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Afghanistan: Taliban attacks against civilians increasing and systematic

As the Taliban's spring offensive intensifies, civilians are increasingly facing suicide attacks, abductions and beheadings. The attacks on civilians by the Taliban are widespread and systematic and are used to instill fear and exert control over the local population, according to an Amnesty International report released today.

"Afghan civilians are bearing the brunt of this conflict. They are caught in the fighting between the Taliban, Afghan government forces, US forces and forces from other NATO countries," said Claudio Cordone, Senior Director for Research at Amnesty International.

"But it is the Taliban who have a deliberate policy of targeting civilians -- they are killing teachers, abducting aid workers and burning school buildings."

The Taliban's military rulebook, or *Laheya*, explicitly sanctions targeting and killing civilians. Rule 25 states that a teacher who continues to teach after warnings from the Taliban must be beaten, and if they still continue to teach "*contrary to the principles of Islam*" they must be killed. Similarly, a Taliban *fatwa*, or religious edict, orders the death of anyone who supports the US-led intervention.

Scores of civilians have been deliberately killed by Taliban insurgents in the past two years, apparently because they were branded "spies". Targets have included women's rights activists, clerics, government and health workers, and teachers. At least 183 schools were burned in arson attacks across the country between 2005-2006.

In one brutal incident last week, an Afghan journalist was killed by the Taliban, reportedly by having his throat slit. Ajmal Naqshbandi, 25, had been taken hostage in March along with an Italian reporter, Daniele Mastrogiacomo, and their Afghan driver, Sayed Agha. While Daniele Mastrogiacomo was released in a prisoner exchange, Sayed Agha was beheaded.

As well as deliberately attacking civilians, the Taliban have also killed or injured hundreds of people in indiscriminate attacks. At least 756 civilians were killed in 2006 in attacks using improvised explosive devices such as roadside bombs and in suicide attacks, according to UN and NATO figures.

"By using indiscriminate attacks such as suicide bombings in public places and by deliberately targeting

civilian workers, the Taleban are committing war crimes," said Claudio Cordone. "The fact that such attacks are widespread and carried out as part of Taleban policy makes them also crimes against humanity."

The Taleban's stance towards civilians is far removed from its obligations under international law. A Taleban spokesperson interviewed by Amnesty International claimed that attacking "*unarmed*" civilians who were not considered a threat was "*forbidden*". He then went on to say that "*there is no difference between the armed people who are fighting against us and civilians who are co-operating with foreigners*". The Taleban rulebook forbids seizing civilians' money or possessions, but sanctions killing teachers.

"All parties to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan must ensure that civilians are protected and all prisoners treated humanely, as required by international law. A first step for the Taleban is to stop deliberately targeting civilians and end all indiscriminate attacks," said Claudio Cordone.

The report, *Afghanistan -- All who are not friends, are enemies: Taleban abuses against civilians*, and a summary will be available from 19 April 00:01 GMT at:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa110012007>

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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