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## **REFUGEES: GOVERNMENTS CALLOUS ABOUT FATE OF REFUGEES**

Governments increasingly show a callous disregard for the impact of policies deliberately designed to prevent people who are genuinely fleeing persecution from reaching safety in their countries, Amnesty International said today as it launched a global campaign on refugees.

“The new battery of techniques aimed at keeping refugees at bay mean that countless people never get a real chance to escape from torture or death threats or are sent back to countries where they run a real risk of getting thrown in jail or handed over to executioners,” Amnesty International said.

The organization said there are more than 15 million men, women and children refugees and a further 20 million people internally displaced because they have been forced to leave their homes but have not crossed an international border.

“The vast majority are women and children -- with women particularly at risk before, during and after they flee,” Amnesty International said. “Rape is increasingly used to torture and terrorize women into flight, especially in conflicts such as in Afghanistan, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.”

With the scale of human rights violations that force people into exile continuing unabated, the number of those displaced is likely to grow in coming years.

“While the number of people needing international protection continues to grow, governments seem more concerned with keeping refugees away from their borders,” Amnesty International said. “They should at least have the decency to protect refugees when human rights tragedies unfold.”

In 1951, in the aftermath of the Second World War, states formulated the Refugee Convention in order to deal with the mass outpourings of people. One of the key principles spelled out in the Convention and general international law is that of *non-refoulement* -- that no one should be forcibly returned to a country where his or her life or freedom would be at risk .

“Yet nearly half a century after the Convention was drafted, there is more than ample evidence that this principle is simply not respected and that people are in fact sent back to countries where their life or liberty is at risk,” Amnesty International said.

In one case, a Zairian woman escaped from a military prison where she was tortured and sought asylum in Sweden. The Swedish authorities rejected her claim on several grounds, including their view that the president does not control the military and therefore torture by soldiers does not constitute state persecution.

In another case in July last year, the Belgian authorities deported Bouasria Ben Othman to Algeria after refusing his asylum application. Despite repeated efforts, Amnesty International received no information from the Belgian authorities about his location, until 19 November when they said the Algerian authorities said he had been arrested upon arrival in Algeria, released and rearrested. On 26 November Bouasria appeared on Algerian television saying he was well and that people should stop asking about him. A week later Algerian police told his family that he had thrown himself out of a window and died. However, there are allegations that he died as a result of torture.

“Governments have made the rules on the refugees and they should now play by those rules,” Amnesty International said. “The increasingly restrictive approach that more and more governments take towards refugees makes a mockery of their international and national obligations.”

This restrictive approach includes limiting access to their countries, harshly applying asylum criteria, detaining asylum-seekers, temporarily protecting or forcibly repatriating refugees, and fining airlines and shipping companies if they carry people who do not have travel documents.

For example, after the military coup in Haiti in September 1991, most Haitian refugees tried to reach the USA and more than 38,000 risked their lives at sea. In June 1992 the USA intercepted Haitian boat people at sea and summarily returned them, without any examination of their asylum claims.

“While governments may have the right to control their borders, they do not have the right to refuse people access to asylum procedures,” Amnesty International said.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina alone, more than half the population was uprooted by the war with an estimated 1.3 million people displaced inside the country and another million or more refugees abroad.

Since November 1996, the massive repatriation of refugees in the Great Lakes region without clear guarantees of safety on their return has been marked by a shocking disregard for the rights, dignity and safety of hundreds of thousands of people. Disparate groups from Rwanda, Zaire and Burundi are in grave danger of human rights abuses, and they are not getting the protection they deserve from the international community.

“If the repatriation solution is needed, it must be defined in terms that give human rights considerations the highest priority at every stage,” Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization is calling on the world’s governments to fulfill their international obligations for the protection of refugees. They must support the efforts of the UNHCR and other international organizations who work to protect and help refugees. They must remind their communities that refugees need protection, they are not abusing the asylum system for their own gain, they are not economic migrants, they are not moving *en masse* for illegitimate reasons.

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