

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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TURKEY: HALT ILLEGAL DEPORTATION OF PEOPLE TO SYRIA AND ENSURE THEIR SAFETY

Amnesty International deplores the apparent forcible deportation of six Syrian men to northern Syria last week and urges Turkey to stop returning refugees to a place where their lives and freedoms are at serious risk. The organization also calls on the Turkish authorities to ensure that all those deported are allowed to re-enter Turkey safely and access essential services.

Amnesty international spoke with one of the six Syrian men who were deported, Maher*, as well as his lawyer and saw documents confirming his right to protection in Turkey.

According to Maher, on 15 May 2020, the Turkish police separately apprehended him and the other five Syrian men in Konya, a city in central Turkey, on the grounds of wanting to ask them questions about their applications for Turkish citizenship. Based on information received by Amnesty International, all of them had a valid Turkish Temporary Protection identity document or “*geçici koruma kimlik belgesi*”.

Maher says that he and the other five men in the group were detained at a police station in the Meram district of Konya for a week. Maher told Amnesty International that Turkish security officials did not notify them of the reason for their detention and did not allow them to contact a lawyer. They took away their Turkish identity documents. Maher told Amnesty International that the six of them were verbally pressured into being forced to sign a document stating that they wanted to return to Syria and acknowledging that they pose a “threat” to Turkish security and public health.

“I said that I will not return to Syria because it is not safe, and I’m staying legally in Turkey. I asked if I had committed any offense, but they didn’t answer,” Maher said. *“I felt completely destroyed and alone.”*

In order to force one of these men to sign the document, Turkish authorities reportedly threatened him that he would be taken to a camp in southern Turkey, kept there for several months and eventually deported.

Maher told Amnesty International that in the early morning of 22 May 2020, the Turkish authorities transported the six Syrian men in an unmarked mini-van from the police station in Konya to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in Turkey’s southern Hatay province. At the border Turkish plain clothes security forces asked them to put their fingerprints on a new document, which was not handed to them and the content of which could not be established. None of them had passport, but some carried their Syrian identity card. The six men were handed over to the “Free Police”, Syrian non-state armed forces controlling the Syrian border crossing.

The six deported men have since been quarantined in a facility in Idlib province, in accordance with local procedures to contain COVID19.

Maher told Amnesty International that he is concerned for his safety in Syria. *“I’m not safe now. There are a lot of criminal groups around and they might kidnap me and ask for ransom. And I can’t go to regime-controlled area. They will kill me because my hometown was full of anti-government fighters”*, Maher said.

Forcibly returning anyone to Syria violates the international law principle of *non-refoulement*, as it puts deported people at risk of serious human rights violations. UNHCR has stated: “As all parts of Syria are reported to have been affected, directly or indirectly, by one or multiple conflicts, UNHCR calls on states not to forcibly return Syrian nationals and former habitual residents of Syria.”¹

¹ UNHCR, *International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update V*, 3 November 2017.

Turkish law prohibits *refoulement* and regulations currently in place to contain COVID19 prohibit all deportations from taking place.

However, Amnesty International has **documented** Turkey's unlawful deportations of Syrians consistently since 2014, often following a similar pattern to the May 2020 incident. Most recently, in 2019, Amnesty International has reported how hundreds of Syrian refugees across Turkey were swept up, detained, and transported against their will to Syria.

Turkey's practice of forcibly returning refugees to Syria, where their lives are at risk, is a dangerous and illegal practice that must end.

Turkey has demonstrated remarkable generosity and allocated significant resources to hosting millions of Syrian refugees since 2011. Over 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees currently live in Turkey. But this generosity does not absolve the Turkish government of their international obligations, including the duty to abide by the principle of *non-refoulement*.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International continues to call on the international community to significantly increase resettlement commitments for Syrian refugees from Turkey and to provide substantial financial assistance to the Turkish authorities' efforts to host this large population.

* Name has been changed in order to protect his identity.

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