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Kandahar massacre: International forces must increase protection of Afghan civilians

International forces in Afghanistan need to ensure greater accountability for civilian casualties, Amnesty International said in the wake of the killing of more than a dozen people among them nine children by a US serviceman.

The soldier, believed to be a 38-year old staff sergeant from a nearby US army base, entered two villages in the Panjwai district of Kandahar province in the early hours of Sunday morning and shot dead 16 people. Some of the bodies were reportedly set alight. NATO has said it will investigate the massacre. US authorities have claimed that the soldier was acting alone and without any official authority.

“The United States must act swiftly and take the lead in an independent, credible, and transparent investigation into the attack that led to the tragic deaths of 16 civilians, including women and children,” said Sam Zarifi, Asia-Pacific Director at Amnesty International

“The US government must provide adequate compensation to the families affected by the killings.

“The current lack of accountability fuels and fosters a perception in the country that international forces do not care enough about the well-being of Afghans and are above the law and unaccountable for their actions, particularly when it comes to civilian casualties — a perception that is successfully reinforced by the propaganda effort of the Taliban and other anti-government forces.”

According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), more than 3,000 civilians were killed in the conflict during 2011, with international and Afghan forces responsible for at least 14 per cent of civilian deaths. Most of these civilians were killed and injured in airstrikes and night raids of homes.

“The Taliban and other insurgent groups are responsible for the vast majority of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, but that does not excuse the continuing lack of accountability and compensation for casualties caused by NATO and Afghan forces,” said Sam Zarifi.

“International and Afghan forces must do more to minimize further civilian casualties and develop a system for prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation leading to the prosecution of anyone suspected of having violated the laws of war, as well as for systematic reparation for civilians killed or injured as a result of international military operations

“Respect for international law, including human rights law and international humanitarian law, as well as respect for the rule of law by all parties involved, including the international forces, is a prerequisite to bringing security to Afghanistan.

Kandahar province has seen some of the heaviest fighting between international troops and insurgents in the past five years, and Panjwai has been at the heart of the conflict.