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Kosovo: Playing politics with refugees in Macedonia

Refugee protection, a non-political and humanitarian act, has become politicized in the Kosovo conflict, states an Amnesty International field report released today at a London press briefing.

“The authorities in Macedonia are effectively holding to ransom those refugees waiting on its borders to enter, while NATO’s continuing involvement in some refugee camps -- as a party involved in the conflict -- contradicts the fundamental principles of refugee protection,” Amnesty International said today.

The Amnesty International research report, while acknowledging the difficulties posed by the refugee influx, criticizes the Macedonian government for playing politics with refugees.

“Frequent closures of the border by the Macedonian authorities seem to be used to prompt quicker action in evacuating refugees. This is an unacceptable intrusion of politics in the humanitarian response to refugees in crisis,” Amnesty International said.

At the beginning of the crisis, Macedonian authorities posed many obstacles for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They refused the agency access to refugees stranded on the border with the country, and made agreements with other countries on the evacuation of refugees without UNHCR involvement. Macedonia has also obstructed the UNHCR in entering some camps, violating the rights of refugees and undermining the UN agency’s protective role.

Even now, the Macedonian authorities engage in closure of the border, despite repeated UNHCR protests. The authorities claim that allowing refugees to remain in Macedonia would destabilize the country. Amnesty International finds it unacceptable that the emphasis is being put on speedy evacuation rather than refugees’ rights.

“The rush by the international community to evacuate refugees as soon as possible from Macedonia tacitly accepts this faulty logic,” Amnesty International said.

NATO’s involvement in the refugee camps also poses problems of impartiality. Initially, it was planned that NATO-constructed refugee camps would be administered by UNHCR, with NATO providing only logistical support as requested.

Yet UNHCR was apparently ill-prepared for the refugee influx, and NATO stepped in to accomplish an urgent and vital job. However, NATO’s continuing role in the protection of refugees from Kosovo raises significant questions about the civilian character and non-political nature of the camps; and indeed, of refugee protection itself.

Politics also plays a role in determining where refugees end up. In the current response to the forced mass displacement from Kosovo a new “solution” has been created - that is - “humanitarian evacuation” from Macedonia to other countries. The evacuation programme is based on international solidarity and responsibility sharing, with some 39 countries agreeing to receive refugees from Macedonia. Yet many countries have not taken their share of responsibility for hosting refugees.

Providing protection for refugees, and searching for a durable solution for their plight, is not the responsibility of one country alone; but the responsibility of the entire international community ,” Amnesty International said.

The rights of refugees, once evacuated, have also become a political question. Amnesty International appealed to those countries hosting refugees evacuated from Macedonia to make sure that they are afforded all their rights as refugees, and make sure that they receive “effective and durable protection against being forcibly returned to Kosovo.”

The human rights organization expressed concern that refugees could not make a truly informed decision about whether they wished to be evacuated to a host country unless they had full information about the rights they would receive. It appeared to the field research team that refugees had been given inadequate information about their rights as refugees in the host countries, and the treatment they would receive there.

In its interviews with refugees, Amnesty International heard repeated tales of Macedonian police intimidation, including reports of harassment and abuse. For example, in Brazda, a 41-year-old refugee man said he witnessed a police officer roughly pushing aside a small child in early April. When he confronted the officer, the refugee said that he was clubbed unconscious and hospitalized. He and his family were subsequently evacuated to another European country.

In its recommendations, Amnesty International urges that:

1. Macedonia should abide by its international obligations and refrain from closing its borders. It should cooperate fully with UNHCR, and make sure that police operating in the refugee camps do so in a non-intimidatory manner; immediate attention be given to ensuring that the responsibility to protect refugees is shared in a truly equitable manner. This mechanism should include developing criteria for assessing when a country of first asylum faced with a large scale influx may be destabilised. Countries other than those in the region should make a greater contribution to sheltering those seeking asylum; adequate financial assistance be provided to Macedonia, to assist the country in dealing with the refugee influx; the international community respects the UNHCR’s supervisory role and ensures that the organization is given adequate resources to carry out its mandate in an effective manner.

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*******To request an interview with Amnesty International refugee experts, for copies of the report, or for further information, please phone Soraya Bermejo at Amnesty International’s press office on +44 171 413 5566. ISDN available.*******