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Afghanistan: Talks with the Taliban must focus on justice and human rights

Human rights, including women's rights, must be integral to any peace deal with the Taliban said Amnesty International today as the USA announced that it was to start direct peace talks with Afghanistan's Taliban armed group.

The call comes as Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai announced that his country would boycott the peace talks unless they were "Afghan-led", and on the heels of NATO handing over responsibility for security in the country to Afghan forces.

The first meeting is due to take place imminently in Doha, Qatar, where the Taliban have recently set up an office.

"Any agreement with the Taliban must include clear red-line commitments that they will guarantee the rights of all Afghan women, men and children," said Polly Truscott, deputy Asia-Pacific Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"The peace process must not allow members of the Taliban or anyone else to be granted immunity from prosecution for serious human rights abuses and war crimes."

The peace talks must uphold the rule of law, and not deny justice to victims of human rights abuses and war crimes – whether perpetrated by the pro-government forces or insurgent groups. Human rights and justice should not be sacrificed for the sake of military and political expediency, Amnesty International said.

The organization also called on the Afghan government to repeal the 2007 National Stability and Reconciliation Bill. Under this legislation, people who committed serious human rights abuses during the past 30 years – including massacres, enforced disappearances, torture, rape, and public executions – would be immune from criminal prosecution. Taliban fighters who agree to cooperate with the Afghan government would also be immune from prosecution.

Afghan civil society groups – in particular women's groups – have demanded that the Afghan people's human rights and well-being not be compromised in any reconciliation talks with the Taliban. But their voices have largely been marginalized.

Only nine women have been appointed to the 70-member High Peace Council, the Afghan government's body charged with leading proposed peace and reconciliation talks with the Taliban and other armed groups. And even these women are sidelined from key peace negotiations the council is undertaking.

"The inclusion of women in the peace talks must be genuine and meaningful, with their priority concerns fully reflected, in line with UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security," said Truscott.

The Taliban have had a terrible record of human rights abuses both while they were in government and as insurgents. Today in areas under their control, as when they ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban have severely curtailed the rights of girls and women, including the rights to education, work, freedom of movement, political participation and representation.

As insurgents, Taliban fighters have targeted and killed civilians whom they consider to be "spies" or "collaborators" of the Afghan government and the international forces, and have carried out abductions, often killing their captives.

The Taliban have also made little effort to distinguish between civilian and military targets and have launched hundreds of indiscriminate attacks, including suicide bombings and roadside bomb attacks, in which hundreds of civilians, including children, have been killed or injured.

Civilian casualties have increased by 24 per cent in the first five months of 2013, with 3,092 civilians killed or wounded, according to the

UN.

Insurgent groups were responsible for 74 per cent of casualties in the reporting period, with their use of improvised explosive devices particularly to blame.