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Reuters

## Afghan campaign destroys hundreds of houses: rights group

By Ian Simpson

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Fighting between U.S.-led forces and the Taliban has destroyed or damaged hundreds of houses during a crucial campaign in Afghanistan's southern Kandahar province, a human rights group said on Thursday.

The widespread property damage reported by the Afghan Rights Monitor (ARM) in Kandahar, the birthplace of the Afghan Taliban, comes despite a U.S. strategy designed to weaken support for the Taliban by limiting harm to civilians.

U.S.-led NATO forces have used aerial bombing to strike Taliban strongholds and to set off mines and homemade bombs sometimes hidden as booby traps in private homes, ARM said in a statement.

ARM Director Samadi Ajmal said the widespread damage underscored the need for reconstruction funds for residents once the fighting was over.

"Rebuilding is the most important part of this operation," he told Reuters.

The damage has been concentrated in the districts of Arghandab, Panjwai, Zheray and Daman, home to about 300,000 of the province's more than 1 million inhabitants, Ajmal said.

Civilian casualties have also jumped since the launch of the campaign in early September, Ajmal said, but gave no figures.

In a mid-year report, the United Nations said civilian casualties had spiked by 31 percent in the first six months of 2010 compared to the same period last year, with more than three-quarters of them blamed on insurgents.

The number attributed to foreign and Afghan forces fell sharply, due mainly to a tightening of the rules for aerial engagements, the U.N. report said.

The ARM statement was based on reports from more than a dozen sources in the area. NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is looking into the report, a spokeswoman said, but had no immediate comment.

Tens of thousands of ISAF and Afghan troops are deployed in Kandahar in Operation Dragon Strike, a crucial stage of the battle to reclaim the initiative from the Taliban.

The campaign is aimed at driving insurgents from districts around Kandahar city, about 600 km (370 miles) southwest of Kabul. Civilian and military casualties are at record levels, despite the presence of almost 150,000 foreign troops.

Several provincial officials have said residents will be helped to rebuild once the operation is over. Twenty-six shopkeepers in one village received compensation for damage last month, the ARM report said.

The region's NATO commander said last week that the campaign was pressuring militants. However, genuine success would not be clear until June, after the usual winter lull in fighting, he said.

Analysts have said Western governments' appetite for a long-term presence in Afghanistan could be further reduced if winter arrives and insurgents still can mount major attacks and intimidate residents.