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Pakistan: Zardari's UK visit must deliver human rights gains in Northwest

Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari should use his UK visit to announce reforms in the country's northwest that will help combat human rights violations there, Amnesty International said today.

President Zardari is due to arrive in the UK on 3 August, amid increased focus by international leaders on Pakistan's response to the Taleban-led insurgency in its northwest tribal areas and in Afghanistan.

"The conditions are right for Pakistan to show it is serious about political solutions to the human rights violations, poverty, and constitutional rights vacuum in the northwest that allowed the Taleban to assert such control there in the first place," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Director for the Asia-Pacific.

"The Pakistani people have suffered tremendously at the hands of the Taleban, but a predominantly military response has led to more than a million civilians still displaced and thousands of deaths while not dealing with the root of the problem."

Amnesty International is calling on President Zardari to deliver on his promise made on 14 August 2009 to reform the exclusionary laws that still govern the northwestern Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly North West Frontier Province).

The Frontier Crimes Regulation is a colonial-era law that excludes the population of FATA from the protection of the national courts and Constitution of Pakistan, allowing for collective military punishment and restricted electoral rights.

"President Zardari should take this opportunity to answer his critics by announcing specific, major reforms, like the abolition of the Frontier Crimes Regulations that treat northwestern Pakistan like a human rights-free zone" said Sam Zarifi.

Amnesty International is also calling on Zardari and UK Prime Minister David Cameron to incorporate real human rights benchmarks in their counter-terror efforts, and into development aid to Pakistan.

Political reform and development will improve the region's human rights, and strengthen accountability and rule of law, which need to be at the core of any anti-terror strategy in Northwestern Pakistan, the organisation said.

"The UK and Pakistan government have to work together to deliver human rights and development for the people of the northwest. Aid to these regions will be wasted in the absence of political reform and guarantees of human rights," said Sam Zarifi.

The UK has pledged £600 million over 5 years in humanitarian aid to people affected by the conflict in the northwest, but needs to include human rights benchmarks in how that money is used, and to push for an end to enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and mistreatment of detainees.

Amnesty International released its report 'As if Hell Fell On Me: the Human Rights Crisis in Northwest Pakistan' in June, which portrayed the civilians of the northwest as caught in a human-rights free zone, between Taleban rule and heavy-handed responses from the Pakistani military.