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The United Nations and the humanitarian community call for respect of humanitarian personnel and humanitarian aid as increasing numbers of displaced people arrive in Lashkar Gah

The consequence of Operation Mushtarak in Helmand province has been a movement of civilians from Marja and Nad Ali districts into the provincial capital city of Lashkar Gah. The humanitarian community has been mobilised to provide assistance to the displaced families. There are an estimated 900 families registered with local authorities and verification of this figure is ongoing.

The United Nations as well as national and international NGOs have increased emergency capacity in the conflict area to provide non-food items, shelter and food supplies to the displaced population and so far has distributed more than 750 food and non-food item kits.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is facilitating dialogue with the military on issues relevant to the humanitarian response. "We are calling on combatants to respect the neutrality of the humanitarian community and humanitarian aid," said Robert Watkins, the Humanitarian Coordinator. "The affected population must be assured of unobstructed access to basic services," he said.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of displaced civilians and there are fears that civilians will remain trapped in the conflict area. UN agencies, particularly UNICEF, UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP), have increased their capacity to deal with an influx of people into Lashkar Gah.

Today there are 6,000 non-food kits already in place. In addition, health emergency kits, emergency school kits as well as water and sanitation equipment are also on standby and in a position to be mobilized quickly.

"Of utmost concern for us is that robust measures are taken to avoid civilian casualties," the Humanitarian Coordinator, Watkins said. "I would like to take this opportunity to call on all parties not to involve or use the civilian population, humanitarian actors, or humanitarian aid for any military purposes."

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