

Minimizing Civilian Casualties, the Case of ISAF

Ladies and Gentlemen, in my introduction I will provide you with some thoughts and experiences on minimizing civilian casualties, based on my recent service as Director Operations Headquarter Regional Command North in ISAF from September 2012 to April 2013. The views and statements I give are my personal and do not necessarily represent the view of ISAF or the Norwegian Army.

Headquarter Regional Command North is responsible for all operations in the northern part of Afghanistan, a region with around 11 million inhabitants. We had approximately 8000 ISAF soldiers in Regional Command North coming from 18 different nations and we had 440 people in our staff. We also worked closely with the 45 000 soldiers in the Afghan National Security Forces, the ANSF. The reason I mention these figures, is that this many people from so many countries with different languages and cultures, offer additional challenges since most of us did not know each other well before we deployed in September last year.

Reducing civilian casualties is an area of great importance for the overall campaign in Afghanistan and COM ISAF has stated very clearly that ISAF must take great care in protecting the Afghan population and we must do whatever we can to avoid civilian casualties. There have throughout the years been tragic incidents where civilians have been wounded or killed by ISAF forces, resulting in a loss of confidence amongst the Afghan population, distrust from the international community and a propaganda victory for the insurgents. In order to avoid civilian casualties, COM ISAF issued Tactical Directives, giving clear orders for all subordinate commanders to follow.

A German General led regional Command North. He had a very strong focus on reducing civilian casualties and he discussed this regularly both with his subordinate commanders and with his Afghan counterparts. Strong leadership is one of the most important steps in order to avoid civilian casualties. Having leaders that clearly state what they expect from their troops and who focus continuously on the importance of protecting the people is urgent.

Before we deployed to Afghanistan, we had both Key-Leader training and a pre-deployment exercise with the whole staff. During the Key-Leader training we established a common understanding on the importance of protecting the people and avoiding civilian casualties.

Avoiding civilian casualties was one of the main issues we trained on during the pre-deployment exercise last summer. A number of different incidents were effectuated in order to see how we handled them, and experts closely monitored our actions. We had many thorough discussions during our weeks of training, providing us with the opportunity to establish an understanding on how we would focus internally in RC North Headquarter on avoidance of civilian casualties. This training gave us good insight in the challenges we would face when deployed.

It is crucial to have well-established procedures. This goes for both how to avoid civilian casualties and what to do if civilian casualties are caused. How to avoid civilian casualties focused on the Rules of Engagement and on the responsibility we had to protect the Afghan people. The other part, how to handle civilian casualties if it happened, was focused on having procedures so we ensured a timely response and notification, and also procedures for how to launch an investigation to look into what had happened in order to learn from the incidents. ISAF had established very detailed procedures on how to handle

such incidents. One of the branches I had in the Operations Directorate was responsible for handling civilian casualties. The members of this branch were specially trained and worked in close cooperation with the legal advisor and gave recommendations to the Commander on how to handle incidents so we could avoid causing civilian casualties.

We had incidents during our six-month deployment where we discussed whether or not to use lethal force against insurgents and the risk of causing civilian casualties. One of the challenges we faced was that the insurgents had good knowledge about our Rules of Engagement. The insurgents knew that we would not attack with the use of air power or other means of direct or indirect fire if there were civilians or civilian structures close to them. We also faced the challenge that the insurgents dressed just as the civilians, making it difficult to separate insurgents from innocent civilians. This was challenging enough when you were physically on the ground and could see the insurgents, but even more challenging monitoring from an aircraft.

We had very strict regulations when it came to having a positive identification before we could engage an enemy. We needed to be sure that the enemy really was a legitimate target and that we did not have any innocent civilians nearby who could be hurt in an engagement. If we did not have a positive ID, or there were civilian structures too close, we were very restrictive on using deadly force. Establishing a positive ID is especially challenging if using air-to-ground munitions. You might see that an insurgent and legal target enters into a house, but you do not know who else might be in that house. Engaging the insurgent in the house might take him out, but you might also harm innocent civilians who you have not seen. This was an issue that all our own forces were well aware of, and all units knew that the employment of deadly force was

restricted. It was crucial that we had a common understanding on the restrictions in employment of deadly force before we deployed to Afghanistan.

By killing one civilian you run a high risk of creating new enemies. Relatives and friends of killed civilians will often turn towards our forces. A situation where you kill civilians will make it more challenging for your overall mission than if you had been more patient when engaging the enemy, and avoided killing civilians.

The need of having a good understanding of the importance of avoiding civilian casualties is not only limited to our own ISAF forces. We had a very close cooperation with the Afghan National Security Forces and we often supported them in operations. The ANSF took over more and more responsibility for conducting operations, especially as we pulled ISAF forces from provinces and left the security responsibility fully to the Afghans. The Afghans still requested support from us, but we had the same rules for supporting the Afghans as for our own troops, meaning we needed to be 100 percent sure that any target we hit was a legal target and not an innocent civilian. We discussed this issue several times with our Afghan counterparts. We had meetings with them before conducting planned operations, explaining what we could do and could not do. The same applied for supporting the ANSF in in-extremis situations. We had discussions with the ANSF on what kind of support they could expect in different situations and what measures we would take in order to protect the civilian population. Having conducted these discussions up-front made it easier for us to reach an understanding on what kind of support we would provide to the ANSF during operations.

We experienced civilian casualties during our deployment to Afghanistan, but they were caused by road traffic accidents and not by misfiring. As I have

mentioned, we also had some cases where we discussed using lethal force, but if we did not have positive ID and were unsure if there could be civilians nearby, we refrained from the use of force. Having a common understanding on the use of force, and the importance of avoiding civilian casualties, made it easier for us to make the correct decision in the heated situation.

To summarize my introduction, the key takeaways as I see them are; the importance of strong leadership focusing on protecting the people, having a common set of procedures both for how to avoid civilian casualties but also how to handle such cases if they occur, the importance of training before deploying, and finally to discuss with partners what kind of support they can expect and what they cannot expect in order to avoid civilian casualties.

Protecting the civilian population and minimizing their casualties is of utmost importance and we have both a legal and a moral obligation to do so. Failing to protect the civilians will not only increase the risk of the population turning against us, but also of losing the overall campaign.

Thank you for your attention.