

AI INDEX: ASA 16/24/97
23 JULY 1997

Myanmar: Burmese Muslim asylum-seekers fleeing to Bangladesh could face forced labour and other hardships if returned

The thousands of Burmese Muslim asylum-seekers fleeing to Bangladesh from Myanmar should not be returned to Myanmar to face the forced labour and other hardships which compelled them to flee in the first place, Amnesty International said today.

According to reliable sources, up to 25,000 asylum-seekers have arrived in the last few months in order to escape forced labour, portering and other hardships. They join some 21,000 other Burmese Muslims in the country.

“Refugees have been forcibly returned to Myanmar, where forced labour and portering continue at a high level,” Amnesty International said. “It is crucial that they are allowed access to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) immediately. The Government of Bangladesh has so far not permitted UNHCR to interview them.”

On 20 July, a group of Burmese Muslims, known as Rohingyas, were forcibly sent back by the Bangladeshi security forces from Nayapara and Kutupalong refugee camps in southeastern Bangladesh.

About 400 refugees, some of whom were ill, were physically taken against their will and sent across the Naf River to Myanmar. UNHCR was not allowed to speak to them or to perform medical checks.

The Bangladesh government has denied these reports, claiming that they are economic migrants and that the repatriation proceeded according to an agreement between them and UNHCR.

The newly arrived Rohingyas are not in camps -- and are unable to receive any assistance or protection from UNHCR. Without UNHCR access they will not be able to have their protection needs assessed, and will not be able to receive the help they need. Many of them have been forcibly returned to Myanmar by the Bangladeshi security forces without having had that opportunity.

The 21,000 who are in camps are the last of more than 250,000 Rohingyas who fled killings, torture, and forced portering in 1992. Most of them have returned home, although there has been no fundamental change in the human rights situation there.

“The Government of Bangladesh must recognize that many of those who have fled are at risk of human rights violations if returned. It should ensure that these refugees receive the protection they so desperately need,” Amnesty International said.

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