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@UNFAIR BARRIERS BLOCK ASYLUM-SEEKERS
SEARCHING FOR SAFETY IN EUROPE

The growing number of people fleeing possible torture, execution or other human rights violations are increasingly blocked by barriers when they try to find safety in many European countries -- and they could run into even more obstacles as coordinated and more restrictive refugee policies are drawn up, Amnesty International said today (Wednesday 27 November).

"European governments want to wash their hands of their responsibility," Amnesty International said. "They haven't done enough to put pressure on governments to stop human rights violations in the countries these people are running from and aren't living up to their obligations when asylum-seekers are on their doorstep."

In releasing a new report on European asylum policy, especially among European Community countries, the human rights organization said some people are now prevented from even getting on planes to leave their country because they don't have visas, can be turned away simply because they come from so-called 'safe countries', and in the end can be sent back to countries where their very lives are in danger.

The organization said the current asylum crisis is brought on largely by the fact that governments treat many asylum-seekers in the same way as immigrants or people who enter a country "illegally" -- and not as people escaping persecution who must be given special treatment.

That approach means asylum-seekers have to contend with complicated, time-consuming police and immigration procedures that inevitably lead to backlogs; steps taken to speed up that process by "screening out" certain categories of people often sacrifice safeguards and can create further backlogs.

"This maze of rules and regulations shows a dangerous lack of understanding of who these people are and the horrors they could face if sent back home," Amnesty International said. "To expect them to carry visas when they often can't even get near an embassy that's under surveillance or to declare entire countries as 'safe' is simply absurd."

The organization said it had details of dozens of cases of asylum-seekers who have been turned away because of deficient procedures, some of whom have suffered human rights violations after being forced to go back to their country.

Some 20 Somalis were reportedly tortured or ill-treated in custody in Somalia after being turned away at an airport in Italy and a Bangladeshi asylum-seeker was tortured upon arrival in Dhaka after being refused asylum in Sweden.

In its report, the organization details some of the flaws in asylum procedures in some European countries: in the United Kingdom airlines face fines of up to £2,000 if asylum-seekers from certain countries arrive without visas and the government is proposing a new law which will only allow two days to apply for an appeal; in Italy asylum-seekers can be turned away by border police without being allowed to make an asylum claim; and in many countries the people who decide whether asylum-seekers can stay have little expertise or knowledge of the human rights situation in the

countries these people come from.

The organization said it was extremely concerned about the concept of "safe countries" already in force in some form in Switzerland and Belgium and being discussed in Germany and other countries. This label would mean that asylum-seekers from certain countries deemed to be "safe" would have a cursory hearing or may even be denied a hearing, without taking account of their individual experiences or risks.

"The danger of such 'safe country' lists being influenced by immigration or foreign policy considerations, and not simply by human rights records, is very real and extremely worrying," Amnesty International said.

In its report, the organization argues that asylum procedures can be both fair and quick if European governments, individually or collectively, put in place 10 essential principles to ensure that all asylum-seekers get a fair hearing. The key recommendation is setting up independent bodies to hear asylum cases - made up of experts who are familiar with human rights situations and refugee law.

The organization said its concerns about procedures in individual countries were heightened by impending "harmonization" of asylum policy in the European Community. An agreement has already been reached whereby asylum-seekers may have to apply for asylum in the first country they land in even if the procedures there are inadequate.

"If bad asylum practices are accepted across the European Community, those twelve governments would be setting a dangerous precedent at the international level," Amnesty International said.

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