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## **Pakistan/Afghanistan: Thousands of displaced civilians in border area have right to international assistance**

Tens of thousands of civilians require immediate international humanitarian assistance as a result of escalating fighting on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border since the beginning of August, Amnesty International said today.

More than 20,000 people have fled from Pakistan to eastern Afghanistan to avoid fighting between government forces and pro-Taliban insurgents in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), while FATA authorities have asked Afghan refugees in Bajaur Agency to leave the area.

"Both the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as international forces operating in Afghanistan, have a legal obligation to provide safe passage, consistent security and humanitarian assistance to the refugees and internally displaced people on both sides of the border. They should also ensure that local and international humanitarian agencies are able to work safely in providing assistance to those in need," said Sam Zarifi, Asia Director at Amnesty International.

"The continued fighting in southern Afghanistan and the more recent conflict in northern Pakistan are creating a very dangerous situation in the region for civilians trying to find refuge. With the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, there is an expectation that even more civilians will leave their homes to avoid the fighting."

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), since mid September more than 600 families have fled fighting in Bajaur Agency in the FATA, where in recent months a Pakistani military campaign against anti-government insurgents has increased tensions. This is in addition to the 3,364 families which took refuge in the districts of Shigal, Marawara, Dangam, and other areas of Afghanistan's Kunar province in early August.

UNHCR reports that the majority of the families fleeing Pakistan are living with tribal relatives or host families in Kunar but some 200 families are living in the open. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the majority of the displaced from Bajaur Agency are women and children.

"These refugees could be jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. They are escaping fighting in Pakistan but they are at risk of being caught in the crossfire of the current fighting in Afghanistan between coalition forces and the Taliban and other anti-government groups," said Zarifi.

Humanitarian assistance to the Pakistani refugees in Kunar province is being sent via the Afghan government because routes to the area, and the area itself, are not safe for direct humanitarian response.

It is essential that all government and international security forces in Afghanistan, as well as anti-government forces, ensure that free and safe passage of humanitarian assistance to these vulnerable refugees is made a priority, especially as the winter months approach. Particular attention should be given to groups with special protection needs, such as women, children, and the elderly.

"People who have fled the fighting, whether they have crossed the border or not, have the right not to be forced to return to Bajaur or other FATA areas and Afghans in the FATA are offered safe alternatives to returning to Afghanistan's conflict-ridden south, until the security situation has improved," said Zarifi.

### **Background**

The armed conflict in Bajaur Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Swat District of the North West Frontier Province began in early August but intensified in September. More than 250,000 people have reportedly been displaced.