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Afghanistan: Mounting civilian death toll – all sides must do more to protect civilians

Amnesty International is increasingly concerned at the escalating numbers of Afghan civilians killed and injured in the ongoing armed conflict in Afghanistan. In recent weeks scores of civilians have been killed during aerial and land attacks against Taleban insurgency by US, NATO and Afghan forces. Scores of civilians have also been killed in indiscriminate suicide attacks launched by Taleban insurgents, as well as in attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) such as roadside bombs. Amnesty International is also concerned at reports that the Taleban are using human shields to escape attack. Attacks by both sides have resulted in deaths of women and children.

Amnesty International fears that civilians have been killed, in contravention of international humanitarian law (the laws of war), as a result of failure by all parties involved in the conflict to take necessary precautions to protect civilians. The organization is concerned by the extent and seriousness of violations reported, including disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks. The conflict has also reduced the access of humanitarian agencies to some of the worst affected areas in south, affecting the delivery of essential aid and medical care to millions of Afghans. Over 100,000 people have reportedly fled their homes in the southern provinces to escape the fighting.

Amnesty International is alarmed at recent reports that Taleban insurgents are continuing to violate the rules of international humanitarian law, showing an utter disregard for the lives of Afghans and foreign nationals who are taking no part in the hostilities. On 17 June 2007 a suicide bomber reportedly targeted a bus ferrying police recruits to a training academy in central Kabul, killing at least 24 people, including 22 policemen. The attack occurred in a crowded area of Kabul, wounding some 52 civilians, including five foreign nationals.

Other incidents included:

On 16 June, a suicide bomber driving a taxi, in an apparent attempt to target a military-civilian convoy in western Kabul, killed four bystanders.

American soldiers reportedly opened fire into crowds that had gathered around the scene of the explosion later that day, killing a truck driver and wounding another civilian. A US military spokesperson was reported to have said that the incident was caused by the "accidental discharge of a soldier's weapon". This is not the first time, however, that American soldiers have let off gunfire in the direction of civilian crowds. On 4 March, following a suicide attack on a US convoy on the Jalalabad Highway in Nangahar province, US troops reportedly opened fire on the road which was packed with civilian cars and pedestrians. Up to 16 civilians were killed and at least 24 were wounded.

On 15 June, a suicide car bomber reportedly killed nine civilians, including five children, while apparently intending to target a NATO Dutch convoy in Tirin Kot, in Uruzgan province in southern Afghanistan. Seven other civilians were wounded in the attack.

According to media reports, Taleban spokespersons claimed responsibility for all three suicide attacks. The Taleban movement has on several occasions said it was planning waves of suicide attacks in Afghanistan.

Suicide attacks have increased six-fold in Afghanistan in the past two years with 123 attacks in 2006, up from 17 in 2005. The UN recorded a total of 237 deaths as a result of suicide attacks in 2006, while NATO reported an additional 519 deaths as a result of IEDs. An Amnesty International report published in April 2007 documented that the Taleban and other armed groups in Afghanistan have consistently failed to abide by the rules of international humanitarian law and have shown disregard for the principles of humanity, including targeting civilians for attack, taking hostages and carrying out beheadings.¹

Amnesty International is also concerned at reports of civilian casualties and injuries resulting from military operations by the foreign forces. During the night of 21 June, 25 civilians from the village of De Adam Khan, near Gereshk in Helmand province, were reportedly killed as a result of air strikes by NATO-ISAF forces. Those killed included nine women and three babies aged between 6 to 10 months, according to the provincial police chief. He also alleged that NATO-ISAF launched the strikes without consulting their Afghan counterparts on the ground. A spokesman for ISAF's Regional Command South said that the insurgents chose to "initiate" the attack from the village and that "the risk to civilians was probably deliberate."

Other incidents included:

On 17 June at least seven children were reportedly killed in an US-led air strike on a religious school in Paktika province, southeastern Afghanistan. The incident occurred during an operation aimed at a compound containing a mosque and madrassa (religious school) thought to be used as a hideout by suspected al-Qa'ida insurgents. A Coalition spokesperson reportedly said that the insurgents were using innocent civilians to shield themselves.

On 1 June at least 14 civilians were reportedly killed in a NATO air strike in Sangin in Helmand province, according to local police sources, though local people claimed that the death toll was much higher.

During joint Afghan-NATO land and air strikes on 21 and 22 May, 16 civilians were reportedly killed in Azizi village, Panjwai district in Kandahar province. Among those killed were women, children and the elderly. Some 15 civilians were reportedly injured in the attack.

In a three day operation between 27-29 April, up to 57 civilians were reportedly killed when US troops carried out land and air strikes on Shindand in Herat province in western Afghanistan in an attempt to flush out Taleban insurgents. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission investigated the incident and reported that at least half those killed were women and children. The International Red Cross reported that 173 houses were destroyed and nearly 2,000 were left homeless.

According to government figures, an estimated 700 civilians were killed in 2006 as a result of insurgency-related hostilities, while up to 380 civilians were killed in the first four months of 2007, according to UN figures. The International Committee of the Red Cross stated on 12 June that civilians are suffering severely from threats to their security, such as increasing numbers of roadside bombs and suicide attacks, and regular aerial bombing raids.

Amnesty International urges all sides to the conflict to take every possible precaution to spare civilian lives and reiterates that abuses by one side can never justify abuses by another. The organization emphasises that civilians must not be made to pay the price for unlawful conduct on either side. All violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including targeting of civilians, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, and other unlawful killings of civilians must be promptly, thoroughly and independently investigated and those responsible for them must be brought to justice, in proceedings which meet international standards of fairness and without recourse to the death penalty.

As a matter of urgency, Amnesty International calls on all sides to the conflict to adhere in their operations to the principle of distinction, a rule of international humanitarian law by which they are bound. All forces must ensure that they do not target civilians or carry out indiscriminate attacks.

¹. Amnesty International, *All who are not friends, are enemies: Taleban abuses against civilians* April 2007 (AI Index: ASA 11/001/2007).

For further information, please refer to previous Amnesty International reports and statements including:

Afghanistan: All who are not friends, are enemies: Taleban abuses against civilians (AI Index: ASA 11/001/2007)

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA110012007?open&of=ENG-AFG>

Afghanistan: Taleban attacks against civilians increasing and systematic (AI Index: ASA 11/002/2007)

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA110022007?open&of=ENG-AFG>

Afghanistan: NATO must ensure justice for victims of civilian deaths and torture (AI Index: ASA 11/021/2006)

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA110212006?open&of=ENG-AFG>

Afghanistan: NATO member states must uphold human rights standards through the establishment of body to investigate alleged violations of Afghanistan's human rights laws, empowered to provide restitution

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA110202006?open&of=ENG-AFG>

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