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Greece: Call to protect the rights of the most vulnerable

(Athens) Amnesty International today called on Greece to ensure that those most likely to suffer human rights abuses -- such as women, minorities, asylum-seekers and migrants – receive full protection of their rights by the authorities.

The organisation's Secretary General Irene Khan was in Greece to receive an award from the Athens Bar Association honouring Amnesty International's contribution to the protection of human rights worldwide.

"The award from the Athens Bar Association reflects the fundamental relationship between the rule of law and respect for human rights. It is recognition of our work and of the power of individuals organizing themselves to uphold the values and principles of human rights," said Irene Khan.

Ms Khan presented Amnesty International's concerns about the human rights situation in Greece during meetings with the Minister of Interior and officials of the Ministry of Public Order.

Amnesty International has documented the appalling conditions of detention under which some migrants and asylum-seekers are held, amounting to cruel and inhuman treatment.

Ms Khan called on the authorities to put in place an effective asylum procedure that would allow access to those applying at the border and provide an independent review of rejected asylum applications, as well as legal aid for such applicants.

Amnesty International and the Athens Bar Association have jointly called on the government to provide legal aid for administrative procedures.

During a meeting with the Ministry of Public Order today, Irene Khan requested that an Amnesty International delegation be granted access to interview more than 100 individuals who have been detained in Chania on the Island of Crete for the past two weeks, without access to lawyers or non-governmental organizations, after their boat sunk near the Cretan coast.

"We hope that the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Public Order will consider our request promptly and allow us access to those detained in Chania before they are returned," said Ms Khan.

Ms Khan also called on Greece to uphold human rights and not allow them to be trampled in the name of security: "The Greek authorities must uphold the rule of law and ensure they do not become complicit in human rights abuses committed in the name of the 'war on terror'."

According to information by the Council of Europe, Greece may have been negligent in allowing CIA planes to stop over in Greece, in the context of the USA's programme of secretly transferring detainees from European countries to detention sites or other countries where they may face torture or other serious human rights violations.

"The Greek authorities must put in place mechanisms to ensure that their airports and airspace are not used to transfer prisoners illegally to countries where they could face torture and ill treatment."

Amnesty International has raised with the Greek authorities the case of the abduction and incommunicado detention of individuals of Pakistani origin after the July 2005 bombings in the UK. They were reportedly detained and questioned by secret intelligence officers acting at the request of UK secret services. The organization will closely follow the legal proceedings of the two Greek secret intelligence agents, charged in connection with the case.

As the country's Parliament discussed a draft bill on domestic violence, Amnesty International called on it to adopt a Domestic Violence Bill that puts the protection of women at its centre, including through effective restraining orders and providing adequate numbers of shelters and legal aid. Arbitration should be provided by an independent expert to a woman as a service and only at her request.

"The Bill must make it very clear that domestic violence, and other forms of violence against women are never acceptable," said Ms Khan.

"All parliamentarians must demonstrate their commitment to human rights and show strong political will to confront domestic violence, prevent its recurrence and move towards eradicating it totally."

A key concern in relation to the government's action on combating trafficking of women for forcible sexual exploitation has been the linking of a victim's protection to a requirement that she testifies against the traffickers.

"Women who have become victims of trafficking should not be re-victimized. They should be protected, irrespective of whether they are willing to give testimony. If they are willing to testify, they should have access to an effective witness protection programme," said Irene Khan.

Amnesty International also raised the violation of the rights of Roma to adequate housing and the rights of people arbitrarily stripped of their citizenship to re-instatement.

"At a time when Greece is chairing the UN Security Council, its contribution to solving the world's pressing problems will only be credible if it is willing to take serious steps to improve its own human rights record," concluded Ms Khan.

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