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Ukraine: A deadly rocket attack highlights the need for civilian protection in eastern Ukraine

On 15 July as many as 11 civilians were reportedly killed in an airstrike in Snizhne – a small town around 12 miles from the Russian border. While separatists blamed the Ukrainian army for the attack, a representative of National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine denied these accusations and suggested that the attack was an attempt to discredit the Ukrainian military.

Amnesty International considers that the situation in certain areas of eastern Ukraine amounts to a non-international armed conflict, and therefore both parties to the conflict are bound by international humanitarian law as laid out in the Geneva Conventions. International humanitarian law requires that all parties to the conflict must protect civilians and respect the distinction between military targets and civilian objects. This means that they must avoid direct attacks against civilians or civilian objects (whether in reprisal or for any other reason), indiscriminate attacks which do not attempt to distinguish between military targets and civilians or civilian objects, or which use inherently indiscriminate weapons, are also prohibited, as are disproportionate attacks i.e. attacks that, while aimed at a legitimate military targets, have a disproportionate impact on civilians. Serious violations of international humanitarian are war crimes. Anyone responsible for such crimes must be brought to justice in a fair trial, and reparation should be provided to the victims of such violations.

Rockets hit a block of flats and a tax office in Snizhne early on 15 July leading to the collapse of a four-story apartment building, international media reported. A video posted on YouTube showed the scale of the damage and the evacuation of the survivors. The human tragedy in Snizhne highlights the need for all parties in the conflict to abide by international humanitarian law and ensure that civilians in eastern Ukraine are protected from fighting. Several news sources cited Ukrainian military sources as saying that 11 civilians died in the incident, including one child.

A renewed attempt to broker a ceasefire by a Trilateral Contact Group consisting of senior officials of Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the OSCE failed when a video conference with the separatists did not materialize. The fighting shows no sign of abating, and on 16 July 11 members of pro-Kyiv forces were killed in Donetsk.

Amnesty International calls on all parties to the conflict to abide by international humanitarian law and to ensure that civilians are protected. The organization also calls on the Ukrainian government to ensure that thorough and impartial investigation is carried out into the circumstances of this event.