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Afghanistan: Afghan civilians at risk during NATO offensive against Taliban

Amnesty International calls on both sides to protect Afghan civilians as NATO and Afghan forces continue a major military offensive in the southern province of Helmand.

“About 10,000 civilians have fled the conflict zone, but thousands more are caught up in the fighting,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Director.

“Afghanistan is likely to witness heavier fighting this year than ever before, and last year the war already claimed more than 2,400 civilian casualties, the highest number since 2001. So it’s crucial for all sides to take efforts to minimize harm to civilians.”

Displaced residents have reported that the Taliban tried to prevent civilians from leaving the conflict area and in some instances have fired from, and sought shelter among the civilian population

The Taliban and other anti-government groups were responsible for some two-thirds of all civilian casualties and injuries last year, according to UN estimates.

“The Taliban have a record of knowingly endangering Afghan civilians in their operations, which can constitute a war crime,” Sam Zarifi said. “Insurgent groups are bound by international law to take every possible precaution to protect the lives of civilians. The Taliban invoke international laws of war when it suits their purposes. Their failure to respect these laws is inexcusable and they should be held to account for their actions.”

Amnesty International also urged Afghan and international military forces to ensure they comply with their legal obligation to protect civilians from harm.

Operations by NATO forces have already led to the deaths of at least 15 civilians in and around the Marjah region since the “Operation Moshtarak” (“Joint Command”) offensive began on February 13th.

Twelve people, including six children, died after two US missiles struck a house on the outskirts of Marja district on Sunday. NATO has claimed that the attack was caused by a faulty missile system.

“The US and NATO have made commitments to minimise civilian casualties. But international and Afghan forces still lack a consistent, clear and credible mechanism to investigate civilian casualties, provide accountability and ensure that such incidents do not recur,” Sam Zarifi said. “This is now particularly urgent with more than 30,000 extra foreign troops deployed in Afghanistan and apparently committed to a more aggressive military strategy.”

Amnesty International also called on all warring parties to ensure that humanitarian assistance can reach needy civilians. The operation, which targets Marjah and Nad Ali districts of Helmand, has resulted in thousands of residents fleeing the conflict zone for Helmand's main town, Lashkar Gah, as well as to the towns of Kandahar and Herat.

The Afghan Department for Refugees and Returnees has reportedly registered more than 6,000 displaced people from Marja and Nad Ali since the operations were announced.

"We know that in other recent campaigns, thousands of displaced people have not been registered with the authorities, as they have chosen to stay with family and friends, often ignored or out of reach of humanitarian assistance," Sam Zarifi said.

Amnesty International calls upon the Afghan government and all relevant national and international aid agencies to provide immediate assistance for the displaced, including essential food and potable water, basic shelter, appropriate clothing and heating materials as well as essential medical services and sanitation, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.