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Afghanistan: Thousands at imminent risk of human rights abuses

Thousands of civilians in northern Afghanistan could suffer serious human rights abuses unless the international community takes action to protect them as the war in the area escalates, Amnesty International said today.

The organization's warning follows reports of a major Taliban offensive against opposing forces in the Panjshir area. Hundreds of civilians have been killed following similar offensives in the recent past.

"Once again, civilians are the likely targets of human rights abuses in the context of a conflict they have no active part in," Amnesty International said. "Caught in a game of war between armed groups, they have only the international community to turn to for protection."

In Afghanistan, civilians who are unable to flee immediately after a new area is captured are often subjected to systematic abuses by the victorious forces. Thousands have been massacred, beaten or ill-treated. Others have died of suffocation while being transported to detention centres in metal containers.

"Both the Taliban and the anti-Taliban forces have committed gross human rights abuses against Afghan civilians in the past. What guarantees are there that they will spare civilians this time?"

"Will the world again stand by and watch as more civilians die, or will this opportunity be seized to protect them and prevent abuses from taking place?"

Amnesty International stressed the pressing need for the international community to protect civilians of the Tajik minority group in the Panjshir valley, as well as those living in other parts of Afghanistan.

The organization is calling on all parties to the conflict to abide by the principles of international humanitarian law and respect the security and physical integrity of the civilian population in Afghanistan.

Background

Serious human rights abuses were reported from the Bamiyan province in April this year as Taliban and anti-Taliban forces fought over the area, and hundreds of houses were reportedly burnt by Taliban forces as they gained control over the area.

The Taleban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, condemned these house burnings, saying they came in retaliation for earlier house burnings by the anti-Taleban forces. However, his statement only came after the abuses had occurred.

Men, women, young children, at times entire families, were reportedly killed by Taleban guards. In some cases, women and children were reportedly separated from their families and taken away, not to be seen again. Serious human rights abuses by the anti-Taleban forces against the civilian population were also reported at the same time.

Massacres by different sides also took place in Mazar-e Sharif in 1997 and 1998 following offensives to capture that city.

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