

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: PRE 01/317/2009
27th August 2009

Afghanistan: Kandahar bombing and NATO clinic attack, highlight increasing danger to civilians

As uncertainty surrounds the outcome of presidential elections in Afghanistan, civilians are at greater danger than at any time since the fall of the Taleban, Amnesty International warned today following a series of attacks on civilians by anti-government groups in Kandahar and today's attack on a hospital clinic by a NATO helicopter.

The highest level of civilian casualties since the fall of the Taleban in 2002 has been registered in Afghanistan in the period around the elections. One of the worst incidents occurred in Kandahar on Tuesday when a truck bomb exploded in an area of the city heavily used by aid groups, killing more than 40 civilians.

"With the outcome of voting in Afghanistan unclear, the danger and insecurity facing millions of Afghans continues and in fact is higher now than ever," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific director. "Anti-government groups, including the Taleban, have demonstrated a systematic contempt for the safety of civilians by targeting Afghans who want to establish their future through ballots, not bullets."

"The Afghan government and its international supporters have done much to try to protect Afghans from this threat during the election period but they must also show that they will follow the rule of law themselves and will quickly investigate, and if necessary punish, any violation of the laws of war or human rights violations."

Amnesty International is calling on NATO forces in Afghanistan to launch an immediate investigation into the attack on the hospital clinic in Paktika province. Even though NATO has stated that no civilians were injured in the attack, NATO's own account of the incident suggests that Afghan and international forces attacked members of the Taleban seeking medical help in the clinic, which would be a serious violation of the international laws of war that entitle wounded fighters seeking medical help to be protected from enemy fire.

"If the Taleban used the clinic as a shelter to fire from, they've committed a serious violation," Sam Zarifi said. "But if they were using the clinic for health care, NATO forces had no business firing on the clinic, even if they had cleared out civilians from the facility."

Amnesty International is calling on NATO to immediately launch a transparent, credible investigation of this incident to establish whether any violations of international humanitarian law took place and, if so, to bring those responsible to account. International forces in Afghanistan have recently repeated their commitment to minimizing harm to civilians but their failure to credibly investigate incidents and punish any violators has resulted in widespread resentment among Afghans and became a major issue during the presidential campaign.

“The bottom line in this incident is that another clinic in Afghanistan is now not working – a tragedy for a country that already suffers from horrifically low rates of access to health care,” Sam Zarifi said. “Whether the Taleban or NATO or both have violated the laws of war, it is Afghan civilians who pay the price.”

Ends