

Flash Update 5 – Fighting, displacement and civilian casualties in Southern Afghanistan (26 October 2020)

Key Highlights

- Heavy fighting continues in southern Afghanistan, near Lashkargah city in Hilmand province affecting thousands of people.
- Four assessment teams are continuing their work to gauge the humanitarian impact of the situation. To date, 9,687 IDP have been verified, with assessments ongoing.

Situation Overview:

Fighting that started on 11 October between the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and a non-state armed group (NSAG) has carried on for more than two weeks near Lashkargah city in Hilmand province. The security situation in the area remains volatile. Fighting continued on Sunday in Bolan, Babaje and Basharan in Lashkargah's PD3. Fighting has also been reported in Nahr-e-Saraj along route 601 – an important route connecting Lashkargah in Hilmand with the city of Kandahar to the east.

The presence of IEDs planted on main roads continues to hinder movement, with additional devices reportedly placed along the Lashkargah – Nawa-e-Barakzaiy road, affecting road movement. The Lashkargah – Kandahar highway and the roads connecting Lashkargah to Nawa-e-Barakzaiy, Nad-e-Ali/Marja and Nahr-e-Saraj also remain closed to civilians due to the danger posed by IEDs, the presence of NSAG checkpoints, and physical damage to infrastructure such as culverts. However, people continue to use other routes in NSAG controlled areas.

Anticipated Humanitarian Impact:

The fighting has triggered the flight of residents with local authorities initially estimating that 35,000 people (around 5,000 households) were displaced into Lashkargah city. Assessment teams are still verifying these numbers with 9,687 IDPs confirmed so far. Interruptions to mobile phone networks continue to be a challenge in Lashkargah as well as other areas, hindering information flow and the progress of humanitarian assessments.

According to initial reports from the Department of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR), 1,750 people (approximately 250 households) were recently displaced from Bolan in Lashkargah PD3 to Lashkargah city after they were asked to leave the area by the NSAG on 20 October. This has resulted in further displacement into other part of Lashkargah city and NSAG controlled areas. The total number of people displaced from Bolan into NSAG controlled areas is yet to be confirmed.

Humanitarian partners calls for timely and reliable data and verification of IDPs to better understand the population's situation in Hilmand province. This will improve the quality of programming and speed of assistance to and protection of the newly displaced population.

The violence has stretched hospitals in Lashkargah to capacity. Attacks on health facilities during the fighting are particularly worrying, with WHO reporting that 15 health facilities have been targeted. The closure of health clinics in the area due to insecurity is affecting thousands of people, according to WHO. According to reports received on 25 October, 5 health facilities that had been closed in Lashkargah, Nad-e-Ali and Nawa-e-Barakzay districts re-opened with limited capacity, restoring health access for approximately 61,000 people.

Coordination:

OCHA is closely coordinating with the Government to provide assistance to IDPs based on need, ensuring efficient information flows and avoiding duplication of efforts. On 22 October, OCHA called for an Operational Coordination Team (OCT) meeting to discuss the needs of the IDPs in hard-to-reach areas, particularly in Greshk, the capital of Nahr-e-Saraj. During the meeting, DoRR in Hilmand noted that around 600 IDP households were forced to flee their homes due to conflict in Greshk, according to initial reports. The OCT also discussed the security situation along the road between Lashkargah and Greshk, which currently remains closed to civilians due to the danger posed by IEDs and the presence of NSAG checkpoints. The OCT in Kandahar agreed to deploy inter-agency teams from Kandahar to Greshk via Maywand to assess the humanitarian situation in both locations once the security situation along the road has improved and IEDs have been cleared.

Four OCT assessment teams led by DACAAR, along with staff from UNHCR, WFP, HAPA, APA, HRDA, SHAO, COAR, IRC, DoRR and the Provincial Governor's Office have been deployed to assess needs in different parts of Lashkargah. To date, 9,687 IDPs have been verified, with assessments ongoing. As of 25 October, OCHA coordinated the humanitarian response to 6,367 IDPs. OCHA is currently coordinating the response for the remaining 3,320 people verified by the assessment teams based on information about humanitarian needs that has been shared with all relevant clusters. The Provincial Rural Rehabilitation and Development Directorate (PRRD), through the support of UNICEF, continues to supply water in IDP locations through water tankering.

On 22 October, the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) in Hilmand provided food and water to 700 IDPs in Lashkargah IDP sites. This was a one-off distribution to address the immediate needs of IDPs in the area. Following ANDMA's response, a humanitarian assessment team carried out a comprehensive needs assessment at the site to determine further needs of IDPs.

The next update will be published as the situation changes and new information becomes available.