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Afghanistan: Amnesty International demands immediate release of all hostages

Amnesty International has made direct contact with the Taliban to demand the immediate and unconditional release of all Afghan and foreign hostages. Noting by way of example the plight of the remaining South Korean hostages, Amnesty International called on the Taliban to fulfil their earlier commitments to comply with international law.

Amnesty International made this direct appeal following an increasing number of abductions, hostage taking and killing of hostages carried out by the Taliban in Afghanistan, including the recent killing of four Afghan government employees and two South Korean aid workers whilst held by the Taliban.

"Hostage-taking is a flagrant breach of international humanitarian law. There are no exceptions to this rule and no justifications for breaking it. Hostage taking and the killing of hostages are war crimes and their perpetrators must be brought to justice," said Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan.

These latest violations directly contradict previous Taliban commitments not to target civilians or ill-treat prisoners. Taliban spokesperson Qari Yusef Ahmadi told Amnesty International on Wednesday that "we are trying to resolve this issue (holding South Koreans hostage) acceptably" but did not agree to protect them from harm and release them immediately as required under international law.

Ahmadi also told Amnesty International: "we are trying not to come into confrontation with international humanitarian law, and also not acting in contradiction with human rights, where it agrees with Sharia Law." Amnesty International emphasized that no legal system is above international law and is deeply concerned by last week's statement by senior Taliban commander Mansour Dadullah that "kidnapping is a very successful policy and I order all my *mujahideen* to kidnap foreigners of any nationality wherever they find them and then we should do the same kind of deal."

In recent weeks, there has been a spate of abductions attributed to the Taliban:

- Four provincial court employees were abducted while travelling in Andar district, Ghazni on 24 July 2007. Their bodies were discovered on Wednesday by Afghan authorities;
- 23 Korean hostages were abducted by the Taliban on Thursday 19 July whilst travelling through Ghazni. Two have been killed; 18 women and 3 men are still held. The Taliban have threatened to kill more hostages;
- Five Afghan and two German hostages were abducted on 18 July in Wardak province. One of the Afghans escaped and one of the Germans died whilst held by the Taliban. The remaining hostages are still being held and the second German hostage is believed to be in ill-health;
- A provincial education official from Paktika was abducted whilst travelling through Andar district in Ghazni on 17 July. His fate and whereabouts are unknown.

Under Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which is legally binding on all parties to the non-international armed conflict in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, hostage-taking is prohibited at all times, as is "murder of all kinds", including the execution-style killing of detainees.

This latest string of abductions follows the abduction of Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo, his Afghan translator Ajmal Naqshbandi and his Afghan driver Sayed Agha in March 2007. While Mastrogiacomo was released both Ajmal and Sayed were subsequently killed by the group.

Amnesty International calls on the Taliban and other armed groups, as well as all other parties to the armed conflict in Afghanistan, to comply strictly and in all circumstances with their obligations under international law. "No sense of grievance, political ideology nor religious conviction justifies or excuses the commission of such violations. All hostages must be released immediately, unconditionally and without further harm," Irene Khan said.

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