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Nepal: Sexual abuse reports highlight plight of Bhutanese refugees

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch warned today that new allegations of sexual abuse of women and children among Bhutanese refugees in Nepal show the human cost of one of the world's unresolved and forgotten refugee problems.

An investigation by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) revealed 18 cases of sexual abuse and exploitation in Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal. Victims included a 7-year old girl and a person with disabilities.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch welcomed the decision by UNHCR to finally take action to address the situation in Nepal, including the dispatch of a special team to investigate the situation. Both organizations urge that thorough and effective action is taken in response to this appalling situation, including bringing the perpetrators to justice, organizing prompt psycho-social rehabilitation and redress for the victims, and implementing codes of conduct in the camp in order to prevent the reoccurrence of such abuse.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch stressed that these cases of abuse underscored the plight of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, many of whom have by now spent ten years in enforced exile while negotiations between the governments of Nepal and Bhutan on their possible return have stalled. Many of the refugees were children at the time they left Bhutan and now face becoming stateless.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch appealed to UNHCR and key donor governments to both countries - including Denmark, the current President of the European Union - to intensify their efforts to encourage the Bhutan and Nepal governments to find an early and constructive solution to the plight of the refugees.

"These people have been kept in limbo for ten years. This is already too long," Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said.

Background

Despite 11 rounds of bilateral talks between the governments of Nepal and Bhutan, a solution to the plight of these people seems a long way off. Major obstacles remain to be solved before those who have the right to return to Bhutan under international law can do so. Among the main obstacles are four categories in which both governments in 1993 agreed to classify the people in the refugee camps as the basis for determining who can return to Bhutan.

Since 1993, both governments have disputed the interpretation of these categories, the process by which the people in the refugee camps would be put into these categories and what would happen to them once they are categorized. There has also been no agreement on the practicalities of repatriation, and the Bhutan government appears to have so far given little attention to the need to ensure the sustainability of the return of the refugees.

Information of the abuses of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal follows of allegations earlier this year of widespread gender based violence and abuse by humanitarian workers and peacekeepers in refugee camps in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. The West Africa cases were brought to light by a UNHCR/Save the Children UK study. Subsequent investigations by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services failed to substantiate some of the allegations, but nevertheless revealed a worrying picture where vulnerable refugees, especially women and girls, are preyed upon by persons in positions of power. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch warned that the Nepal situation further highlighted the dangers of sexual abuse and exploitation in refugee camp communities and the need to avoid complacency on this issue.

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