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Thousands stranded in 'appalling' conditions on Italian island

Thousands of people, many who left North Africa following recent unrest, are stranded on the Italian island of Lampedusa in appalling conditions, an Amnesty International delegation on the island said today.

The unequivocal assessment by Amnesty International's delegation came as Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi pledged "to clear Lampedusa within 48-60 hours".

There are currently about 6,000 foreign nationals on the island, mostly from Tunisia.

"The Italian government must immediately deal with this humanitarian crisis that has been caused by its failure to organise timely and orderly transfers from Lampedusa to facilities on the Italian mainland," said Anneliese Baldaccini, part of Amnesty International's delegates on the island.

About 22,000 people who have arrived in Lampedusa in recent weeks, with many already having been moved to other parts of Italy.

Many on Lampedusa have not been provided with the most basic humanitarian assistance such as shelter, medical care, mats, blankets and access to sanitary facilities, the Amnesty International team has found, while thousands continue to sleep outdoors.

Individual screening to assess potential protection needs has also completely broken down.

"All those arriving in Italy must have their individual needs adequately assessed and be given access to fair and effective asylum procedures, something that is not possible because of the chaotic situation in Lampedusa," said Anneliese Baldaccini.

"The Italian authorities should also not assume that people arriving in Lampedusa are economic migrants."

The Italian authorities have said they plan the imminent transfer of all foreign nationals remaining in Lampedusa to other parts of Italy.

Amnesty International has urged them to clarify where people will be moved to, as well as the legal status of the facilities where they are expected to be hosted.

"The Italian authorities must live up to their human rights obligations, This means tending to people's immediate needs and halting any plans to carry out collective removals," said Anneliese Baldaccini.