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Red Cross sounds alarm on rising casualties in 'ignored' Afghanistan

BY EMMA BATHA

3/18/2016

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is in a "downward spiral", the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned on Friday, as he sounded the alarm on rising attacks against medical facilities.

"There are more displaced people, more war-wounded and more disabled people," ICRC president Peter Maurer said at the end of a visit to Afghanistan - the organization's largest operation.

"Humanitarian concerns are growing, yet international attention is dwindling. It seems that the more the Afghan people suffer, the less attention there is on them."

An estimated one million people are displaced within Afghanistan, some having been uprooted multiple times.

The Taliban, ousted from power in a U.S.-led military intervention in 2001, has been waging a violent insurgency to try to topple Afghanistan's Western-backed government and re-establish a fundamentalist Islamic regime.

The number of civilian casualties hit a record high for the seventh successive year in 2015, with over 11,000 non-combatants killed or injured, according to U.N. data.

Increased ground fighting in and around populated areas, along with suicide and other attacks in major cities, caused many of the deaths and injuries.

Maurer said a particularly worrying trend was the escalation in attacks against medical facilities and staff which was making it increasingly difficult for civilians to access health care.

Such attacks have risen 50 percent in the last year, he said in a statement.

"Every bombed out hospital and every doctor or nurse who is forced to flee, means thousands of people cannot get immediate medical treatment when necessary," he added.

The most high profile attack was the U.S. bombing of a hospital run by Medecins Sans Frontieres in the northern city of Kunduz in October.

International humanitarian law obliges all warring parties to protect medical missions, the ICRC said.

Maurer noted that Afghans are the second largest group of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe behind Syrians.

"This shows that the chronic violence and insecurity, and the permanent unpredictability of the war, has pushed people beyond their limits," he added.

In two tweets at the end his trip, Maurer wrote: "My conclusion after a week in Afghanistan: this is not a forgotten conflict, it's an ignored conflict.

"It defies human logic: the more victims there are in Afghanistan, the less attention there is on the country."

