



## **Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief**

### **Statement on the Protection of Civilians in Afghanistan**

1 August 2008

WE, the 100 national and international NGO members of ACBAR, express our grave concern about the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and the serious impact on civilians. There has been a surge in the number of civilian casualties caused by all sides, a spread of insecurity to previously stable areas, and increasing attacks on aid agencies and their staff.

So far this year the number of insurgent attacks, bombings and other violent incidents is up by approximately 50 per cent on the same period last year. The number of insurgent attacks for each of the months of May (463), June (569) and July is greater than the number of such attacks in any other month since the end of major hostilities following the international intervention in 2001.<sup>1</sup> Prior to May 2008, the highest number of insurgent attacks in a single month was 405 in July 2007.

This year 2,500 people have reportedly lost their lives in the conflict and whilst exact figures are not yet available, this could include up to 1,000 civilians. According to initial estimates, there have been over 260 civilian casualties in July of this year, which is higher than any other month in the last six years.<sup>2</sup>

Around two-thirds of the reported civilian casualties can be attributed to insurgent activities, especially the increasing use of suicide bombings and other indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas and the use of civilian property from which to launch attacks. The increased number of air strikes by international military forces, which are up by approximately 40 per cent on last year, has also contributed to the rising civilian death toll.

Searches conducted by Afghan and international forces have on some occasions involved excessive use of force, extra-judicial killings, destruction of property and/or mistreatment of suspects.

In the south, south-east and east of the country insurgents are mounting an increasingly vigorous, systematic terror campaign of threats, abductions and executions aimed against members of the civilian population.

Insecurity has spread to areas which were previously relatively stable in parts of north, north-west and central Afghanistan, such as Badghis, Ghor, Farah and Kunduz, including to provinces close to and bordering Kabul, such as Ghazni, Logar and Wardak.

The escalating violence has forced the closure of a large number of schools and health facilities in the south; is hindering the implementation of vital development projects; and has caused significant levels of internal displacement.

Aid organizations and their staff have been subject to increasing attacks, threats and intimidation, by both insurgent and criminal groups. This year there have been over 84 such incidents, including 21 in June, more than in any other month in the last six years.<sup>3</sup> So far this year 19 NGO staff have been killed, which already exceeds the total number of NGO workers killed last year.

This situation has forced many aid agencies to restrict the scale and scope of their development and humanitarian operations. With a severe drought in some parts of the country and dramatically increased food prices, over four million Afghans are facing extremely difficult circumstances. Young children, and pregnant and breastfeeding women are at especially high risk. Increasing and spreading insecurity is jeopardizing the delivery of essential humanitarian assistance to these people and threatening their lives and livelihoods.

THEREFORE,

We urgently call upon all parties to the conflict to ensure that in all their activities the safety and welfare of Afghan civilians is a paramount consideration.

We urge all parties to ensure observance of the fundamental standards of humanity, and of the established international laws of armed conflict.

In particular, we call upon all parties to the conflict:

- To distinguish between civilians and combatants in all attacks, and ensure that all attacks are directed at military objectives, using proportionate force.
- To take all feasible steps to avoid or minimise civilian casualties and damage to civilian property or infrastructure.
- Never to use civilians as a shield against attack.
- Never to attack humanitarian, development and medical personnel or supplies.
- Never to take hostages for any reason whatsoever.
- To conduct raids or searches of premises with proportionate force and with consideration for Afghan culture.
- To ensure timely and adequate compensation and assistance is provided to civilians who have suffered as a result of conflict.
- To conduct transparent investigations of incidents involving civilian casualties and ensure full accountability.
- To ensure that no detainee or prisoner is subjected to torture, or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Cont./

FURTHERMORE,

We emphasise our strong belief that the conflict will not be brought to an end through military means, but that a range of measures are required to achieve a sustainable peace, including strong and effective support for rural development and the delivery of essential services, major governance reforms, enhanced aid effectiveness, and peace-building initiatives at local, national and regional levels.

Note to editors

The information contained in this statement is derived from a range of sources, including NGOs, the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), the United Nations, and reliable media sources.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of insurgent attacks in July this year is not yet available but it exceeds 440 (source: ANSO).

<sup>2</sup> Prior to July 2008, the month with the highest number of civilian deaths was June 2007, with 253 reported fatalities.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to June 2008, the month with the highest number of attacks or threats against NGOs was September 2007, with 17 such incidents (source ANSO).