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Philippines: Civilians at risk as armed forces launch massive attack

Amid reports that at least 600 civilians have been killed or injured since the Philippine armed forces launched its Saturday attack on rebel bases on the southern Philippine island of Jolo, Amnesty International appeals to the Philippine authorities to take urgent steps to ensure the safety of all civilians on the island.

"Indiscriminate bombing of the civilian population must be halted immediately. No security crisis can justify a military offensive which involves the killing of civilians," Amnesty International said.

The Philippine armed forces have committed human rights violations within the context of counter-insurgency operations against armed opposition groups throughout the country, including extrajudicial executions, torture, "disappearances" and indiscriminate killings of civilians.

Amnesty International is appalled by reports that the armed forces have denied Jolo based medical and relief workers access to areas where innocent civilians, including children, are reported to have been killed or injured. A news blackout imposed by the government has made it impossible to confirm the numbers of civilian casualties, but government sources have so far admitted that four civilians have died.

Several thousand local villagers are reported to have fled their homes as bombings continue on the island, one of the poorest in the country. All transport links to and from Jolo have been severed.

On Saturday, President Estrada ordered thousands of troops to launch an attack on bases of the armed Islamic separatist group Abu Sayyaf in an attempt to rescue 22 hostages being held by the group. The hostages include 16 Filipinos, three Malaysians, two French journalists and an American. At least one of the Filipinos has been in captivity for nearly five months. Other hostages, including several foreign nationals, were released recently reportedly for large sums in ransom money.

Amnesty International called on both the Abu Sayyaf group, which has committed human rights abuses including hostage-taking and killings, and the Philippine armed forces, to respect the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

"All parties to any conflict have a responsibility to respect the lives of civilians, and of combatants who are wounded or have laid down their arms" Amnesty International said.

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