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TARGETED ATTACKS ON MEDICAL FACILITIES AND STAFF IN AFGHANISTAN LEAD TO DEATH AND DISEASE AMONG CHILDREN

New Report Calls for Afghan Government Forces to be Cited as Responsible for Attacks for First Time

NEW YORK, March 6, 2017 – Afghan government forces, the Taliban and other parties to the country’s conflict have repeatedly targeted medical facilities and staff, negatively impacting children’s health, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict said in a new report today. For the first time, Watchlist called on the UN Secretary General to list the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) as one of the parties responsible for these attacks.

Watchlist’s 27-page report, which focuses on 2015 and 2016, details how parties to the conflict, through more than 240 attacks, have temporarily or permanently closed medical facilities throughout Afghanistan, damaged or destroyed facilities, looted medical supplies, stolen ambulances, and threatened, intimidated, extorted, detained and killed medical personnel. They have restricted and sometimes blocked access to health care and used medical facilities for military purposes, which is in violation of international humanitarian law. While the Taliban and other anti-government groups were responsible for the majority of attacks, the ANDSF carried out at least 35 attacks on medical facilities and personnel between 2015 and 2016.

“Targeted attacks on medical facilities have decimated Afghanistan’s fragile health system, preventing many civilians from accessing lifesaving care,” said Christine Monaghan, research officer at Watchlist who traveled to Afghanistan in November 2016 and wrote the report. “Children suffer as a result — we are seeing more deaths, injuries and the spread of disease.”

Attacks on hospitals have compounded challenges to children’s health, already exacerbated by two years of escalating armed conflict, according to the report.

In Afghanistan, 4.6 million people, including more than 2.3 million children, are in critical need of health care, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

More than 1 million children suffer from acute malnutrition, an increase of more than 40 percent since the beginning of the reporting period in January 2015, according to WHO. Communicable diseases are also up; WHO reported 169 measles outbreaks in 2015, an increase of 141 percent from 2014. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) furthermore reported that child casualties increased by 24 percent from 2015 to 2016.

Watchlist's report includes stories from individuals impacted by the damaged health care system. One father discussed how his 15-year-old son lost both feet after stepping on a mine. He could not get proper care in Kunduz City, where the only trauma center had been bombed and many medical professionals had been killed or had fled. He eventually took a taxi to Kabul, more than 200 miles away, where he was told his son needed to get treatment earlier.

"Now, both of his legs must get cut off from just below the waist, because the bones are ruined and he has a serious infection," the father told Watchlist. "For a week he was OK, but then from the infection he went into a coma. Ten days later, he died in the hospital."

The report calls on all parties to immediately stop attacks on medical facilities and personnel, which are protected during times of conflict under international humanitarian and human rights laws. It calls on the UN Secretary-General to list the ANDSF in its 2017 annual report on children and armed conflict, which is expected to come out before the summer. While previous UN reports included incidents by Afghan forces, the Secretary-General only listed the Taliban in his annual report as responsible for attacks on hospitals. Watchlist also recommends the Afghan government establish an independent and permanent body to investigate these attacks.

About the report

"Every Clinic is Now on the Frontline" The Impact on Children of Attacks on Health Care in Afghanistan

Watchlist conducted a research trip in Afghanistan in November and December 2016 and interviewed more than 80 people, including humanitarian actors, health workers, health "shura" members, and patients. Watchlist visited five hospitals and focused its research on four provinces: Helmand, Kunduz, Nangarhar and Maidan Wardak. To read the report: <http://watchlist.org/about/report/afghanistan/>

About Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict is a New York-based global coalition that serves to end violations against children in armed conflict and to guarantee their rights. For more information: <http://watchlist.org/>

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