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Iraq: military action could trigger civilian and human rights catastrophe

With the onset of military action against Iraq, Amnesty International demands assurances from all parties - USA its allies and Iraq - that they will respect fully the laws of war, protect civilians and ensure their access to humanitarian assistance.

"Those who have launched the military attacks must take responsibility if their action provokes a human rights and humanitarian catastrophe. We fear it will disrupt delivery of essential services and supplies to a population heavily dependent on government aid, and could trigger a humanitarian catastrophe. They must make every effort to safeguard the people and alleviate human suffering," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"Amnesty International believes there is a real risk that many civilians, including children, might die as a result of indiscriminate attacks, or use of prohibited weapons."

Amnesty International also fears that attempts by the Iraqi regime to suppress internal uprisings or, the settling of scores that could follow if the regime collapses, could lead to widespread human rights abuses.

"It is essential that the United Nations begins preparations for the deployment of international human rights monitors in Iraq as soon as the situation permits. The mandate of the monitors should address violations by any authority controlling the territory, whether Iraqi or foreign."

Amnesty International calls on the neighbouring states, and the Kurdish authorities to keep their borders open to receive refugees and displaced persons, and to give full and free access to international organisations and NGOs.

"The international community must support these countries, " Ms Khan stated.

Amnesty International also fears significant 'collateral damage' on human rights in the region and beyond.

"There is a high degree of public anger and concern about the war. Already the freedoms of expression, assembly and movement are being threatened as increasing numbers of anti-war demonstrations are suppressed, political opponents and journalists are detained. We must resist a backlash against human rights," Ms Khan warned.

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