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Bold new claims, no new evidence: NATO's 'avoidance' of civilian harm needs measuring, not re-stating

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On 22 October NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen posted a [video message](#) on his website in response to the question, "For every taliban you kill how many of the civilian population do you kill or injure? Do you expect those injured will see you as liberators from the taliban tyranny?". Rasmussen began by noting that "*it is not NATO's mission simply to kill the Taliban*", and went on to state:

We take extra measures to avoid killing or injuring civilians. This approach has already shown results, civilian casualties are significantly down.

This would be a welcome statement except that (a) NATO always claims to avoid civilian harm so it is unclear that there has been any positive change, (b) civilians continue to be killed and maimed by NATO military actions in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and (c) NATO still has not indicated any objective measure by which its performance on the protection of civilians may be judged, either by NATO itself or the public it serves.

We would argue that claims such as the one above cannot be evaluated, let alone sceptics convinced, until there is full and proper documentation of all casualties in conflicts involving NATO, published on a frequent and regular basis. The Secretary General's answer gives no explicit indication of current casualty numbers associated with NATO's Afghanistan actions, or how these differ from earlier ones; nor are we told how the data upon which this claim is based was obtained. In the absence of such supporting evidence, one may question how Rasmussen knows civilian casualties are down at all, never mind "significantly down".

What is needed to settle otherwise unresolvable arguments over numbers is a verifiable numerical account of civilian deaths in Afghanistan, and a comprehensive, transparent public record of individuals killed. We have neither. Wide

disparities in the numbers presented so far relate not only to methodological approaches but to the socio-political priorities of those presenting them. Differing reports contain seemingly arbitrary choices over matters such as the start and end dates of data compilations, categories of casualties and of perpetrators, and the selection of sources for inclusion.

By contrast, had Rasmussen been asked the number of NATO soldiers killed, he would have been able to provide not only their names and date of death, but also their nationality, age, hometown, rank, service branch and place of death. This is of course possible because multiple official and unofficial sources exist for this data, beginning in most instances with the US Department of Defence.

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For NATO and the West to demonstrate any kind of parity of concern at a bare minimum the names, dates and places of deaths of Afghan victims should be made public in the same way that NATO deaths are. This practice would acknowledge our common humanity and carry the potential to contribute to post-conflict reconciliation, among many other benefits. It would also finally allow NATO to assess and verify, under public scrutiny, that its tactics for reducing civilian casualties are as effective as they are claimed to be.

The Secretary General's answer continued along another familiar line:

The conclusion is NATO is doing everything possible to avoid civilian casualties but in conflicts such like the one in Afghanistan you regrettably cannot avoid the loss of

civilian lives. When it happens we try to learn and improve. We will do our utmost to protect the Afghans.

While NATO may indeed be doing everything possible to minimize civilian casualties, without transparency, people will rightly question whether the statement “*We take extra measures to avoid killing or injuring civilians*” isn’t simply negated by “*but in conflicts such like the one in Afghanistan you regrettably cannot avoid the loss of civilian lives*”.

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NATO’s credibility in this matter could only be enhanced if it provided concrete examples of what has been learned from mistakes, how operations have improved to better protect civilians and, of course, how NATO measures these outcomes. Such evidence need not reveal specific military tactics – indeed, these are of little interest to most people. The only relevant performance criterion here is one that measures (and records accurately and openly) civilian deaths and injuries in NATO actions. Good intentions, genuine as they might be, cannot be directly measured.

Until such recording is done, and seen to be done, Secretary General Rasmussen’s claim will remain just one among many in the political landscape.