

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE 01/335/2009
17 September 2009

Yemen: Saudi Arabia must assist refugees fleeing Sa'da fighting

Saudi Arabia must not close its borders to civilians fleeing the conflict raging in Yemen's Sa'da region, Amnesty International said today in a letter addressed to the Minister of Interior.

The warning comes amid reports that some have been denied entry and others have been forcibly returned to the conflict zone where a reported bombing raid by government forces on Wednesday was said to have killed about 80 people.

"The Sa'da region has been largely sealed off to the outside world by Yemeni forces since the current upsurge in fighting between government troops and armed Zaidi Shi'a militants began last August, but it is clear that civilians are bearing the brunt of the conflict," said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"Scores, perhaps hundreds, of civilians have already been killed and for many now, fleeing into Saudi Arabia is the only way to get out of the firing line. They must be allowed to enter and be afforded adequate protection."

At present, the situation along the border between Yemen's Sa'da region and Saudi Arabia is unclear. News reports suggest that more than a dozen members of one Yemeni family who crossed into Saudi Arabia in late August were rounded up and pushed back across the border and that others are said to have been prevented from entering Saudi Arabian territory.

Saudi Arabia has never become party to the main UN treaty governing the treatment of refugees.

It is nevertheless bound under international law not to turn away people seeking asylum, either by sealing its borders or by forcibly returning people on its territory, if on return they may be at serious risk of human rights abuses.

"While the Saudi Arabian authorities have been playing a positive role in helping organize the flow of humanitarian assistance to beleaguered civilians in Sa'da governorate, they must not force the return of any people seeking safe haven," Malcolm Smart added.

Yemen's Sa'da region, whose inhabitants are predominantly members of Yemen's Zaidi Shi'a minority, has experienced several periods of conflict in recent years with recurrent armed clashes between government security forces and followers of the late Zaidi Shi'a cleric, Hussein al-Houthi, who was killed in 2004.

The latest upsurge in violence began in mid-August, when the area has been placed under a virtual state of emergency and government forces have mounted an escalating series of attacks, including bombing raids

against villagers and towns in an apparent attempt to crush the Houthi militants.

International humanitarian law expressly prohibits attacks which directly target civilians, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. The Yemeni government and the Houthi armed militants are legally bound to respect international humanitarian law and must ensure that their forces refrain from carrying out such unlawful attacks.

“The Yemeni authorities must investigate, fully and promptly, all allegations of serious violations by their forces such as the reported bombing raid yesterday which is said to have killed many civilians, at Adi village in the Harf Sufyan area of Amran province near Sa’da,” said Malcolm Smart.