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Afghanistan: The truth must be exposed

The Taleban's refusal to allow independent monitoring of the situation in the northern areas of Afghanistan -- following the fall of Mazar-e Sharif and several other major towns to the Taleban last week -- could serve to conceal the human rights violations in the area, Amnesty International warned today.

The human rights organization has received unconfirmed but persistent reports of mass arrests of members of the non-Pashtun ethnic groups in Balkh province and their transfer to secret locations. There have also been reports of mass killing of non-combatant members of the Hazara population in Mazar-e Sharif allegedly by the Taleban militia when they entered the city on 8 August.

The Taleban have denied reports of human rights abuses but blocked independent monitoring of the situation in the area. They have flatly refused requests by journalists, including Pakistani journalists, to visit northern Afghanistan. People are not allowed to leave Mazar-e Sahrif, and non-Pashtun travellers heading for Pakistan are stopped at the checkpoints near Jalalabad.

"The Taleban must open up the area to foreign media and independent monitors and give public account of who they have arrested and why," Amnesty International urged.

"The legacy of the gross abuses committed in the past is all too great. We fear that non-combatants may be at risk of acts of violent reprisal and revenge by conquering factions," the organization said.

"The memory of the alleged killing of some 2,000 Taleban militia in Mazar-e Sharif after they were driven out of the city by anti-Taleban forces in May 1997 is still alive and could fuel possible retribution against supporters of the anti-Taleban alliance."

In September 1997, about 70 civilians from the Hazara minority, including women and children, were reportedly massacred in Qezelabad village near Mazar-e Sharif by Taleban guards retreating from positions they had captured in the area.

The whereabouts hundreds, possibly thousands, of Afghans and dozens of non-Afghans reportedly detained in recent weeks continue to remain unknown. According to eye-witness reports, people travelling to Pakistan are stopped in Jalalabad area by Taleban guards who take away Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek and Panjsheri men. Pashtuns are allowed to go. The prisoners are taken to the same prison where they keep people whom they have arrested during combat. Such prisoners are kept in *blaak siasi* (political block) and there is no distinction between military and political opponents.

Some are classified as 'important' prisoners and taken to Kandahar where thousands of such prisoners are reportedly held. Others are normally released on payment of a ransom. The

elderly, women and children of the non-Pashtun families are not taken prisoner but are forced to stay in camps near Jalalabad, including Sarshahi camp with no humanitarian relief assistance or material support available to them.

Among the non-Afghans missing are Mahmud Saremi, a 30-year old Iranian journalist who was reportedly captured on 8 August along with 10 Iranian diplomats when the city of Mazar-e Sharif fell to the Taleban forces. The Taleban have denied holding the 11 missing Iranians but admit that they captured 35 Iranian military truck drivers. Iranian authorities claim that these persons were solely involved in transporting humanitarian aid.

Amnesty International is urging the Taleban authorities to provide access to international human rights and humanitarian organizations to all the detainees in Afghanistan and to make public information about the number, identity and ethnic affiliation of the detainees. Any detainee who has not been actively involved in combat should be released immediately and unconditionally.

All warring parties, including the Taleban, should ensure that their militia do not carry out acts of deliberate and arbitrary killing, indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas, torture or hostage taking.

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