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East Timor: Refugees in danger as repatriation program starts

As airlifts to Dili begin, Amnesty International warned today that refugees in West Timor indicating their desire to return to East Timor could face intimidation and attacks by militia groups.

"Without adequate protection in the camps from militia attacks, refugees could face reprisals for indicating their desire to return to their homeland," Amnesty International said.

"Many refugees may not be able to make a free and informed choice in the face of such intimidation and attacks."

The human rights organization is seriously concerned that the transmigration program for those East Timorese willing to be relocated within Indonesia, announced by the Indonesian government, could potentially place the refugees in a position where they are forced to state their support for integration or independence, thereby exposing themselves to risks of further human rights violations. Militia leaders have also pledged to organize the return of people in camps under their control with a view to establishing their claims over territory in East Timor.

Amnesty International calls on the Indonesian government to urgently allow the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian agencies full and unimpeded access to the refugee camps in West Timor, both to ensure the safety of the refugees and to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance.

At the same time however, Amnesty International stressed that conditions must be established for the refugees to return to East Timor with safety and dignity.

"The situation in East Timor is far from secure and refugees' basic humanitarian needs may not be met," the organization added. "The international community must ensure that adequate facilities and security arrangements are in place to receive the refugees."

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For more information or to receive a copy of Amnesty International's recently published report on East Timor, "*Refugees at risk*", please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>

