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[Ir a la navegación](#) | [Ir a contenido](#)

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PAÍS](#)

[DÓNDE
TRABAJAMOS](#)

[ÓRGANOS DE
DERECHOS
HUMANOS](#)

[NOTICIAS Y
EVENTOS](#)

[PUBLICACIONES Y
RECURSOS](#)

[Español](#) > [Noticias y eventos](#) > **[Noticia](#)**

UN Human Rights Chief urges action to prevent calamitous consequences for the people of Afghanistan

GENEVA (10 August 2021) – Failure to stem the rising violence and commission of human rights violations and abuses is having disastrous consequences for the people of Afghanistan, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet warned on Tuesday as civilian casualties continued to mount and reports of violations that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity continued to emerge.

"We know that urban warfare results in scores of civilians being killed. We have seen it before, too many times. In Afghanistan, since 9 July in four cities alone – Lashkar Gah, Kandahar, Herat and Kunduz – at least 183 civilians have been killed and 1,181 injured, including children. These are just the civilian casualties we have managed to document – the real figures will be much higher," High Commissioner Bachelet said, warning that even before the latest Taliban military offensives on urban centres, the UN had documented a steep increase in civilian casualties.*

"Parties to the conflict must stop fighting to prevent more bloodshed. The Taliban must cease their military operations in cities. Unless all parties return to the negotiating table and reach a peaceful settlement, the already atrocious situation for so many Afghans will become much worse."

Bachelet also urged all States to use their influence – bilaterally and multilaterally – to bring the hostilities to an end.

"States have a duty to use any leverage they have to de-escalate the situation and reinvigorate peace processes. The fighting must be brought to an end," the High Commissioner stressed, noting the peace-related meetings taking place this week in Doha.

According to reports documented by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Human Rights Office, most of the civilian harm is being caused by ground engagements. Airstrikes have also resulted in civilian casualties. In addition, since the start of the May Taliban offensive, at least 241,000 people have been displaced, and the protracted fighting in the cities has resulted in damage to essential infrastructure like roads and bridges, and other civilian objects.

The situation in the southern city of Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, starkly demonstrates the harrowing impact that hostilities in urban areas have on civilians. In only 13 days since 28 July, when fighting started in the city, the UN received reports of at least 139 civilians killed and 481 injured. The real numbers are expected to be much higher as communication with the city is intermittently cut off and many civilians wounded by the fighting are unable to reach hospitals. By 5 August, hospitals were nearly at full capacity. On 31 July, a private clinic was significantly damaged by an Afghan National Army airstrike, leaving one civilian dead and five injured. The available food supply in the city is fast diminishing and shortages of medical supplies were also reported. Electricity and water were cut off in most parts of the city.

The sweeping takeover of an estimated 192 district administrative centres by the Taliban, the attacks on provincial capitals including Qala-e-Naw, Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, Herat, Faizabad, Ghazni, Maimana, Gardez, Pul-e-Khumri, and Mazar-e-Sharif, and the takeover of at least six provincial capitals – Zaranj in Nimroz province, Sheberghan in Jawzjan province, Kunduz City in Kunduz province, Taloqan in Takhar province, Sar-e-Pul in Sar-e-Pul province and Aybak in Samangan province – "have struck fear and dread into the population," the High Commissioner said, warning that the proliferation of pro-Government militias being mobilized against the Taliban may also put civilians in additional danger.

In the areas that have already been captured by the Taliban and in contested areas, Bachelet said the Office was receiving reports of summary executions, attacks against current and former Government officials and their family members, military use and destruction of homes, schools and clinics, and the laying of large numbers of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including pressure-plate IEDs which function as anti-personnel landmines.

The UN is also receiving other deeply disturbing reports of serious violations of international humanitarian law such as killings by the Taliban of *hors de combat* members of Afghan security forces – in some cases after they had even received letters guaranteeing their safety upon surrendering. Orders issued by members of the local Afghan National Police not to spare captured or surrendering Taliban members are also prohibited under international humanitarian law.

Bachelet reminded all parties of their obligation to take all necessary measures to protect civilians, especially when fighting in populated areas. Directing attacks against civilians is a serious violation of international humanitarian law and amounts to a war crime. Perpetrators of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law must be held accountable, she stressed.

The High Commissioner also expressed particular concern about early indications that the Taliban are imposing severe restrictions on human rights in the areas under their control, particularly targeting women. "People rightly fear that a seizure of power by the Taliban will erase the human rights gains of the past two decades," she said.

"We have received reports that women and girls in various districts under Taliban control are prohibited from leaving their homes without a *Mahram*, a male chaperone. These restrictions have a serious impact on the rights of women, including the right to health – and clearly, in the midst of a war, the need to access urgent medical care for themselves and their families is a matter of life and death. Hampering a woman's ability to leave home without a male escort also inevitably leads to a cascade of other violations of the woman's and her family's economic and social rights," Bachelet warned.

In several locations, the Taliban have reportedly threatened that violation of these rules would result in harsh punishments. There are already reports of women having been flogged and beaten in public because they breached the prescribed rules. In one case in Balkh province, on 3 August, a women's rights activist was shot and killed for breaching the rules.

Serious curbs on the freedom of expression and the ability of journalists to do their crucial work by both parties are also of deep concern during this time of uncertainty and chaos, the High Commissioner said.

"The people of Afghanistan are speaking of their deep fears of a return to the worst of the human rights violations of the past," Bachelet said. "Women, minorities, human rights defenders, journalists as well as others who are particularly vulnerable need particular protection. There are very real risks of renewed atrocities against ethnic and religious minorities."

"We will continue to monitor the human rights situation, in spite of security and other challenges, and I urge the international community, including through the Human Rights Council and the Security Council, to take urgent action to prevent further atrocities and to ensure that civilians in Afghanistan do not – once again – have to bear the brunt, and aftermath, of a prolonged and deadly conflict."

ENDS

* Link to the UN's mid-year Protection of Civilians report issued in July:

https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2021_26_july.pdf

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