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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Amnesty International expresses concern at US air strikes

Amnesty International today expressed its alarm at yesterday's United States air strikes on targets in Afghanistan and Sudan. The organization is writing to the US government seeking clarification on measures taken to protect civilian lives.

Amnesty International is concerned that the human rights of civilians remain paramount, and that this has to be a key factor in decision-making. The organization expressed its concern at the possible indiscriminate nature of these attacks which would violate international humanitarian law. According to Articles 48 and 51 of Additional Protocol 1 to the Geneva Convention which have now become customary international law, armed forces are obliged not to target civilians, either directly or through indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks. They are also required to protect the civilian population from the dangers arising from military operations.

Amnesty International acknowledges the rights of governments to protect the safety of their citizens and condemns deliberate attacks by armed groups which lead to civilian casualties. The organization condemns unequivocally the callous slaughter of civilians in the bomb attacks on the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. However, these attacks can never be used as a justification for actions which could cause further human rights violations and loss of civilian life. Experience has shown that such attacks frequently lead to reprisals and escalation of conflict in which civilians bear the brunt of the violence.

This situation should remind the international community of the ongoing human rights crises in Afghanistan and Sudan, and the dangers arising from transfers of weaponry to states or armed groups without adequate guarantees that they will not be used to commit human rights violations.

For more than 20 years, the US government, along with several others, has offered material and political support to armed groups in Afghanistan both following the Soviet invasion and for periods during the current civil war. These arms have been used to commit widespread human rights abuses against the civilian population.

For years Amnesty International has been urging the international community to bring the human rights catastrophe in Afghanistan to an end. The US has a direct responsibility to use its influence to promote international efforts to secure peace and human rights in Afghanistan, rather than selectively pursuing its interests. It also has a responsibility to use its influence to promote the protection of human rights in the Sudan, a country where the gross abuse of human rights has become the norm particularly during deliberate attacks on civilians by government forces which have caused famine in the war zones.

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