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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Cyprus threatens to breach the United Nations Refugee Convention

Amnesty International wrote today to President Glafcos Clerides of Cyprus expressing concern that police officials in Limassol reportedly plan to forcibly return 109 asylum-seekers, including eight children and two pregnant women, despite pending examination of their application for asylum by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The 109 persons -- from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Rwanda, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Syria -- were rescued from a fishing trawler found drifting off the coast of Cyprus on 29 June 1998. They have since been remanded under police guard in an hotel in Limassol pending examination of their request for asylum.

In its letter to the Cypriot authorities Amnesty International expressed its concerns regarding the human rights situation in the countries of origin of these people. The organization therefore called on the Cypriot authorities to abide by the principle of *non refoulement* guaranteed by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, to which Cyprus is a party, which forbids the forcible return of any person to a country where he or she might be at risk of serious human rights violations.

Amnesty International is urging the Cypriot authorities to ensure that all 109 persons who applied for asylum are given access to a full and satisfactory asylum procedure and to ensure that the UNHCR is able to carry out a thorough assessment of each individual's situation. The organization also called on the authorities to afford effective and durable protection against *refoulement* were any of these persons found to be in need of international protection.

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