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## **Afghanistan: Tens of thousands of people displaced by fighting and hunger**

Tens of thousands of Afghans displaced from their homes by escalating fighting and ongoing food shortages require immediate humanitarian assistance, said Amnesty International today.

The organization called on the international community to implement a comprehensive strategy for assisting the Afghan people. The call came as US President Barack Obama announced the deployment of an additional 17,000 US troops to Afghanistan and urged the international community to commit more forces.

“The US and the international community should adopt an approach that emphasizes the rights and well being of the Afghan people and not just focus on a military solution,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director.

Around 235,000 people are currently displaced in Afghanistan, according to estimates by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Most of them are displaced as a result of the fighting between government forces (and allied US and NATO troops) and armed opposition groups, including the Taleban, particularly in the South, Southeast and Northwest regions of Afghanistan.

“We are already half way through another hard winter in Afghanistan and tens of thousands of Afghans who already had some of the lowest standards of economic development in the world have been forced out of their homes because of fighting and a dangerous crisis of food shortage,” said Sam Zarifi.

The fighting between various armed groups in Afghanistan has aggravated the effects of an ongoing drought and growing food insecurity in northern and western Afghanistan and forced thousands of families to seek shelter in relatively safer and wealthier areas, such as Herat and Kabul. People who have been displaced by the fighting in southern Afghanistan have arrived at camps near Kandahar, where they are vulnerable to ongoing fighting between government forces and the Taleban and are largely cut off from international assistance.

In December 2008 Amnesty International researchers visited several informal camps established by the displaced in Kabul and Herat provinces. They found more than 700 families settled in slum-like conditions in western Kabul. In Herat province, in western Afghanistan, they witnessed hundreds of families are living in Maslakh and Shaidayee camps. Thousands of other displaced people either live with their relatives or in rented accommodations in Kabul and Herat.

There are estimated to be tens of thousands of people in makeshift camps and shantytowns in Herat and Kabul. Those interviewed told Amnesty International that they had escaped fighting and insecurity in their areas, particularly in the south. The people gathered at these camps repeatedly reported that they received

little, if any, assistance from government or non- government agencies.

“People in the camps in Kabul and Herat are living in extremely inadequate shelters with almost no heating and no bedding, where small children and elderly people have to sleep on the wet floor. Most people in those camps have little or no access to food, drinking water, health services and education,” Sam Zarifi said. “Our researchers also came across numerous instances of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis.”

A 35-year-old woman and mother of eight children who is now in an informal camp in Kabul told Amnesty International that:

“It’s about a year that we became displaced from Helmand province to Kabul because of the fighting between government and Taleban insurgents. Our homes were bombed [by NATO forces] and we lost everything we had during fighting. Here we have nothing, no job and no assistance from any national and international agency. It was long ago when we received some rice and coal from an Afghan businessman and since then we have nothing and I have to spend days and nights with no food.”

Many of the displaced people in Herat and Kabul told Amnesty International that they were forced to leave their homes because the Taleban and other armed opposition groups were preventing aid agencies from assisting the civilian population in the conflict-affected areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan.

According to the Afghan NGOs Safety Office (ANSO), which maintains comprehensive records of NGO activity in Afghanistan, in 2008 31 staff members of non-governmental organizations were killed in Afghanistan, while 78 were abducted by armed opposition and criminal groups. ANSO recorded 176 attacks against NGO staff and facilities. So far in 2009, one NGO staff member has already been killed, seven have been abducted, and there have been 25 attacks against aid convoys and facilities.

“By targeting and killing aid workers, armed opposition and criminal groups are committing war crimes. They are also preventing the delivery of essential humanitarian assistance, thereby worsening the already miserable conditions facing tens of thousands of people who are already suffering from hunger and cold, particularly women and children cut off from health care and education,” Sam Zarifi said.

In line with international humanitarian law, all parties to the conflict, including armed opposition groups, have a legal obligation to allow and facilitate safe passage of impartial humanitarian assistance to civilians lacking supplies and services essential for their survival.

Amnesty International calls upon the Afghan government, particularly the Ministry of Refugee and Repatriation Affairs, and all the other national and international aid agencies to provide immediate assistance for the displaced, including essential food and potable water, basic shelter, appropriate clothing and heating materials as well as essential medical services and sanitation, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.