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Afghanistan: Avoid civilian casualties after security handover

Afghanistan's security forces must do everything in their power to avoid and account for civilian casualties, Amnesty International said today as the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) handed over responsibility for maintaining security in the country.

The organization also calls on the Afghan authorities to investigate allegations of civilian casualties amid operations carried out by Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

"The ANSF are obliged under international law to ensure accountability for their actions and to provide remedy for civilian casualties of military action," said Polly Truscott, deputy director of Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Programme.

According to UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) civilian casualties from ANSF operations increased in 2012, however ANSF leadership has been reluctant to acknowledge let alone take for responsibility for civilian casualties when they occur. Numbers of civilian casualties by ANSF may therefore be under-reported.

"All civilian casualties and destruction of civilian objects must be tracked and investigated, ANSF must also ensure timely and effective remedies for such acts," said Truscott.

Amnesty International said that the international coalition should accelerate efforts to assist the Afghan government to create an independent and effective mechanism to monitor and investigate civilian deaths and injuries proactively and provide full reparations.

The organization acknowledges some positive steps taken by the Afghan authorities since last year to investigate and mitigate civilian casualties and to protect civilians.

In March 2012 the government issued a presidential order directing all security forces to uphold Afghan laws, policies and procedures during the conduct of special operations. Two months later, it established the Civilian Casualties Tracking Team in the Presidential Information Coordination Centre and in October last year it appointed an advisor to President Karzai on the protection of civilians.

"Sadly, these measures are proving insufficient, judging by the surge in civilian casualties including by ANSF and the apparent disregard by its leadership," said Truscott.

Amnesty International calls on both the Afghan authorities and the international forces operating in the country to predict, monitor and assess the impact of military operations on local populations, and take all measures to minimize displacement in affected areas.

Background information

On 18 June, President Hamid Karzai announced the fifth and final phase of security transition from international to Afghan forces. NATO/ISAF is now handing over control of the remaining 95 districts – including Taliban stronghold areas in the south and east – to the ANSF

The NATO/ISAF military coalition will still be responsible for military air support as well as support in combat operations until the end of 2014, when it is due to withdraw all combat troops from the country completely.