

AI INDEX: AFR/ 01/10/97

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Africa Refugee Day -- Governments Must Take Action 20 Million Refugees in Search for Safety

ABIDJAN -- Governments in Africa and worldwide are failing to prevent the mass human rights abuses which are behind the refugee crisis in Africa, while at the same time shirking their obligations to protect those fleeing for their safety, Amnesty International said today on Africa Refugee day.

More than 20 million Africans have been forcibly displaced from their homes -- five million have sought asylum in other countries and around 16 million are internally displaced within their own country. The vast majority of them are women, children and elderly victims of the worsening armed conflict situations and ethnic-based violence throughout the continent.

“Time and time again the international community has refused to heed the warnings issued by non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations and failed to take action to halt the human rights abuses which are the root cause of the refugee crisis in Africa today,” Amnesty International said.

“For example, during the recent crisis in the Great Lakes region, the standard government response has been to react only to emergencies, and not to address the underlying causes. There can be no long term solution to refugee flows until the underlying reason -- human rights abuses -- is tackled.

Launching a campaign to pressure governments to live up to their obligations to protect refugees and asylum seekers, Amnesty International highlighted how governments in the North have responded to the crisis by erecting barriers to prevent refugees travelling to their countries to seek asylum, by introducing unfair and discriminatory asylum procedures and by sending refugees back to situations where they would be at serious risk.

The organization also emphasised the growing reluctance amongst African governments -- who shelter the majority of the world's refugees and who have traditionally treated refugees generously -- to accept new refugees and recent examples of mass refoulement of refugees to dangerous situations.

“The international community has a shared responsibility to work together to solve the refugee crisis,” Amnesty International said. “All states should share equitably the responsibility for hosting refugees and funding their support. States should not bear a disproportional share of this responsibility because of their geographical location.”

“All governments should ensure that refugees are treated in accordance with international standards of human rights and refugee protection. No government should violate their international obligations by sending asylum-seekers back to dangerous situations. As well, UNHCR funding arrangements should be reviewed urgently to create an adequate mechanism to support states which bear the overwhelming responsibility for hosting refugees.”

“While governments are erecting barriers to prevent the innocent victims of armed conflicts and human rights abuses seeking safety, they have shown no qualms about granting asylum to political leaders accused of being responsible for gross human rights violations,” Amnesty International said. “Mengistu Haile-Mariam, Milton Obote, Hissein Habré and now Mobutu Sese-Seko have all been given protection by governments who regularly turn refugees away from their borders, or send them back to danger.”

The past year has been marked by the *refoulement* of refugees in the Great Lakes region. In December 1996, the Tanzanian authorities and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a joint statement announcing that all Rwandese refugees should return by the end of the month. Those fearing return were not given an opportunity to have their individual cases assessed.

Thousands of Rwandese and Burundian refugees have been killed by combatants in Zaire, where fighters of President Laurent Kabila, supported by Rwandese troops, have attacked refugee camps since September 1996. Since the forcible return of more than 500,000 refugees from Zaire, increased insecurity has prevented UN human rights observers and UNHCR personnel from monitoring killings and other abuses of returnees and other Rwandese nationals.

There have been numerous massacres of refugees returning to Burundi, including at least 400 returnees from Zaire who were massacred by the Burundi security forces at Muramba Seventh Day Adventist Church, Cibitoke Province, in October 1996.

The internally displaced, who have been forced to flee their homes, fearing for their safety but have not crossed any international borders, are not recognized as refugees. Yet they face the same problem. More than two million people -- half the population -- of Sierra Leone were forced to leave their homes as the result of armed conflict.

There are at least four million internally displaced people in Sudan -- the majority of them women, children and elderly who have been deliberately targeted by rival armed groups and government forces. Thousands of women living in internally displaced people's camps have been raped or suffered other abuses, and many children abducted.

Amnesty International is calling on the international community, the OAU and individual governments to ensure that internally displaced people are given comprehensive protection, according to standards of human rights law and humanitarian law.

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