

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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Haiti: Refugees and asylum seekers are not part of the conflict

Amnesty International criticized as unacceptable measures by the US and Caribbean governments to prevent those fleeing Haiti from reaching other countries or to forcibly return them to Haiti.

As the crisis worsens -- a number of new towns and some smaller localities along the Dominican border have reportedly come under rebel control today -- there is an imminent risk of mass exodus of refugees from Haiti.

"The right to leave your country and seek and enjoy asylum from persecution abroad is a fundamental human right," Amnesty International said. "The obligations on all of Haiti's neighbouring states to keep their borders open, even the event of a mass influx, must be upheld in all circumstances, consistent with international human rights and refugee standards."

"It is particularly worrying that while the number of people fleeing the country is increasing, governments persist in taking stronger measures in order to prevent them from reaching other countries, leaving hundreds of Haitians without access to any form of human rights protection", Amnesty International stressed.

At least one group of Haitians claiming to be fleeing persecution by Haitian government authorities was yesterday denied entry to the Dominican Republic. They reportedly were forced to go into hiding this morning when the border area where they were waiting was attacked by armed rebels. Their whereabouts are currently unknown. Another group of 15 Haitians, all of whom had reportedly requested asylum, were returned to Port-au-Prince earlier this week from the Bahamas.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other sources reported that around 30 Haitian asylum-seekers have arrived in Cuba, 103 in Jamaica, 300 in the Bahamas and up to 300 in the Dominican Republic.

The Bahamas have also stationed troops off its southern islands and has said it would return asylum seekers intercepted at sea.

Meanwhile, more than 500 Haitians who have been intercepted at sea this week are reportedly being held on US coast guard ships.

Reports also indicate that in the event of a mass exodus from Haiti, the US authorities may hold thousands of Haitian refugees on the US naval base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

"The transfer of Haitian asylum-seekers and refugees to Guantánamo Bay or other off-shore facilities raises serious concern that they might not be guaranteed the human rights and refugee protection to which they are entitled," Amnesty International said. "The asylum procedures that have been used in Guantánamo Bay in the past have fallen well short of minimum international standards and have been inadequate to identify individuals in need of international protection. "

The situation of detainees held in legal limbo in Camp Delta further serves to underscore Amnesty International's

concerns that Guantánamo Bay is being used by the US authorities as a way to deny people their human rights including access to due process.

President George W. Bush said last Wednesday that all Haitians attempting to flee to the US would be stopped and returned, showing a blatant disregard for the most fundamental obligation states have towards refugees not to forcibly return them to a situation where they could face human rights abuses.

"All forcible returns of Haitians to Haiti should be suspended unless or until their entitlement to protection has been determined through a full and fair procedure and their return can take place in safety, dignity, and with full respect for their human rights", Amnesty International concluded.

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