

Flash Update 4 – Fighting, displacement and civilian casualties in Southern Afghanistan (21 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, 6,358 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 a week near Lashkargah city in Hilmand province. The security situation in the area remains volatile. Fighting continued on Tuesday in Loy Kalay in Nawa-e-Barakzaiy district. According to reports received on 20 October, the clashes in Hilmand have advanced further towards PD3 in Lashkargah city. Fighting has also reportedly increased close to Greshk, the capital of Nahr-e-Saraj.

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.

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 6,358 IDPs confirmed so far. Ongoing security concerns are also affecting assessments in Nahr-e-Saraj. 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.

On 20 October, civilians residing in Bolan in Lashkargah PD3, were asked to leave the area by the NSAG, causing further displacement into other part of Lashkargah city and NSAG controlled areas. The total number of people displaced from Bolan is yet to be confirmed.

Humanitarian actors are gravely concerned at reports of increasing civilian casualties due to the surge in violence in Hilmand province over the past week. As of 20 October, the WHO estimates that there have been more than 300 civilians wounded since violence flared in the south on 11 October. The violence has stretched hospitals in Lashkargah to capacity. Furthermore, attacks on health facilities during fighting are particularly worrying with WHO reporting that 12 health facilities have been targeted. The closure of health clinics in the area due to insecurity is affecting around 20,000 people, according to WHO.

Coordination:

OCHA is closely coordinating with the Government to provide assistance to IDPs based on need, ensure efficient information flows and avoid duplication of efforts. On 20 October, an Operational Coordination Team (OCT) meeting was held with humanitarian partners, the Afghanistan National

Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) and the Department of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR) to discuss the needs of the IDPs in Hilmand and how to best ensure a collaborative response. During the meeting, humanitarian partners and government counterparts agreed to prioritise assistance for IDPs staying in markets and in the temporary shelter established by DoRR on 18 October in Lashkargah city. The IDPs have so far received 100 tents with the capacity to accommodate 300 families. As of 18 October, a total of 25 families (approximately 175 people) have been provided with blankets and water. During the OCT meeting, the participants also agreed to organise an urgent field visit to IDP sites to assess WASH needs.

ANDMA informed the OCT that its officials would ask the Governor of Hilmand to call for a Provincial Disaster Management Committee (PDMC) meeting to initiate a Government-led assessment with community elders in Nawa-e-Barakzaiy, Nahr-e-Saraj and some hard-to-reach areas in Lashkargah. The outcome of the assessment will be shared with OCHA and other humanitarian partners. Furthermore, ANDMA confirmed it would temporarily suspend its food distributions until after the PDMC meeting.

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, 6,358 IDPs have been verified, with assessments ongoing. As of 20 October, OCHA coordinated the humanitarian response to 3,520 IDPs. OCHA is currently coordinating the response for the remaining 2,838 people verified by the assessment teams based on needs shared with all relevant clusters. OCHA is closely coordinating with the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC), Emergency Shelter and Non-Food Items (ES-NFI) Cluster and the WASH Cluster to deliver assistance in Lashkargah with a particular focus on the newly verified IDPs.

On 19 October, IRC distributed 12 portable handwashing facilities across 3 IDP sites. IRC also conducted COVID-19 awareness-raising sessions to 400 IDP families and delivered 800 bars of soap. The Provincial Rural Rehabilitation and Development Directorate (PRRD) through the support of UNICEF continues to supply water in IDP locations through water tankering. Furthermore, OCHA is closely coordinating with the WASH Cluster and DACAAR to further increase the provision of safe drinking water in the area. DACAAR has also delivered materials to install emergency bathing and latrine facilities. Finally, Action Against Hunger (ACF) is planning to carry out COVID-19 awareness-raising campaigns and disinfection activities across IDP sites in markets as well as at humanitarian distribution points. Distributions to 2,469 IDPs are ongoing and will include food from WFP, non-food items and hygiene kits from UNHCR, cash from IRC, and the provision of WASH services from DACAAR and UNICEF.

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