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Pakistan: Government must protect Swat valley residents from abuses

The Pakistani government should act immediately to protect hundreds of thousands of people from insurgents in the Swat valley and elsewhere in the country, Amnesty International said today. According to official estimates, over the past year more than 1,200 people have been killed and an estimated 200,000 – 500,000 have been displaced from the Swat valley as a result of fighting between Pakistani Taleban groups and the military.

“The Pakistani Taleban have shown their contempt for the lives and rights of the people of the Swat valley, whilst Pakistani military forces have often violated the human rights and disregarded the safety of the people that they are ostensibly trying to protect,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director.

Since 2007, a local armed group ideologically affiliated with Afghanistan’s Taleban movement has managed to take effective control of nearly 80 percent of the Swat valley territory, once a tourist destination only 100 miles from Islamabad.

In Swat, the Pakistani Taleban have committed serious human rights abuses, including the unlawful killing of scores of government workers as well as those whom they view as violating their edicts. The Taleban have publicly whipped men for shaving their beards, destroyed shops for selling music and forcibly prohibited women from leaving their houses unless escorted by a male relative.

The main square of Mingora, the area’s largest city, has been locally dubbed Khooni Chowk, or “bloody square”, in reference to the more than two dozen bodies the Pakistani Taleban have publicly displayed there.

There are an estimated 3,000 Taleban insurgents located in the Swat Valley. They often endanger civilians by seeking shelter in villages, knowing that this might provoke military reaction.

“For the past five years the government’s response to the rise of insurgents in Swat and the Tribal Areas has vacillated between launching often indiscriminate and disproportionate military operations that mostly harm civilians and abandoning Pakistani citizens to abusive insurgent groups.

Up to 15,000 government troops are deployed in Swat seeking insurgents. They have used helicopter gunships and heavy artillery in their operations, often in an indiscriminate way, harming civilians as they do so. Fear of government military operations, rather than the Taleban, have been cited by tens of thousands of people who have fled the area.

The Pakistani government needs to implement a strategy that focuses on respecting the rights and the well-being of its citizens and refrains from heavy-handed military operations which put civilians at risk. The

government should also ensure it does not leave its citizens at the mercy of the Taleban,” said Sam Zarifi.

Amnesty International condemned the Pakistani Taleban’s campaign against education, especially for girls. Over the past 18 months, the Taleban have destroyed more than 170 schools in Swat, including more than 100 girls’ schools. These attacks have disrupted the education of more than 50,000 pupils, from primary to college level, according to official estimates.

Amnesty International urged the government to take protective measures to guarantee that pupils of both genders, including those who have fled their homes, have access to education when schools reopen on 1 March. If the government can not protect schools in the area, it should ensure that displaced children have access to alternate means of receiving an education, Amnesty International said.

“By disrupting education, the Taleban are threatening the rights of another generation of Pakistanis,” said Sam Zarifi. “The Pakistan government must ensure the people fleeing the conflict have adequate access to their basic needs such food, health care, and education, and that local and international humanitarian agencies are able to safely provide assistance to them.”

Background:

Swat is a “settled area” distinct from neighbouring tribal areas on the Afghan border.

Swat valley is normally home to around 1.5 million people. Over the past two years, radical cleric Maulana Fazlullah and his followers have increasingly established control over the region, imposing a de-facto administration. The group has consolidated its control by setting up a parallel justice system with over 70 “courts” to administer “speedy and easy justice”, in practice meting out punishments that amount to cruel, degrading, or inhumane treatment. The Pakistani Taleban have used their nightly FM radio broadcasts to announce “wanted” lists of local politicians and government workers to appear before their courts, or face the consequences, and have recently threatened to kill all lawyers and judges if they failed to stop working with the state judicial system. Half or more of Swat’s 800 police officials, too afraid to remain on duty, have either taken leave of absence or deserted their ranks.

In May 2007, a peace plan between the government and the insurgents in Swat, which purportedly allowed the militants to regroup, broke down. Since then, the government has not articulated any clear policy about how it intends to protect the rights of the residents of the Swat valley.