

AFGHANISTAN

Massacres in Yakaolang

Amnesty International has now obtained detailed information which corroborates earlier reports of the massacre of civilians in Yakaolang in the central province of Bamiyan. According to eyewitness reports, Taleban forces began to arrest people and summarily execute them when they recaptured Yakaolang on 7 January this year. They had lost Yakaolang to Hezb-e Wahdat - an anti Taleban party claiming support from the Hazara minority - in late December 2000. Eyewitnesses also told Amnesty International that Hezb-e Wahdat forces carried out at least four summary executions during the several days they were in control of Yakaolang in late December 2000.

For several days Taleban forces massacred over 300 unarmed men and a number of civilian women and children. The victims were either summarily executed or deliberately killed.

Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International: "Some people in Kata Khana ran to the mosque for shelter thinking the Taleban would respect the sanctity of the mosque, but they were wrong!" They said they saw Taleban guards deliberately firing two rockets at the mosque where some 73 women, children and elderly men had taken shelter. The building collapsed on them but the Taleban guards would not allow anyone to go to their rescue for three days, by which time all those in the mosque had died except for two small children.

In publishing this report, Amnesty International is adding its voice to concerns raised by the UN and human rights organizations about the massacres in Yakaolang (see below).

Amnesty International is reiterating its call to the international community to set up an international body with a clearly demonstrated independent, impartial and competent structure to investigate reports of these massacres with a view to establishing the facts, identifying the perpetrators and recommending means of bringing them to justice.

Amnesty International is urging all warring factions including the Taleban to abide by the principles of international humanitarian law which forbid the killing of civilians and other human rights abuses. As a first step, the Taleban leadership should ensure that their forces do not carry out such abuses. As a second step they should remove from active service any of their members who are implicated in human rights abuses, and facilitate an investigation of their conduct by an independent, impartial and competent body with a view to holding them to account for such abuses.

Background information

These human rights abuses have taken place in the context of ongoing fighting between the Taleban and Hezb-e Wahdat over the control of Bamiyan province.

After their most recent capture of Yakaolang, the Taleban also reportedly destroyed homes and orchards and looted food stuff. An eyewitness told Amnesty International:

“They set our homes on fire, cut down the trees with engine and electric saw, and sprayed our fruit trees and bushes with a nasty chemical: it was red and made the trees die within hours. They also splashed it on the trees - particularly apple and apricot trees - and this made the trees die even sooner. It was clear that they wanted to destroy our food. Why else should they burn our crops, set fire on our homes and loot our grains, flour and other food stuff? In this year of drought they left us with nothing to eat! Nothing! So we left.”

A number of civilians were reportedly killed in cross fire between the two warring sides.

About a dozen children were reportedly killed in attacks by the warring sides against houses in the area. It is difficult to establish who exactly aimed at these houses but the information available indicates that Taleban fighters had taken position in the residential localities from where they were responding to firepower from Hezb-e Wahdat positions in the hillside. Eyewitnesses believe responsibility for these attacks must be shared by both warring sides:

“It all began in a cold night with heavy snow at about 11 pm [in late December 2000] when Hezb-e Wahdat forces entered Yakaolang. Fighting began. The area was being defended by the Taleban forces as they moved from one building to another. Hezb-e Wahdat forces began to fire at them. This lasted about 4 hours. The attacks came from the hillside. Houses were hit. Some houses caught fire as a result of the attack. We found out later that some 11 children of between six and 12 years, had been killed in these houses. We also came to know that two women and three old men had been severely injured.”

Massacre of unarmed people and civilians by Taleban forces

The Taliban reportedly began their attack to recapture Yakaolang from Bazar Nayak and from the direction of Bamiyan which leads to Shahr Naw in Yakaolang. Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International how the Taliban first began to consolidate their control of Yakaolang:

“They came with a lot of forces. At about 8am [on 7 January] the fighting began. It was a very cold day. People had no where to go. There were many Taliban guards deployed at the Tapa Kabuli and Poshta Akhundun which is very near the building of the Wolaswali some 15 minutes to the north. Taliban forces came to the Sangar Navy Gaz and Sare Kutal Sorkhak. Both sides were firing at each other. Hezb-e Wahdat forces were defeated in Kutal Kabuli, but left the area before the Taliban arrived. The Taliban captured Kutal Kabuli and Poshta Akhundun [all villages and localities in Yakaolang]. A new group entered with about 18 Datsun pickups. They began to chase Hezb-e Wahdat forces and followed them up to Chaman area which is about 12 km from the centre.”

At this point, Taliban forces reportedly returned to the villages and other localities in Yakaolang and imposed a curfew. As the fighters had fled, civilians felt they would be safe so they did not try to flee the area. However, Taliban forces began to arrest people in the street and from their homes and then execute them.

“First they rounded up the people in the streets. They then went from house to house and arrested the men of the families except for the very old men. Nothing could stop them, and they did not spare any of the houses. In one house, the mother of a young man whom the Taliban were taking away held onto him saying she would not allow him to go away without her. The Taliban began to hit the woman brutally with their rifle butts. She died. They took away the son and shot him dead. They were our neighbours. When they arrested the people, they tied their hands behind their back and took them away. They took them to areas behind Bazar Kona and fired at them. They executed a lot of people. We believe they killed more than 300 people.”

All testimonies obtained by Amnesty International contain similar accounts of arrest and execution of civilians in Yakaolang district of Bamiyan province. The organization has so far obtained the particulars of over 170 of the victims, but the actual number of those massacred is believed to be over 300.

According to this information, victims included farmers, teachers, labourers, shopkeepers, a doctor, carpenters, office workers, a religious leader, religious students, human rights activists, and bakers. They include at least 80 people from Dara Ali, 50 from Bazar Nayak, 47 including seven internally displaced persons from Kata Khana, 34 from Bed Mushkin,

17 from Kashkak, 12 from Mandik, 10 from Kutal Sorkhak, seven from Gonbadi, five from Feruz Bahar, four from Sarasiab, and one from Chashma Shirin.

They included male villagers between the ages of 20 and 55, youths of 18 and 19 years old, children between the ages of six and 14, internally displaced people from Dara-e Suf, and travellers. About six of the victims were single men in their twenties; the rest were all married with children.

Shelling of a mosque by Taleban forces

In one instance, some 73 women and children and elderly men who had taken shelter in a mosque were killed as the Taleban shelled Fatematuzahra mosque in the Kata Khana area of Yakaolang. Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International:

“Some people in Kata Khana ran to the mosque for shelter thinking the Taleban would respect the sanctity of the mosque, but they were wrong! This mosque was in Kata Khana and its name was Masjid Fatematuzahra. The Taleban got to know that there were people inside and fired two rockets into the mosque. The mosque tumbled and all of the people except for two toddlers - about 3 or 4 years old - were killed. People wanted to see if there were survivors but the Taleban did not allow anyone to enter the site. They guarded it for three nights without letting anyone getting near it. Then, they left the site. We saw the attack on this mosque. It was in our clear view. When the Taleban were guarding the site, hungry dogs came in and pulled out arms and legs of the dead but the Taleban did not allow people to bury them.”

Taleban's dismissal of international concerns

In January 2001, the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, deplored the killings in Yakaolang and demanded that the Taleban take immediate steps to control their forces. He further stated that these reports require prompt investigation and that those responsible should be brought to justice.

Later that month, Amnesty International also condemned the massacre and called once again on the international community to set up an international body with a clearly demonstrated independent, impartial and competent structure to investigate the massacres, identify the perpetrators and recommend means of bringing them to justice.

Taleban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar not only denied that the massacres had occurred but banned journalists from visiting Yakaolang. He was quoted in the international media as saying: “I am not allowing them to visit Yakaolang because their reports are not fair.”

.. “They are biased people having a hostile behaviour. That is why I do not allow them [into the area].”

He also pre-empted the possibility of a dialogue between the Taliban officials and the international bodies with regard to these massacres: “It is their own partial information and non-neutral tendency. I consider it stupid to have discussions with these people.” “Amnesty International has made a one-sided report and I term discussion with these people a matter of ignorance.”¹

In February, Human Rights Watch published a report on the latest (January 2001) and earlier (May 2000) massacres in Yakaolang, calling “upon the United Nations to investigate both massacres and to systematically monitor human rights and humanitarian law violations by all parties to Afghanistan's civil war.”

Taliban officials denied the findings of this report too. A Taliban official was quoted in the international press as saying: “These organizations are collecting baseless and incorrect reports from spiteful sources and from the opposition, which are void of any truth.” .. “The Islamic Emirate [Taliban] ruled Bamiyan for more than two and a half years without any complaint raised by any body or any source.”²

Summary executions by Hezb-e Wahdat

According to Amnesty International's information, at least four people were executed by forces of Hezb-e Wahdat following their capture of Yakaolang in late December 2000. Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International:

“In the morning they [Hezb-e Wahdat forces] were celebrating their victory saying they want to purge the traitors. They went for people especially in the central parts of the area, particularly the shopkeepers. They also beat some other people. They arrested four shopkeepers named Haji Ishaq, Nazer Moalem, Mohammad and Akbar and executed them in the area of Dahan Shura at the end of Bazar Kona in Nayak. The men were brought to a field there and were shot dead. Hezb-e Wahdat forces were there for about seven days. We saw the executions.”

Amnesty International recommendations:

¹ See Reuters and AFP reports of 27 January 2001.

² AFP, 19 February 2001.

Afghanistan: massacres in Yakaolang

Amnesty International is extremely concerned about the reports of the massacre of over 300 unarmed men and civilian women and children by the Taleban forces in Yakaolang in January 2001 and the summary execution of four people by Hezb-e-Wahdat forces in the same area in December 2000. The organization is making the following recommendations.

The Taleban authorities should:

- ! Uphold international humanitarian law at all times which forbids the killing of the civilian population, and other human rights abuses, in areas under their control.
- ! Remove from active service any of their members who are implicated in the massacre of over 300 unarmed people and civilians (as cited in this report) in Yakaolang.
- ! Facilitate an investigation into the massacres in Yakaolang.

The Hezb-e Wahdat authorities should:

- ! Uphold international humanitarian law at all times which forbids the killing of the civilian population, and other human rights abuses, in areas under their control.
- ! Remove from active service any of their members who are implicated in the summary execution of the four people (as cited in this report) in Yakaolang.
- ! Facilitate an investigation into the massacres in Yakaolang.

The international community should:

Set up an international body with a clearly demonstrated independent, impartial and competent structure to investigate the massacres in Yakaolang with a view to establishing the facts, identifying the perpetrator and recommending means of bringing them to justice.