

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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World Refugee Day 2007

On World Refugee Day 2007, Amnesty International stands in solidarity with refugees around the world from countries such as Afghanistan, Burundi, Iraq, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Sudan who are awaiting a solution to their plight and sometimes have been for generations.

Amnesty international calls on all governments to uphold their international obligations to respect and protect the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers. However, in many parts of the world, governments are portraying refugees and asylum-seekers as a threat to the societies in which they have sought protection. Such fears are being used and fuelled by the same governments that have legally committed themselves to protect refugees from the persecution they have escaped in their countries.

Driven by political and security motivations for border control, asylum procedures have become tools for exclusion rather than protection. According to the European Commission, the 27 countries of the European Union received 53 percent fewer asylum applications in 2006 compared to 2002. Ever stricter external border controls as well as measures against irregular migration implemented even outside the EU's territory are believed to be an important obstacle for refugees to reach the European Union and part of the explanation of the constant decrease in asylum applications in the EU. Certainly, the reasons for seeking asylum - violence and persecution - remain as high as ever.

The principle of non-refoulement, which is described as the cornerstone of the international system of refugee protection and which prohibits the forcible return, either from the territory of a state or at the border, of anyone to a country where they could be at risk of serious human rights violations, is being eroded and ignored by States seeking to evade their obligations towards refugees and asylum seekers. In January this year, the government of Kenya closed its border with Somalia, preventing thousands from crossing to seek sanctuary as well forcibly returning hundreds who had managed to cross and seek asylum.

Millions of Palestinian refugees, the world's largest and longest standing refugee community, continue to be denied a durable solution to their plight nearly 60 years following their flight to host countries in the Middle East.

Host countries in the global South are most often the ones that struggle to cope with the economic, social and environmental impact of hosting large numbers of refugees for years on end. The continuing conflict in Iraq has caused some one and a half million Iraqis to become internally displaced and some two million others to become refugees, raising concern of a burgeoning humanitarian crisis not only in Iraq but also in Syria and Jordan as these countries struggle to meet the challenges posed by major influxes of Iraqi refugees. Despite this, other countries have done little towards averting this humanitarian crisis. On the contrary, the recent actions of some of the richest countries are making a mockery of established principles of burden and responsibility sharing, which calls for states to engage in international cooperation to relieve the "unduly heavy burden" that granting asylum places on "certain countries".

Further north, European Union governments are employing increasingly complex measures to prevent asylum seekers from reaching their territory, including undertaking interception operations in the Mediterranean and cooperation agreements with North African states. However, such actions do not absolve states of their human rights obligations as they are equally responsible for protecting the human rights of people under their effective control.

In April 2007, the Australian government agreed to an exchange of recognized refugees processed in the Pacific island of Nauru with recognized Cuban and Haitian refugees held by the USA in Guantánamo Bay. Rather, than alleviating the suffering of these refugees through a durable and adequate solution, this proposed "swap" appears to be specifically designed to deter refugees from rightfully seeking protection by shuttling them from one region of the world to another. Amnesty International believes that rather than using their resources on "swapping" refugees or other such exercises detrimental to the protection of refugee rights, states should honour their commitments both at home to refugees who arrive and to assist in providing assistance and protection to refugees in large-scale situations elsewhere.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that refugees are increasingly being excluded from the system of international human rights protection. The organization reminds states that the protection of refugees is both an obligation of host states and an international responsibility. In particular, the organisation calls on all states to scrupulously uphold the fundamental principle of non-refoulement. In addition, AI notes the critical importance of ensuring that all refugees have non-discriminatory access in a timely manner to appropriate durable solutions - voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity to places of origin or habitual residence, local integration or resettlement in a third country. Yet, far too many refugees are in danger of refoulement including as a consequence of racist and xenophobic rhetoric, are denied legal rights in countries of first asylum making local integration difficult, or are left for years or even generations in limbo in protracted refugee situations unable to access resettlement opportunities or to effectively integrate.

On World Refugee Day 2007 Amnesty International focuses on the plight of the forcibly displaced with a variety of actions and events across the globe.

At the International Secretariat of Amnesty International in London Ricky Romain's exhibition *Nurturing Hope - Seeking Common Ground* opens. The exhibition portrays various themes relevant to displacement.