
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 119/93

TO: PRESS OFFICERS
FROM: IS PRESS OFFICE
DATE: 21 SEPTEMBER 1993

AI INDEX: NWS 11/119/93
DISTR: SC/PO
NO OF WORDS: 957

NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - REFUGEES
INTERNAL - ISRAEL & O/T

NEWS INITIATIVES - INTERNAL

INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

Egypt - 23 September - SEE NEWS SERVICE 117/118
Sudan - 29 September - SEE NEWS SERVICE 88
Myanmar - 8 October - SEE NEWS SERVICE 111
Yugoslavia/Kosovo - 12 October - SEE NEWS SERVICE 117
EJEs and "Disappearances" - 20 October - SEE NEWS SERVICE 113

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

****Refugees - 1 October**** - SEE NEWS SERVICE 117

Please note embargo has been changed to 1 October. The item is enclosed and is being issued in conjunction with AI's paper, Refugee protection at risk: AI's recommendations to the 44th session of the UNHCR Excom (POL 33 06/93), sent to sections in the weekly mailing of 17 September. It was sent to sections several days ahead of the embargo date to allow time for sections who wish to do so to adapt it in light of the refugee situation in their country. (Suggestions for this were set out in §5.2.2 of the internal circular POL 33/07/93 which has been sent to refugee coordinators and IGO coordinators.)

Togo - 5 October - SEE NEWS SERVICE 111
Council of Europe Summit - 7 October - SEE NEWS SERVICE 117
Francophone Summit - 11 October - SEE NEWS SERVICE 111

****North Korea - 15 October**** - SEE NEWS SERVICE 88

Please note the embargo has been changed to 15 October.

FORTHCOMING NEWS INITIATIVES

Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting - 21-25 October (undecided)
Iran - 3 November (International)
Venezuela - 10 November (International, linked to EJEs & Disappearances)
Papua New Guinea - 19 November (targeted)

AI INDEX: POL 33/WU 01/93
EMBARGOED FOR 1 OCTOBER 1993

INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION OF REFUGEES THREATENED BY POWERFUL GOVERNMENTS

Amnesty International is calling urgently on the governments participating in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Executive Committee, or Excom, meeting -- beginning on Monday in Geneva -- to take immediate steps to support the international system of refugee protection. The Excom meets annually and is the main UN body dealing with refugee policies worldwide.

"Governments of the European Community have been disregarding international standards for refugee protection developed by the Excom, and the United States Government has turned away tens of thousands of Haitian asylum-seekers fleeing for their lives or safety," said Amnesty International.

"These powerful governments are undermining the principle of international solidarity which is essential to the international system of refugee protection - which they have a responsibility to uphold. If they disregard international law, there is a real risk that poorer governments -- who host the vast majority of the world's refugees -- might follow their example," said the organization. "If the commitment to refugee protection fades in Europe and western countries, then a downward spiral of protection could follow and undermine the fragile humanitarian foundations which are the basis for supporting and protecting millions of refugees worldwide."

The US Government policy of forcibly returning Haitian asylum-seekers intercepted at sea direct to Haiti without any hearing on their asylum claim violates the basic principle of international refugee law and decisions of the Excom. And member states of the European Community (EC) have agreed on a number of joint conclusions and resolutions which in some cases contravene Excom conclusions.

The EC governments have worked out in secrecy arrangements for sending asylum-seekers to "safe third countries", and to systematically restrict asylum-seekers from gaining access to their territories. Countries in eastern Europe, and even outside Europe, will be expected to take back asylum-seekers who travelled through their countries. "Legal protection for asylum-seekers sent back to the third countries is often lacking", said Amnesty International, "and already some of the third countries are simply copying EC policies by themselves identifying other third countries to which to send the asylum-seekers."

The Excom is the only intergovernmental body in the UN system dealing explicitly with the international protection of refugees, and conclusions reached by the Excom over past years are widely considered to be authoritative standards. "When previous Excom conclusions are ignored", said Amnesty International, "the Excom has a responsibility to take action."

In a report sent to governments which participate in the Excom, Amnesty International has asked for a number of steps to be taken including:

- reaffirming the importance of previous Excom conclusions which set out standards and principles which are the fundamental basis of international refugee protection;
- urging that common asylum policies being discussed by EC and other European states should be undertaken only in a process which allows for meaningful participation by all affected states, UNHCR and non-governmental agencies dealing with refugee issues, and that the Excom should play a supervisory role in such a process so it is not simply left to EC policy-makers;
- in the light of the US policy of forcibly returning Haitians without any hearing on their claims, reasserting that asylum-seekers should not be forced directly back to the country they have fled without being given a full opportunity for a fair examination of their asylum claims.

"If governments at the Excom don't take action to stop policies threatening the international system of refugee protection, then refugees worldwide will see their legal rights eroded."

ENDS/

AI INDEX: MDE 15/WU 09/93
INTERNAL - FOR VERBAL RESPONSE ONLY

ISRAEL AND O/T: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL VISIT

Amnesty International delegates from the International Secretariat are visiting Israel and the Occupied Territories during the week of 20 September to discuss human rights implications of the envisaged peace agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The delegates will meet Israeli and Palestinian officials as well as representatives of human rights groups. The following week Amnesty International delegates will travel to Tunis to discuss the same issues with PLO officials.

Amnesty International takes no position on the Declaration of Principles agreed between Israel and the PLO. However it has appealed to both parties (see New Service 115/93) to ensure that strong human rights safeguards are included in any peace settlement.