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HONG KONG REFUGEE SCREENING PROCESS STILL FLAWED AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SAYS

Vietnamese asylum-seekers should not be sent back from Hong Kong as long as its refugee screening process still has significant flaws, Amnesty International said today (Friday 13 July).

The worldwide human rights organization said that there have been some positive developments in the screening process over the past six months, but that sufficient safeguards are still not in place to ensure that people at risk of human rights violations are not sent back to Viet Nam.

A forthcoming major inter-governmental meeting in Geneva will attempt to deal with outstanding issues relating to Vietnamese asylum seekers in Asia, including whether those deemed not to be refugees should be returned to Viet Nam.

Amnesty International said that it had still not received a reply from the British or Hong Kong governments in response to the 23 recommendations it made in January on the protection of Vietnamese asylum-seekers, 10 of which dealt with improving the screening process.

The recommendations, made after a delegation visited Hong Kong in December, include making adequate legal assistance available to asylum-seekers at every stage in the screening process and giving them a written record of the initial interview to make sure it is accurate - before a decision is made on their refugee status. Those recommendations have not yet been implemented.

The organization said there had been some positive developments, including announcements that the Refugee Status Review Board, which hears appeals after a refugee claim has been rejected, would give written reasons for its decisions and that interpreters used in screening interviews would be given more training. Amnesty International has not received any details about whether or how those announced changes are being implemented. The organization also noted that in 1990 there had been an increase in the proportion of Vietnamese asylum-seekers who were granted refugee status in Hong Kong.

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