

AI Index: PRE 01/082/2009
26 February 2009

Afghanistan: Accountability for civilian casualties needed before more troops arrive

As US President Barack Obama announced the deployment of extra troops in Afghanistan and urged NATO allies to follow suit, Amnesty International has demanded that forces must do more to provide accountability for civilian casualties of military action.

“2008 was the most violent year for civilians since the fall of the Taliban and Afghans are increasingly resentful about civilians casualties caused by international forces during night raids and other actions of this sort,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director.. “The challenge for the USA and its allies is to ensure that the surge of international troops into the country will provide better security for Afghans, and not put them at greater risk.”

The killing of two brothers in Kandahar in the middle of the night last January is a notable example of the lack of accountability of international forces. Amnesty International’s research in Kandahar indicates that Abdul Habib and Mohammed Ali, who were unarmed, were shot at home at point blank range by international forces in camouflage uniforms. More than a year later, no one has admitted responsibility despite enquiries by Amnesty International, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, and the United Nation’s Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston.

“The ongoing impunity surrounding the deaths of Abdul Habib and Mohammed Ali highlights the lack of proper accountability for Western forces operating in Afghanistan,” said Sam Zarifi. “The country is at tipping point and civilians are increasingly questioning whether their government and its international allies are doing enough to protect them. The Taliban have stoked public resentment and international forces have not yet demonstrated that they are serious about conducting investigations of incidents and providing accountability and compensation to the victims.”

So far no one has accepted responsibility for the deaths of the two brothers. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) told Amnesty International that no NATO/ISAF personnel were involved in the operation. To date the US military has not acknowledged taking part in this incident.

Amnesty International has, however, received information that the operation was conducted by personnel operating out of Firebase Gecko (also known as Firebase Maholic), located at the former home of Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Now used as a US base, it houses regular international troops, special forces units, as well as personnel from intelligence agencies forces, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), known to operate in Afghanistan. These forces are often referred to as “other government agencies” or OGAs.

Afghan security forces in Kandahar have confirmed that they do not exercise any control or command over the activity of special forces or OGAs operating out of Firebase Gecko and cannot provide any remedy for

civilians injured by the action of units based there.

Amnesty International commended recent policies adopted by NATO and US forces to minimize harm to civilians, but pointed out that there is still great confusion about the chains of command, mandates and rules of engagement of personnel from the nearly 40 countries operating military forces in Afghanistan.

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA11/001/2009/en>