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Thousands in need of protection after fleeing Yemeni assault on suspected militants

Amnesty International has today urged the Yemeni authorities to take urgent measures to protect thousands of people displaced during a military operation against suspected al-Qa'ida militants in the town of al-Hutah.

The Yemen Red Crescent Society has said more than 12,000 local residents have fled the assault, in the southern region of Shabwa, but reports indicate they are yet to receive any humanitarian aid.

Government officials state that the operation is against up to 100 al-Qa'ida fighters taking refuge in the town, while several inhabitants of neighbouring areas have told Amnesty International that the suspected militants are actually armed tribesmen with grievances against the government.

“Whatever the nature of the ongoing operations, the Yemeni authorities must ensure as a matter of urgency that what amounts to a shocking number of people displaced in the space of a few days are adequately provided for,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The authorities have a duty to ensure public safety and must immediately fulfil the needs of the displaced in terms of food, water, shelter and medical care, particularly for those who may have been injured during their escape.”

Media reports suggest that at least one local resident has been killed and others wounded while trying to flee, while dozens of government soldiers and suspected militants are said to have died in the fighting. The exact circumstances of the deaths remain unclear.

Families fleeing the scene have described how government forces began shelling al-Hutah on Sunday, followed by tanks and armoured vehicles descending on the town, leading to clashes between government troops and suspected militants.

The nature of the assault gives rise to concerns that government forces have used what would be – for a law-enforcement operation – grossly disproportionate force.

Amnesty International has documented previous occasions when the government has failed to provide for the needs of people displaced by conflict or other violence in Yemen, most recently during the intermittent conflict between government forces and armed Huthi rebels in the northern region of Sa’dah, which began in 2004.

In August 2009 the Yemeni government launched a military offensive against the Huthis codenamed “Scorched Earth” which included aerial bombing and the deployment of tanks and ground troops. In November 2009 Saudi Arabian forces began to launch air strikes in Sa’dah after fighting spilled over onto

their territory.

The ferocity of these bombardments, particularly in the three or so months before a ceasefire was declared on 11 February 2010, led to mass displacement of Yemeni civilians; almost the entire population of some cities and villages fled to camps for the displaced in the nearby regions of Hajjah and 'Amran, as well as to the capital Sana'a and elsewhere.

A total of over 300,000 people have been driven from their homes in Sa'dah since 2004, according to the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency.

Amnesty International published a report on 25th August 2010 entitled Yemen: Cracking Down Under Pressure which documented a catalogue of human rights violations including unlawful killings of those accused of links to al-Qa'ida and Southern Movement activists, and arbitrary arrests, torture and unfair trials, occurring in the name of security.