



Casualty recording and documenting harm to civilians: The need to know.

It is sometimes remarked that nothing in war is completely predictable. This is not entirely true: it is in the nature of armed conflict that it prematurely and violently ends human lives, including the lives of many civilians.

But just *how* many civilians? That is a harder question, a question which all too often remains inadequately answered long after an armed conflict has ceased.

If we keep in mind that this question refers to individual human beings, a more fitting way to frame it is to ask not only how *many* have died, but *who* died.

What was each victim's name, what was their age, their gender, their profession, their ethnic and religious background? Were they parents? And what were the circumstances under which these individuals, these families and various people were killed? By which weapons, for example?

Or to to put it in another way: precisely how did protection fail for these civilians?

Does it matter to have full and public knowledge of this? We think it does matter, for many reasons, including in connection with the themes of this conference.

It matters because effective casualty recording provides a clearer understanding of the vulnerability of different groups and the protection needs of populations affected by conflict, and how their protection might be improved.

Indeed it is hard to see how in the absence of such objective knowledge there can be any hope of closing the gap that too often exists between good intentions, often sincerely expressed and carried out, and the hard reality of outcomes on the ground.

Such meticulous documentation is in principle no different from that which is considered necessary, important and completely routine for every violent death in the country of which I am a citizen, and I am sure this is the normal expectation for most other nations too.

But can systematic and detailed casualty recording be carried out during conflict, or as some might say, "in the fog of war"?

Well, there are limits to what can be done while conflict rages but the answer is, yes it can. The very best and most complete work, such as community-based and door-to-door interviews, or careful forensic investigations, or fully-named victims lists with biographies, are almost invariably carried out post-conflict. But these kinds of investigations are only the final stage of a range of casualty recording practice that often begins with the first casualty.

Some conflicts last such a long time that waiting for them to finish before beginning to record their casualties simply means that much information will be lost. As, of course, will the possible benefits of a more immediate flow of information.

Consequently, most casualty recorders begin their work the moment it is technically and safely possible to do so, to the best level of care, detail and completeness they can achieve.

Such large-scale and in-depth documentation of conflict casualties is already being carried out across the world by dozens of organizations, each employing the methods best suited to their conflict environments and their own capacities. Advances in information technology that enable small teams to handle large amounts of data have contributed to this development, but perhaps the greatest incentive has been a growing recognition of its importance.

There are now casualty recording organisations working on current and past conflicts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Guatemala, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia, to name only some of more than 40 organisations worldwide who now form a new professional network convened by Oxford Research Group, for whom I work. One key purpose of the network is to assist casualty recording to become a recognised field of research activity, with a set of well-defined methods for different environments, peer exchange, standards and the sharing of good practice.

Most of these practitioner organisations are based in the civil society in their respective countries. Nonetheless, most believe that greater participation by states is required to deliver the best outcomes. Notions of state participation range from respecting the independence of casualty recorders, to assurances of protection and facilitation of their efforts, to the open sharing of information already acquired and held by states or their militaries, to direct collaboration on the collection and analysis of new data.

Also promoting this concept of states as active supporters of casualty recording is the Every Casualty Campaign, which is supported not only by practitioners but diverse NGOs whose basic joint demand is that states ensure that every casualty of armed violence is promptly recorded, correctly identified and publicly acknowledged.

As we heard from delegates and other panelists, knowledge of the specific effects of weapons on different population groups is at the heart of new proposals to minimise harm to civilians.

And as we also heard from panelists at this conference, it is not only the civil society which is capable of recording civilian casualties. We know for instance that from 2004-2009 the US military recorded tens of thousands of civilian deaths as part of its overall tracking of so-called significant activities in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. But the extensive and highly detailed information on civilian harm contained in these military databases should not require whistleblowers or leaks – or WikiLeaks, in this case – for them to become public knowledge.

I think it is only fair to mention that the vast majority of civilian victims recorded in these military logs were not killed by coalition soldiers, although to their credit, such events are reported in the logs too.

This is hard-won knowledge of universal interest and, if its full value is to be derived, must be treated differently from classified information.

These data collected by states can be seen as complementary to information collected by other actors, including local communities through social and traditional media, as well as casualty recorders.

When casualty information is sufficiently detailed and also accessible, good use can and will be made of it by third parties, often in more and better ways than the providers of the information anticipated.

As a brief indication of the wide-ranging outcomes that are possible when these documentation criteria are followed, I'll focus on the Iraq Body Count project, which I know intimately. Founded just over ten years ago, this NGO documents civilian deaths in what is of course a sadly continuing conflict, and bases most of its information on the work of locally-based professional journalists who, as is true in many other conflicts, are the eyes of the world on that conflict. Iraq Body Count's detailed data is openly published on the web, and has been used by:

- the World Bank and IMF for monitoring civilian security trends;
- the World Health Organisation to inform their Iraq Family Health Survey;
- the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in its reports on the direct impact of the armed conflict on Iraqi civilians;
- humanitarian actors needing information to operate safely in Iraq;
- the United States Congress in its investigation of the general failure to protect civilians in the breakdown of civil security following the 2003 invasion;
- the UNHCR in setting protection guidelines to host countries on Iraqi asylum seekers;
- and virtually every media outlet around the world that has covered the topic of civilians deaths in the Iraq war.

The list could be extended, but in short, intergovernmental organisations, the civil society and states used data produced by a single small casualty-recording NGO to inform analyses and activities relating to protection.

And they could use it for these purposes because it was accessible, disaggregated, and rich with detail.

If this is what's really useful to states as well as others for informing and fulfilling their protection obligations, then we must ask whether states should not be more responsible for ensuring that the recording of casualties happens.

We think it is clear that this will require collaboration among and between states. We are very interested in delegates' views on the best ways to build state support on this issue and some of the opportunities and obstacles which will need to be taken into account.

So my main message to you is that casualty recording is possible, is useful to the protection of civilians, and that states should ensure that it happens.

I want to mention before closing that there are many *other* reasons why the civilian war dead need to be fully and publicly recorded, including:

- as a recognition of our common humanity,
- to acknowledge the losses of the bereaved,
- to better direct assistance to the families and communities who have been deprived of their contribution,
- and as an unavoidable element of restorative processes in post-conflict societies.

But if casualty data can be used to inform efforts to protect other civilians from suffering the same fate in the future, then surely this use is one of the most valuable uses we can make of such information.

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