

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: MDE 14/126/2003 (Public)  
News Service No: 134  
3 June 2003

## **Iraq: Compulsory return must not be imposed on Iraqi asylum seekers**

Amnesty International calls on European states currently examining the possibility of returning rejected asylum-seekers to Iraq not to force Iraqis into a situation which remains far from stable.

"It could be many months, if not years, before the situation in Iraq becomes sufficiently stable and secure to allow the safe and dignified return of refugees amid a respect for all human rights," the organization said.

Amnesty International's appeal comes following a recent meeting between ministers from France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to explore possibilities for returning thousands of Iraqi asylum-seekers and refugees.

"European governments must realize that there is no quick fix to such a massive situation of displacement," Amnesty International said.

"All parties involved in these discussions must keep in mind the ongoing human rights abuses, including the prevailing lawlessness and the palpable lack of protection for civilians."

Amnesty International is concerned about forcing Iraqi refugees to return to a situation that is unsafe and insecure. Furthermore, a return of Iraqi exiles that is not phased and coordinated may also hinder reconstruction efforts. Information reaching the organization through its field presence in Iraq suggests that the situation of law and order is not stable.

Amnesty International pointed to the fact that, even 18 months after the Bonn Agreement which led to the establishment of the interim government in Afghanistan, the UNHCR has not yet started promoting the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees. Minorities still cannot return to the territory of Kosovo almost four years after the military intervention by NATO.

"The US and UK occupation does not in itself guarantee a safe, dignified and voluntary return of all displaced people to their homes," Amnesty International said.

"Host countries must ensure that Iraqis do not return in circumstances that would lead to their internal displacement or that would result in them being forced to flee again."

Security Council resolution 1483 of 22 May, 2003 stipulates a safe, orderly and voluntary repatriation of displaced Iraqis. The Special Representative for Iraq of the United Nations Secretary General, Sergio Vieira de Mello, stressed last month the importance of allowing the situation in the whole of Iraq to stabilize before any return, and asked governments hosting Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers to be patient.

"France, Germany and the United Kingdom have a responsibility to contribute to efforts to ensure stability and security in Iraq, the same as all UN member states," Amnesty International said.

"Any program that caters for their premature return risks undermining these goals."

Amnesty International does not oppose a return of rejected asylum-seekers provided they have had access to a fair and satisfactory asylum procedure and that their return can take place in safety, dignity and with full respect for human rights.

### **Background**

On -30 May, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers, met with the United Kingdom's Home Secretary David Blunkett, the French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy and the German Minister of the Interior Otto Schily in Geneva. Blunkett warned that compulsion could be used this year if other incentives to return did not work. Lubbers said the UNHCR would make a clear assessment on the extent to which return can be promoted within 3 to 4 weeks. A follow-up meeting is planned for late June.

Iraq is one of the largest source countries for refugees in the world. Up to two million Iraqis are estimated to be living in exile in addition to nearly one million displaced persons inside Iraq's borders. In 2002 alone, more than 50,000 Iraqi nationals applied for asylum in industrialized countries.

### Public Document

\*\*\*\*\*

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>