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South Africa: Displaced at risk as camps close

Amnesty International today said that those displaced by May's xenophobic violence in South Africa face serious threats to their safety, as the last remaining camps for the displaced are closing and their asylum-claims are overwhelmingly rejected.

The warning came as the South African government claimed it was handling the after-effects of the violence well at the annual meeting of member states of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) taking place in Geneva.

"The South African delegation presented a highly embellished picture of its response to the displacement crisis," said Louise Moor, Amnesty International's refugee rights expert, who visited the camps for the displaced last month.

Amnesty International called for an immediate halt to any deportations of displaced people from South Africa, pending access to an effective appeal process with full procedural safeguards.

"The authorities are closing camps despite having no plan for the safe reintegration of those at risk of violence, and officials are rejecting nearly all asylum claims -- using gravely flawed procedures, in violation of international law," said Louise Moor.

"These people are not only at risk in South Africa, but also facing the risk of being forced to return to countries with serious human rights problems, like Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe. They have no safe place to go."

The organization is urging the South African government to honour its obligations towards those displaced by the xenophobic violence of last May, and called on the UNHCR to intervene.

The violence in May led to thousands of people fleeing their homes to escape beating, sexual assaults, looting and destruction of property.

"While it is true that those displaced by the May violence initially received temporary protection and access to basic services in camps, they are now at serious risk of further human rights abuses," said Louise Moor.

The Department of Home Affairs implemented accelerated asylum procedures lacking procedural safeguards in the Cape Town area camps in late September and at the Gauteng Provincial camps in August. Amnesty International said that these asylum procedures were overwhelmingly characterised by:

- a lack of information on the process;
- a lack of adequate interpretation during the taking of statements;

- a lack of confidentiality in the interviewing process;
- absence of adequate legal advice;
- mistakes of fact in the decisions by Refugee Status Determination Officers; and
- failure to consider relevant country of origin information.

“The speed with which statements were taken, and in some cases the abusive conduct of the officials, added to the confusion and distress for applicants,” said Moor.

Notes to editors:

The rejection rate in the Cape Town asylum determinations appears to have been even higher than that in Gauteng -- over 98 per cent. Somalis, Congolese from Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabweans were amongst those whose asylum claims were rejected.

On Monday, provincial authorities closed the last site for displaced persons in Gauteng, Akasia camp, without having in place a publicly-accessible government plan for safe and sustainable re-integration into local communities for displaced persons.

Civil society organizations have not received adequate support or commitment from provincial authorities in Gauteng province in their efforts to engage local communities for the safe return of displaced persons. The financial assistance offered by international agencies to displaced persons is seriously insufficient to find safe accommodation and to meet other aspects of a sustainable return.

Violence against displaced persons attempting to return to local South African communities continues, in particular against Somali nationals, with police failing to accept that these crimes are part of a continuing pattern of xenophobic attacks.

To see more on Amnesty International’s concerns about those displaced by xenophobic violence in South Africa, please [click here](#).