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Pakistan: Government must prepare for South Waziristan displacement crisis

The government of Pakistan must urgently prepare for a displacement crisis as civilians flee South Waziristan ahead of an expected military assault, Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International research teams in the area report that between 90,000 and 150,000 residents of South Waziristan have fled the area since July, when the Pakistani military began a long-range artillery and aerial bombardment in the region.

“The Pakistani government has to ensure the well-being of its own citizens, even when it’s fighting against a group with a record of violations like the Pakistani Taleban. There is no excuse for not complying with basic human rights principles or the laws of war,” said Sam Zarifi, Asia Pacific Director for Amnesty International.

Most of the displaced have been living with host communities—often relatives or friends in neighbouring areas of Dera Ismail Khan and Tank. Local officials imposed a curfew in Tank on Wednesday and have limited movement between 6 pm and 6 am, and have restricted access on the road to Dera Ismail Khan, significantly hindering the ability of people from South Waziristan to seek shelter in safer parts of the country.

Amnesty International’s research teams on the ground report that there are insufficient preparations for health facilities, supplies of food and drinkable water, and shelter for the displaced.

“The authorities must ensure that all civilians, regardless of ethnic group or background have access to adequate food, water, healthcare and shelter especially as the winter months approach,” said Sam Zarifi.

The government has failed to prepare adequate camps where fleeing civilians could find shelter in an emergency, and has limited its response to preparing six facilities for registering internally displaced people (four in Dera Ismail Khan, one in Tank and one in Pathankot).

The government has provided registered families with automated bank cards giving them access to Rupees 5000 (US\$60).

Several displaced residents of South Waziristan told Amnesty International that local government officials had refused to register them indicating a possibly serious under estimation of the total number of displaced people.

Due to insecurity in the area, only one local nongovernment organization, FIDA, has been given the task of assisting the displaced.

“Conditions around South Waziristan are even worse than in Swat, because few international aid groups, whether international or local, are able to operate in this highly insecure area. Add to that the impending cold weather and the potential for a real calamity is quite high,” said Sam Zarifi.

Residents of South Waziristan recently told Amnesty International that they had fled military operations in the mountainous areas of Ladah, Makin and Zahwarr.

They said they were forced to travel through often treacherous mountain roads because the military has blocked the main roads in the area.

The road blockades have aggravated local food shortages, also spurring people to leave their homes.

“All parties to the conflict, including armed opposition groups, have a legal obligation to allow and facilitate the safe passage of impartial humanitarian assistance to civilians lacking supplies and services essential for their survival,” said Sam Zarifi.

“It is essential that the Pakistan security forces, as well as anti-government forces, ensure the free and safe passage of humanitarian assistance to these vulnerable displaced people is made a priority.”

In the event of a major army operation in South Waziristan, Amnesty International calls on the Pakistani military as well as the Pakistani Taleban groups to ensure that it takes the necessary precautions, as dictated by the laws of war, to prevent civilian harm and never intentionally target civilians or civilian objects.

They must also take all feasible precautions to avoid, or at least to minimize, any damage to civilians and their property.

Background

A series of apparently coordinated attacks by Pakistani Taleban and affiliated militant organizations has killed more than 170 people over the past two weeks, at least 80 of them civilians.

On 5 October, the Taleban attacked the offices of the World Food Program in Islamabad, killing 5 people. As a result, international aid agencies have further restricted their operations in and around northwestern Pakistan.

South Waziristan is estimated to have a population of around 450,000 people, according to 1998 census figures.

In April, the Pakistan army launched a major offensive in northwestern Pakistan against the Pakistani Taleban resulting in the displacement of over two million people, the largest displacement crisis in Pakistan’s history. While many have returned to their homes at least temporarily amid continuing insecurity, more than half a million people remain displaced in the region.