

AI Index: PRE 01/255/2009
02 July 2009

Pakistan: More than two million people living outside displacement camps face appalling conditions

Pakistan's central and regional governments must urgently do more to assist the more than two million people who have fled escalating fighting in northwestern Pakistan but do not have access to aid distributed in official displacement camps, Amnesty International said today. In particular, the Pakistani government must ensure that ethnic Pashtuns fleeing the fighting do not face discrimination in receiving assistance.

“As the fighting expands to North and South Waziristan, a displacement crisis that the government had said would last only for weeks looks set to go on for months, with no relief in sight for the millions of displaced people,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Director. “To make matters worse, the vast majority of displaced people are living outside the registered camps where aid agencies are distributing shelter, food and water to those in need.”

Nearly 90 percent of the displaced people do not have access to organized camps and live in extremely overcrowded conditions with host communities or in existing slums and abandoned buildings. Amnesty International has documented numerous instances of three or four families sharing one household, greatly straining the ability of host communities to provide sufficient food and clean water for everyone. The World Health Organization has warned of a significant risk of communicable diseases with the advent of hot weather and the monsoons.

“The Pakistani government has to ensure that the millions of displaced people, and their hosts, get the required assistance”, Zarifi said.

Conditions are particularly difficult for displaced people who have sought shelter in other provinces of Pakistan.

Of particular note, Amnesty International has documented some two dozen cases from Pakistan where displaced Pashtuns have been told they cannot rent property, access health care or place their children in school without security clearance – something particularly difficult for many people who lost their documentation as they fled. This problem is particularly acute for women and women-led households because in areas of northwestern Pakistan under Taleban control, many women were barred from receiving national identity documents.

Conditions seem particularly difficult in Sindh province, where some local political groups have fanned fears that the influx of Pashtuns would threaten the local population. According to local aid

groups, more than 200,000 displaced people have already reached various cities in Sindh, including Jamshoro, Kotri, and Sukkhar, joining millions of Pashtuns already living in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city.

One leader of the Sindh Taraqi Pasand Party, a local group opposing aid to the displaced, told Amnesty International "All the nationalists of Sindh are against the settlement of displaced people from the NWFP or any other place as Sindhis are being turned into minority in their own province. We are afraid that once these displaced people will come to Sindh and they will not go back and will become a burden on our economy. We will not allow non-Sindhis to occupy the land which belongs to Sindh and Sindhis."

"People who lost everything as a result of the fighting are now being treated as second-class citizens in their own country," Sam Zarifi said. "The central and local governments must ensure that all internally displaced Pakistanis, regardless of ethnic group or background, are treated in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and have adequate food, water, shelter, and healthcare."