

“Every Clinic is Still on the Frontline”

Attacks on Health Care in Afghanistan in 2017

In March 2017, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (‘Watchlist’) launched its first in a series of Field Monitor reports focused on the impact on children of attacks on medical facilities and personnel and denial of humanitarian access. *“Every Clinic Is Now on the Frontline” The Impact on Children of Attacks on Health Care in Afghanistan* highlights how the targeting of medical facilities and personnel throughout Afghanistan in 2015 and 2016 had devastating consequences on children’s health. Ahead of the mandate renewal of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Watchlist documented attacks on medical facilities and personnel carried out between January and December 2017.

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In 2017, parties to the conflict, including the Taliban, the Islamic State (IS), and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), continued to attack medical facilities and personnel as a tactic of war. Through this research, Watchlist found that parties to the conflict carried out at least 63 attacks on medical facilities and personnel in 22 provinces between January and December 2017. The number and type of incidents is consistent with Watchlist’s documentation of incidents carried out in 2015 and 2016.

Conflict also escalated across Afghanistan in 2017, with noted increases in use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and airstrikes.¹ Parties to the conflict have used heavy weaponry in civilian populated areas, occupied civilian infrastructure, and deliberately blocked the delivery of humanitarian assistance to populations in need.²

Watchlist found that disruptions in health care access from ongoing conflict and attacks on medical facilities and personnel have continued to compound challenges to children’s health, which were already exacerbated by the escalation of conflict across Afghanistan in 2017. In the past year, as with the two years before it (2015 and 2016), an increase in conflict and targeted attacks on medical facilities and personnel have led to more children directly injured and suffering from acute malnutrition, diarrheal disease, and vaccine-preventable diseases (e.g. polio and measles).

Key Recommendations:

- In light of the continued targeting of medical facilities and personnel, Watchlist calls on all parties to the conflict to immediately cease attacks, and strongly urges the Government of Afghanistan to take concrete measures to remedy impunity for violations, including investigating, prosecuting, and condemning those responsible in a timely and impartial manner.
- Watchlist also highly recommends that in the upcoming mandate renewal of UNAMA, distinct budget lines be retained for child protection in order to provide for a dedicated, standalone Child Protection Section with a sufficient number of Child Protection Advisors (CPAs). CPAs are essential to gathering and verifying information on attacks on medical facilities and personnel and other grave violations against children for Afghanistan’s Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM). Doing so not only provides dedicated child protection capacity, but also support for the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2286 (2016), which calls for better protection for medical and humanitarian facilities and personnel and accountability for perpetrators.

Attacks against Medical Facilities and Personnel: January to December, 2017³

JANUARY

- 4th Members of the Taliban physically assaulted an ambulance driver and then stole the vehicle in North Sar-e-Pol province.
- 6th A nongovernmental organization (NGO) clinic was damaged after a nearby improvised explosive device (IED) placed by unknown assailants detonated in Nangarhar province.
- 9th The National Directorate of Security (NDS) entered an NGO hospital and arrested a Taliban commander while he was receiving treatment, in Balkh province.
- 13th The Taliban refused passage to a team of health care workers at a checkpoint in Nuristan province. The team had been en route to re-open a clinic that had closed. The Taliban stated the team could proceed only if the health care workers visited other areas in the district; ultimately the team turned back.
- 18th Unknown assailants abducted a doctor traveling by road in his personal vehicle in Parwan province.
- 25th Unknown assailants entered an NGO clinic in Helmand province and set fire to the building, causing serious damage and destruction of almost all medical supplies.

FEBRUARY

- 2nd Armed ANDSF soldiers entered and searched an NGO health facility as part of a search operation in Kandahar province.
- 8th Armed men on motorbikes stopped an NGO convoy traveling to a humanitarian distribution point in North Jawzian province and shot at the vehicles, killing six staff. The armed men abducted two remaining staff members.
- 19th Men claiming allegiance to IS threatened and intimidated staff at an NGO clinic in Nangarhar province. As a result, the NGO was forced to relocate closer to the district center the following month.
- 26th Members of the Taliban detained a vehicle carrying the head of an NGO clinic and two polio vaccinators at a checkpoint in Farah province. The Taliban interrogated the three health care workers and then released them the following day.

MARCH

- 2nd Members of the Taliban stopped and boarded a public bus in Herat City, in Herat province, and identified and abducted a doctor who ran a private clinic.
- 8th IS militants disguised as medical personnel attacked a hospital in Kabul City in Kabul province by detonating an IED near one of the hospital gates and opening fire on ANDSF soldiers. The gunfight lasted for more than six hours. Fifty people were killed and 91 injured.⁴

◀ MARCH

- 10th An NGO clinic in Paktika province was damaged after an IED placed by unknown assailants detonated.
- 17th ANDSF soldiers entered an NGO clinic in Nangarhar province and arrested nine individuals suspected of being members of the Taliban.
- 25th ANDSF soldiers arrested a health worker in Nangarhar province for allegedly supplying medicine to the Taliban and seized a cache of medical supplies.
- 26th Unknown armed men forcibly entered an NGO clinic in Nangarhar province, locked the guard in a bathroom, and stole medicine and other medical supplies.
- 27th Unknown assailants set fire to a supply room in an NGO clinic in Nangarhar province, where vaccines and vaccination kits were stored. The clinic was damaged and the vaccination kits destroyed.
- 28th ANDSF soldiers discovered an IED under a tree on the property of an NGO clinic in Nangarhar province. The IED was destroyed before it detonated.
- 28th Taliban forcibly entered and searched an NGO clinic during a raid on village in Badghis province.
- 29th The Taliban fired mortar rounds that landed close to an NGO clinic in Ghazni province, damaging the windows.

A PRIL

- 1st Unknown assailants forcibly entered an NGO clinic in Nangarhar province, threatened the guard on duty, and stole a motorcycle before fleeing.
- 10th Members affiliated with IS ordered NGO clinics in Farah province to stop providing medical services. They demanded that the district clinic be upgraded to a hospital, that additional medical staff be recruited, and that all districts in the province be supplied with additional ambulances. As a result, clinics in six districts closed for varying lengths of time until community elders negotiated the terms of their reopening.
- 14th During ground fighting between the Taliban and ANDSF in Nangarhar province, an NGO clinic was hit with several rounds of gunfire, resulting in broken windows and damage to the building.
- 24th A Taliban commander set fire to and destroyed an ambulance in Ghor province, after he had been asked by the provincial shadow governor to return the vehicle to the NGO from which it had been stolen in November 2016.
- 26th Four unidentified assailants abducted a local doctor in Nangarhar province.
- 28th The Taliban fired a mortar round that landed on the roof of an NGO clinic in Kunar province, damaging the office below the blast.

MAY

- 6th** The Taliban abducted a local doctor from a clinic in Sar-e Pol province.
- 7th** Two armed members of IS entered an NGO clinic and assaulted staff members who had just arrived to monitor the implementation of an NGO project in Badghis province. IS forced the staff members to drive in the NGO vehicle to an area outside of town and released them only after confirming with the IS shadow health department that the staff members were permitted to work in the area.
- 14th** A village leader entered an NGO clinic in Badghis province and demanded the nurse in charge of distributing food items to mothers and children provide his relatives with ration cards. When the nurse refused, he assaulted her before leaving the clinic.
- 17th** Afghan National Police (ANP) detected and subsequently defused an IED attached to the entrance gate of a hospital in Faryab province.
- 20th** International Military Forces and NDS entered a private hospital in Nangarhar province and arrested three suspected members of an Armed Opposition Group (AOG).⁵
- 21st** Members of the ANP arrested two doctors in Laghman province for allegedly transporting medicine to the Taliban.
- 21st** AOG members fired at an NGO ambulance carrying a female national staff member in Nangarhar province.

27th An ambulance was struck and damaged by bullets during a gunfight between the ANDSF and the Taliban in Logar province.

- **27th** The Taliban established a checkpoint in Wardak province and shot at the first two trucks in a four-truck convoy. Those two trucks passed, however the Taliban stopped the remaining two trucks, seized the convoy's humanitarian supplies, and detained the drivers.

JUNE

- 4th** Two unknown assailants threw a grenade out the window of their vehicle and into an NGO clinic in Farah province before fleeing the area. The blast resulted in minor damage to the building.
- 5th** An unknown person made a series of threatening calls to a clinic in Farah province, beginning June 5, warning staff that women should not work in the clinic and that doing so went against Islam. The calls stopped on June 17, after a community leader intervened.
- 7th** Thirty-two NGO clinics closed after members of the Taliban demanded additional health services be provided across Laghman province.
- 8th** An NGO clinic in Nangarhar province closed during armed clashes between the Taliban and members claiming allegiance to IS.
- 10th** Members of the Taliban shot and killed an employee of a provincial hospital in Nuristan province.

◀ JUNE

12th Unknown assailants abducted a local doctor in Nangarhar province.

22nd A member of the Taliban drove a car wired with explosives into a line of ANDSF soldiers waiting to collect their monthly salaries from a bank in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province. The blast damaged a nearby emergency hospital, killed 29 people, and injured 60.

22nd Members of the Taliban demanded that four female nurses immediately leave an NGO hospital in Sar-e-Pol province, accusing them of wearing makeup and talking to male colleagues. All four left their posts.

- **23rd** Members of the Taliban burned an NGO clinic in Kunar province, destroying medical equipment.

J JULY

6th Members of the Taliban shot and wounded the director of the Laghman Public Health Directorate in Laghman province while he was en route to the public hospital.

22nd Members of the Taliban entered an NGO clinic in Ghor province and stole medical equipment and an ambulance.

- **22nd** Two rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) hit an NGO clinic during ground fighting between the Taliban and ANDSF in Ghor province. The blast destroyed two rooms and shattered the windows.

AUGUST

6th Members of the Taliban forcibly entered an NGO clinic in Badghis province and abducted one staff member and the husband of a female employee. Both abductees were released several hours later after a Taliban commander confirmed they had permission to work in the province.

- **30th** Members of the Taliban abducted a doctor in Nangarhar province while he was on his way home from the clinic where he worked.

SEPTEMBER

9th Unknown assailants forcibly entered a clinic in Parwan province and stabbed and wounded three staff members before fleeing.

11th An armed man opened fire inside an NGO medical facility in Balkh province, killing a staff member. The NDS arrested the shooter.

13th The Taliban fired an RPG at a passing unmarked truck used by the local hospital in Kunduz province. A doctor and another civilian traveling in the vehicle were wounded by the blast.

17th Members of the Taliban attacked a convoy of vaccinators travelling in Kunar province. ANP responded to the attack and forced the Taliban to flee.



18th Unidentified armed men attempted to abduct a doctor from his clinic in Nangarhar province. A large crowd assembled outside of the clinic, preventing the assailants from putting the doctor in their vehicle and driving away. After one of the men fired several shots in the air, the crowd disbanded and the assailants fled without the doctor.

- **24th** Members of the Taliban coerced an NGO doctor to travel in an NGO ambulance to treat wounded Taliban members in Faryab province. The doctor returned unharmed with the ambulance several hours later.

OCTOBER

6th AOG members abducted two mobile volunteer vaccinators associated with the National Immunization Day Polio Eradication Campaign in Nangarhar province. For two days, they detained and interrogated the vaccinators about their vaccination methods and areas in which they were operating. Community leaders negotiated for the vaccinators' release, and they were freed on October 8.

- **16th** An NGO clinic in Nangarhar province closed during armed clashes between the Taliban and members claiming allegiance to IS.

NOVEMBER

21st Unidentified assailants abducted a doctor as he was walking from his residence to his clinic in Nangarhar province.

22nd A clinic was damaged and a staff member wounded during ground fighting between the ANDSF and the Taliban in Laghman province.

24th Medical staff evacuated two clinics in Nangarhar province after members of IS seized the area.

27th Medical staff evacuated a clinic in Nangarhar province after members of IS seized the area.

- **28th** Unknown assailants placed an IED inside a clinic in Nangarhar province, which caused minor damage to the clinic when it detonated.

DECEMBER

- **27th** Seven NGO clinics in Badghis province suspended all but emergency services following threats and intimidation by the Taliban.



About Watchlist

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and to guarantee their rights. As a global network, Watchlist builds partnerships among local, national, and international nongovernmental organizations, enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, we strategically collect and disseminate information on violations against children in conflicts in order to influence key decision-makers to create and implement programs and policies that effectively protect children.

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict is a project of Tides Center, a non-profit public charity.

Endnotes

- ¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan," December 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/2018-afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview> (accessed February 26, 2018), pg. 9.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Incidents included on this list, unless otherwise cited, were obtained from information that is not publicly available.
- ⁴ Robbie Gramer, "ISIS Fighters Disguised as Doctors Attack Kabul Hospital, Kill Dozens," *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/08/islamic-state-isis-afghanistan-kabul-hospital-attack-terrorism/> (accessed February 12, 2018).
- ⁵ The term Armed Opposition Group (AOG) is utilized in this document when it is unknown whether the attackers were affiliated with the Taliban or the IS.

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