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Europe: Governments to act on human rights 20 years after the Berlin Wall

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, European governments must act urgently to tackle human rights abuses against migrants, asylum seekers, detainees and minorities, Amnesty International said today.

“While the fall of the Berlin wall symbolized the opening of borders, the signature response of Europe now to the challenges of migration is to turn the continent into a fortress,” said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“People fleeing poverty, violence or persecution in other parts of the world have literally been pushed back into the sea.”

In May this year, the lives and safety of hundreds of migrants and asylum-seekers on three vessels in the Mediterranean were placed at risk first by a squabble between the Italian and Maltese authorities over their obligations to respond to maritime distress calls, and then by the Italian government’s decision to send them to Libya, without assessing their protection needs.

European governments must also do more to investigate allegations of torture, ill-treatment and wrongful detention during the US-led war on terror, Amnesty International said.

“In the new, post Berlin Wall, Europe human rights are under attack again. This time they are victim to states’ claims that even the most fundamental human rights, including to be free from torture, must be sacrificed in order to counter terrorist threats,” Nicola Duckworth said.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Europe was host to secret prisons run by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), where detainees were victims of enforced disappearance, held in conditions that amounted to torture, and were subjected to abusive interrogation techniques.

Revelations emerging last August have prompted calls to the Polish and Lithuanian authorities to investigate allegations that in detention facilities on their territories “high value” detainees were held and questioned in secret by the CIA until late 2005.

But not all today’s challenges regarding human rights in Europe are new.

“Shamefully, the fruits of 20 years of economic growth and greater political unity since the fall of the Berlin Wall have not been shared equally by all. Serious and deep-rooted problems of racism and discrimination remain at the heart of modern Europe,” Nicola Duckworth said

One of the most profound illustrations of systemic discrimination in Europe is against Roma, who remain largely excluded from public life in all countries.

Roma in Eastern Europe were often the first to be excluded from employment as state owned enterprises were privatised. Unlawful forced evictions are driving them deeper into poverty.

In some countries such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic Romani children continue to be overrepresented in schools for pupils with mental disabilities, and to be segregated in Roma-only schools and classes offering substandard education. The authorities have failed to take effective and unambiguous measures to eliminate racial segregation in education.

And 20 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, Amnesty International still recognizes as Prisoners of Conscience journalists and human rights activists arrested for seeking to exercise their fundamental freedoms of expression, association and religion in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Russia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

“In Berlin today, there’s little left of the physical wall that 20 years ago was a symbol of division and repression. There still continue to be, though, walls making some people more equal than others when it comes to the enjoyment of the full spectrum of human rights,” Nicola Duckworth said.

“However, in spite of threats, intimidation and detention, human rights defenders across Europe, fuelled by the energy that brought down the Berlin wall, continue to strive for the vision of a region where all human rights are upheld for all.”