

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Morocco/Western Sahara: Amnesty International concerned by mass deportations

Amnesty International is greatly concerned by reports that large groups of migrants, including possible refugees, from West African countries have been rounded up by Moroccan forces and either summarily deported to Algeria or dumped in desert areas close to the border with Mauritania. Amnesty International believes that these deportations breach fundamental safeguards of international refugee and human rights law, and it fears for the life and safety of those left at border regions.

In all, hundreds of individuals of sub-Saharan origin have been rounded up in recent days by Moroccan authorities as part of their efforts to clear migrants away from areas around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, where migrants have been killed and injured while attempting to enter Spanish territory. Many are reported to have taken long distances in buses and left with little or no food, water in desert areas along Morocco's borders with Algeria and Mauritania. Some of the migrants are reported to have died as a result; one eyewitness report received by Amnesty International suggests that as many as 10 people who were part of one group left near the border with Algeria died apparently as a result of the conditions to which they were left exposed.

Another group, numbering about 80 people, were reportedly abandoned close to a minefield near the town of Smara before being taken in military trucks by Moroccan forces to the city of Guelmim, where hundreds of migrants, including injured, are now said to be kept.

"Access to food, water and medical attention are fundamental rights that should be available to everyone at all times, regardless of their nationality or the legality of their stay in a country" said Amnesty International, "Driving people to desert areas without any access to food or water is a very serious human rights violation."

Amnesty International recognizes the right of states to control their borders and to regulate the entry of non-citizens into their territory. However, Morocco has obligations under international law to protect the basic human rights of all individuals within its territories, including irregular migrants. Morocco also has an obligation not to deport any individual who is at risk of serious human rights violations in their country of origin and to give them full access to fair and satisfactory procedures to establish this. Collectively expelling persons without first assessing their need for international protection is in violation of fundamental principles of international refugee and human rights laws.

Amnesty International believes that any deportations of those not in need of international protection must only be carried out in an orderly, safe and dignified manner, including the provision of adequate food, water, medical attention, and humane treatment, as well as with a view to ensuring that their irregular situation does not persist. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has recognised the right of an expelled alien to elect the country of destination, subject to agreement with that country. All efforts should be taken to prevent migrants being pushed back and forth from one country to another over a considerable period of time, without them being able to regularise their situation in any country.

On 11 October Amnesty International published a press release saying *inter alia*: "The present dire situation in North Africa, where people trying to gain entry to EU territory are reportedly being shot dead, or even dumped in the desert without food or water, relates directly to pressure exerted by EU countries to strengthen fortress Europe."... "Shamefully, EU Member States are shifting the burden of refugee protection to other countries which may be ill-equipped to deal with the ever increasing numbers of displaced people. In the process, international commitments to humane treatment and the principle of 'non-refoulement' are being violated..."