

EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 HRS GMT 3 SEPTEMBER 1997**Middle East: International response to mass refugees flows should start with the causes of flight**

"Leave your homes to save your lives." The majority of refugees in the Middle East have heard this sentence all too often. They have been forced to abandon their livelihoods, their lives turned upside-down by forces beyond their control, Amnesty International said today.

"Many governments in the Middle East driven by political expediency and self-interest order or condone violations of human rights," Amnesty International said. "Rarely does a year go past without another mass flow of refugees in the region."

In its new report, *"Refugees in the Middle East: Fear, flight and forcible exile,"* issued as part of its ongoing Refugee Campaign, the human rights organization documents how the Middle East provides shelter to an estimated 5.6 million refugees, among them individuals, families and whole communities who have fled from torture, killings and campaigns of terror, discrimination and intimidation against ethnic groups.

Such violations are not new to the region. In 1948-1949 around 750,000 Palestinians fled their homes as the new state of Israel was formed. The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s drove thousands of people to cross nearby borders. In the years up to 1989, as a result of the continuing Afghan civil war, around two million refugees ended up in Iran. During the Gulf War, hundreds of thousands of Kuwaitis, Iraqis and other nationals fled from Kuwait and Iraq. Around two million other Iraqis--Kurds and Arabs-- fled when Iraqi government forces brutally crushed uprisings in the country. Since the 1980s, hundreds of Bahraini nationals have been forcibly exiled from Bahrain, losing the protection of their own state.

"Refugees at risk need -- and are entitled to -- protection by the international community," Amnesty International said. "Refugee protection is founded on the principle of *non-refoulement*, which obliges states not to forcibly send anyone to a country where they would be at risk of human rights violations."

"Many asylum-seekers have had their rights violated when they have sought sanctuary, within and outside of the Middle East. When governments refuse to respect asylum seekers, they are, in many cases, condemning people to torture and even death."

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, Kuwait expelled hundreds of people, mostly Iraqis and Palestinians, to Iraq. Thousands of people, members of the *bidun* (stateless) community, were caught on the Iraqi side of the border with Kuwait after the cease-fire and were not allowed to return to Kuwait.

People from the Middle East who have sought asylum in Europe have faced many problems and dangers. Some countries have obstructed access. In 1996, Ahmad, a Syrian refugee, was bundled onto a plane in Romania and sent back home. Turkey has attached a geographic reservation to the UN Refugee Convention excluding non-European asylum seekers. Iraqis and Iranians, who form the largest refugee groups in Turkey, are not recognized as refugees by the Government.

European governments have urged their nationals to leave Algeria because it is too dangerous. However, they refuse to acknowledge that Algerian asylum-seekers would also be in danger if returned

home and cannot be protected by their authorities. As a result, Algerians fleeing persecution are increasingly being refused protection and returned to a situation of danger.

Within the Middle East, governments have signed bilateral and multilateral security or “anti terrorism” agreements, allowing the *refoulement* of political activists. As a result, at least nine Bahraini nationals were forcibly returned in June 1996, from the United Arab Emirates to Bahrain. In September 1996, Iran reportedly handed over 35 Turks to the Turkish authorities. In October 1996, Yemen was reported to have forcibly returned around 20 Saudi Arabian nationals. All were detained upon arriving in Saudi Arabia and are believed to be at risk of torture.

In Iraq, human rights violations committed by Iraqi forces did not start with the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Between 1987 and 1989, the authorities destroyed about 4,000 Kurdish villages. At least 100,000 Kurds “disappeared” in the first half of 1988. Inter-factional fighting between Kurdish organizations also pushed Kurds to flee.

Today, 490,000 Iraqis live in Iran, many of them in camps. In Turkey, only 30,000 of the Iraqi refugees were allowed to remain. Many of them have allegedly been forcibly returned, after Iraqi “amnesties” which were used to lure back suspected government opponents. Hundreds of these returnees “disappeared”, were tortured or executed.

Today, Iran shelters more than two million refugees and is home to the largest number of refugees in the world. The international community should not leave Iran alone to shoulder that responsibility, simply because it is the nearest point of safety for refugees. On the other hand, torture, executions and imprisonment after unfair trials have driven thousands of Iranians to seek refuge abroad. Dozens of Iranian dissidents in exile have been killed allegedly by Iranian government agents. For Iranians, gaining asylum in Europe is becoming increasingly difficult.

Today Palestinians are the largest refugee population in the world. More than half of them do not have the right to citizenship in any country and face restrictions on their civil rights. In some countries, like Lebanon, they are without rights such as the right to work in the public sector. Jews from the Middle East also fled to Israel, sometimes because of persecution in countries like Iraq and Yemen.

“All refugees, including Palestinians, have the right to return to their country in safety,” Amnesty International said. “The problem of Palestinian refugees should have a high priority in the peace process.”

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