

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Afghanistan: Civilians suffer the brunt of rising suicide attacks

Increasing suicide attacks

Amnesty International is dismayed that the early months of 2008 in Afghanistan have been marked by a sharp rise in civilian deaths caused by attacks of the Taliban and other armed anti-government groups. Amnesty International is particularly concerned that armed groups fighting the Afghan government and its international supporters are apparently launching more suicide attacks, which tend to disproportionately harm civilians.

“Afghan civilians bear the brunt of suicide attacks by the Taliban and other armed groups,” said Sam Zarifi, Asia Director at Amnesty International. “These indiscriminate attacks are carried out with scant regard for civilian lives, killing and injuring innocent children as well as mothers and fathers, causing untold suffering to surviving relatives.”

Taliban and other armed groups, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami, killed at least 120 civilians in 20 separate suicide attacks in the first three months of 2008, comparing to the first 20 suicide attacks of 2007, which claimed 20 civilian lives.

These numbers reflect a pattern of increasing attacks, with 160 suicide attacks and 68 thwarted attacks reported in 2007, compared with 123 suicide attacks and 17 thwarted attacks in 2006. The Taliban have claimed responsibility for most suicide attacks, although they have at times disowned incidents that have resulted in particularly high civilian casualties.

In March 2008, a purported Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, reportedly threatened further attacks against “The foreign occupying forces and their Afghan slaves...this summer”, warning that “this year will be the bloodiest.”

Civilians at risk

Suicide attacks by anti-government armed groups have led to increasing civilian casualties either because civilians or non-military objects such as bazaars and mosques have been deliberately targeted, or because the attackers cannot or do not discriminate between civilians and combatants.

These attacks violate provisions of international humanitarian law that prohibit targeting civilians, or engaging in attacks that fail to discriminate between civilian and military targets or disproportionately harm civilians. All combatants in Afghanistan are bound by the provisions of Article 3 Common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which applies to non-international armed conflicts, as well as the provisions of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which Afghanistan ratified in 2003.

Suicide attacks pose a particular threat to these protective provisions because the attackers tend to disguise themselves as civilians, or seek shelter among civilians, thereby eroding the distinction

between combatants and non-combatants. With increasing violations of international legal prohibition against the practice of "perfidy" (acts of deliberate deception or treachery) the risk of reprisals against civilians has also risen.

"With the onset of warm weather, Afghans face the prospect of more and more violence targeting them," Zarifi said. "So far, this year has been the worst for civilians. All parties to the conflict, including US, NATO and Afghan forces, have a duty under international law to protect civilians. All the fighting parties must change their strategies and take the fight away from civilians and populated areas."

Suicide attacks in 2008

Major suicide attacks by anti-government forces reported so far in 2008 include:

Deliberate targeting of civilians: On April 17, a suicide bomber blew himself up in a busy bazaar in the southwestern Afghan province of Nimroz, killing 23 people, including two senior policemen, and injuring 35 others, including children and women. It is not clear which group was responsible for the attack.

Indiscriminate/disproportionate attack: On 13 March in Kabul at least six Afghan civilians were reportedly killed and at least 35 civilians injured in a car bomb attack apparently aimed at US troops near Kabul airport.

Indiscriminate/disproportionate attack: On 18 February a suicide car bomber in Spin Boldak, a district of Kandahar province bordering Pakistan, apparently targeting Canadian troops, killed 35 civilians and injured 27. Three Canadian soldiers were injured in this attack. The Taliban claimed responsibility but denied that civilians were killed.

Indiscriminate/disproportionate attack: On 17 February a suicide bomber blew himself up close to a crowd of around 500 people watching a dog fight in Arghandab, on the western outskirts of Kandahar city. According to Kandahar's governor, Asadullah Khalid, nearly 70 civilians were killed and dozens were injured. The Taliban denied responsibility for the attack, but senior Afghan officials believe the group was targeting the head of Kandahar's Auxiliary Police, Abdulah Hakim Jan, and a militia leader opposed to the Taliban, who also died in the attack

Deliberate targeting of civilians: On 31 January 2008 in Lashkargah, capital of Helmand province a suicide attacker blew himself up inside a mosque, killing the deputy governor of the province, Haji Pir Mohammad, and five other people. Eighteen people were wounded including a four-year-old child.

Deliberate targeting of civilians/civilian objects/perfidy: On 14 January Taliban fighters wearing Afghan National Security Force uniforms, attacked the Serena Hotel in Kabul, using a combination of rifle fire and multiple suicide bombs. Eight people were killed in the attack and nine injured, including Afghans and foreign nationals. The Norwegian Foreign Minister, Jonas Gahr Stoere, who was staying at the hotel, escaped unharmed.

All sides to the conflict must protect civilians

According to the Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO), a total of 463 civilians have been killed in the armed conflict for the first three months of 2008 compared to 264 for the same period in 2007.

The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston, after visiting Afghanistan in the beginning of May, stated in his initial statement of 15 May, that for the first four months of 2008, 300 civilians were killed by the Taliban and other armed groups and

approximately 200 civilians were killed during joint military operations of the international forces and Afghan forces.

It is difficult to obtain the exact number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, however, this document tends not to inform about the figures, but about the emerging trend of systematic violations against civilians perpetrated by all sides in the armed conflict – international forces including Afghan forces and the Taliban and other armed groups.

A spokesman for USA-led forces in Afghanistan said that a full record civilians killed by their troops is not maintained. However, independent Afghan and international observers fear that the number of civilians killed by the international forces in Afghanistan remains significantly under reported. According to a 5 May report by the BBC, NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) officials reported only four civilians were killed during the same period.

The numbers of civilian casualties caused by the international forces have fuelled persistent resentment amongst the Afghan population. In April, when 33 civilians were reportedly killed in foreign and Afghan army operations in Nuristan province, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, again repeated his calls for foreign troops to exercise more caution when carrying out military actions.

In this context, Amnesty International again reminds all armed forces in Afghanistan that they must make every effort to distinguish between civilians and combatants and that they must do all they can to spare civilians and civilian property. All persons taking no active part in hostilities, without exception, must at all times be treated humanely, and must not be subjected to violence to life and person, in particular murder, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture, in accordance with relevant provisions of the Geneva Conventions, as well as international human rights standards.

The Taliban and other armed groups in Afghanistan must immediately cease attacks targeting civilians and civilian objects, and all indiscriminate attacks. Attacks on civilians, including teachers, students, governmental officials and humanitarian personnel must cease immediately.

“Amnesty International calls on all armed groups to condemn direct attacks on civilians, and indiscriminate attacks, as well as all other acts violating international humanitarian law and abusing human rights,” said Sam Zarifi. “The Taliban and other anti-government forces must ban such attacks and issue instructions to all members strictly prohibiting such acts in all circumstances.”

For further information, please refer to previous Amnesty International reports and statements:

Afghanistan: All who are not friends, are enemies: Taliban abuses against civilians (AI Index: ASA 11/001/2007)

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA11/001/2007/en>

Afghanistan: Mounting civilian death toll - all sides must do more to protect civilians (AI Index: ASA 11/006/2007)

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA11/006/2007/en>

Afghanistan: Taliban attacks against civilians increasing and systematic (Index Number: ASA 11/002/2007)

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA11/002/2007/en>

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International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org