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Afghan civilian casualties rising, analysts report

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By Sharon Behn - The number of civilians inadvertently killed by U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan doubled in 2007 from the previous year as coalition forces dropped about a million pounds of bombs on the country, military analysts said.

There were no official military numbers readily available for Iraq. But based on official and unofficial U.S. and U.N. data, one analyst said that 400 to 500 Iraqis died last year at U.S. checkpoints and that 200 to 300 were killed in U.S. air operations in 2007.

Citing security rules, military officials declined to answer questions regarding U.S. rules of engagement on collateral damage and civilian casualties in military operations.

But the figures are clearly of concern to U.S. strategists, who understand that civilian casualties build resentment against the international forces and undermine attempts to win support for U.S.-backed governments in the two countries.

"Some of what you are asking for is very sensitive material. We never discuss rules of engagement, as doing so could seriously endanger both our own forces and civilians," one Pentagon official told The Washington Times.

The U.S. military apologized late Sunday for the deaths of nine civilians in an air strike against al Qaeda near the town of Iskandariyah, about 30 miles south of Baghdad.

"Over the past two years, there has been a significant increase in the use of air power" in both countries, which in some cases has led to more civilian deaths, said Carl Conetta, co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives.

In an attempt to stem the rise of civilian casualties, Human Rights Watch has even lobbied for increased ground forces in Afghanistan to boost pro-government strength on the ground, allow for more humanitarian work and improve intelligence gathering.

In 2006, a total of 929 Afghan civilians were killed, of whom 116 died from air strikes and 114 were killed by ground fire. The other 699 were killed by the Taliban, said Marc Garlasco, a former Pentagon official now working as a senior military analyst for Human Rights Watch.

Through September 2007, a total of 892 Afghans were killed — 438 by the Taliban, 272 by air strikes, 62 by ground fire, 16 by a combination of air and ground fire. In addition, 15 died in shooting incidents where it was not clear which side did the shooting, and 89 were killed by unknown assailants.

Mr. Garlasco, who traveled to Afghanistan and met with U.S. and other NATO commanders, and a number of nongovernmental organizations, said his numbers tended to be conservative, "but they show the general trends."

In July 2006, the U.S. and NATO began a heavy offensive against the Taliban.

"You see a jump from some 20,000 pounds of bombs dropped per month to some 80,000 to 100,000 pounds dropped," he said.

In Iraq, the number of air strikes was low in 2006, totaling about 62,000 pounds for the year. In early 2007, there was an uptick to 10,000 to 15,000 a month; as U.S. forces built up strength, the numbers jumped to 71,000 pounds a month in the last half of the year.

In 2003, Mr. Garlasco was the chief of high-value targeting in the Pentagon's Iraq intelligence task force.

He distinguished between planned air strikes and those called in by troops engaged in battle.

In the first instance, U.S. military planners will do an assessment of the area and seek ways to minimize civilian casualties — including what type of bomb should be used, at what time, and at what angle it is to be fired.

"In a pre-planned strike, when they do all these things, we find minimal civilian casualties," Mr. Garlasco said. But when soldiers are faced with an overwhelming enemy and they call in air strikes, not all those procedures can be followed, he said.
