

Afghanistan: Thousands of civilians killed following Taleban takeover of Mazar-e Sharif

Taleban guards deliberately and systematically killed thousands of ethnic Hazara civilians during the first three days following their military takeover of Mazar-e Sharif on 8 August 1998, according to new information received by Amnesty International.

Since their arrival in Mazar-e Sharif, the Taleban have sealed the area to foreign media and independent observers. Amnesty International's information is based on testimonies from eyewitnesses and surviving members of the victims' families.

The vast majority of those killed were from the Hazara ethnic group living in Zara'at, Saidabad, and Elm Arab areas of the city. The victims were killed deliberately and arbitrarily in their homes, in the streets where their bodies were left for several days, or in locations between Mazar-e Sharif and Hairatan. Many of those killed were civilians including women, children and the elderly who were shot trying to flee the city.

"This latest information shows yet again how the Taleban disregard internationally recognized humanitarian laws on the treatment of civilians in armed conflict," Amnesty International said. "The Taleban leadership must give clear and direct orders to their troops to uphold international safeguards."

"Foreign governments bankrolling or giving military support to the Taleban bear some responsibility for failing to rein in the Taleban's worst excesses. They must publicly condemn these latest atrocities and pressure the Taleban to immediately release all prisoners held simply because of their ethnic identity and allow independent investigators into the area."

"Amnesty International repeats its call to all governments to ensure that all the warring factions in Afghanistan do not receive any military equipment or training which could be used to commit human rights abuses," the organization added.

In at least one instance, a group of prisoners were reportedly executed in front of villagers near the city of Hairatan. Some 70 men were reportedly executed in a *Halal* [Islamic slaughter of animals] killing ritual at the tomb of Abdul Ali Mazari.

Eleven Iranian nationals (ten diplomats and one journalist) are said to have been killed when Taleban guards entered the Iranian Consulate in Mazar-e Sharif. Despite conflicting reports about their fate, eyewitnesses say that their bodies were left in the consulate for two days, before being buried in a mass grave at the Sultan Razieh girls school.

Following their takeover, Taleban guards imposed a curfew in the city. In the Uzbek populated areas, they told people to hand in their weapons, while in the Hazara area, they told people to stay in their homes. They then entered Hazara houses one by one, killing older men and children and taking away young men without any explanation. In some houses, they also took away young women as *Kaniz* (maid-servant) saying they would be married off to the Taleban militia.

Detainees, reportedly totalling thousands, were transferred in military vehicles to detention centres in Mazar-e Sharif and Shebarghan and interrogated to identify their ethnic identity. Non-Hazaras were released after a few days.

Former detainees told Amnesty International how all of them were beaten, sometimes severely, during their detention. Hundreds were taken by air to Kandahar and many others taken during the night to fields in the surrounding areas of Mazar-e Sharif and Shebarghan and executed.

Severe restrictions have been imposed on the movement of Afghan people in and out of Mazar-e Sharif. Families who have managed to leave the area have told Amnesty International that they have been stopped at many checkpoints on the way. At each check point, Taleban guards stopped them asking if there were Hazaras among them and took away anyone whom they suspected of being a Hazara. Hazara men and boys younger than 12-years-old have been taken to Jalalabad prison while women and girls have been sent to Sarshahi camp.

Amnesty International is urging the Taleban to bring an end to the killing of non-combatants and prisoners by their militia, and to release all prisoners whom they have arrested solely on account of their ethnic identity.

The organization is also calling for an international body, with a clearly demonstrated independent, impartial and competent structure, to be set up to investigate these human rights abuses with a view to identifying the perpetrators and recommending means of bringing them to justice.

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