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Afghanistan: Still not safe enough

Amnesty International today reiterated its concerns that the situation in Afghanistan is not conducive to the promotion of voluntary repatriation of refugees and asylum seekers and urged that countries should not rush to return people to an unsustainable situation.

"The security situation across Afghanistan has steadily deteriorated in 2003, and cannot be said to have fundamentally, durably and effectively changed. It is therefore unlikely that repatriation can be promoted in the foreseeable future," the international human rights organization emphasized.

In its report *"Afghanistan: Out of sight, out of mind: The fate of the Afghan returnees"*, Amnesty International highlights its concerns that, under current conditions, the inability of many refugees and Internal Displaced Persons (IDP) to sustain their return to their places of origin or preferred destination is leading to destitution and renewed cycles of displacement.

"The sustainability of return is also hindered by insufficient aid and reconstruction assistance from the international community. This must be remedied, and Afghanistan must not be allowed to drop off the international agenda once again," the organization continued.

"The situation is exacerbated by the fact that many instances of return are taking place in less than voluntary circumstances," Amnesty International said.

Pakistan and Iran have provided a place of refuge for up to six million Afghan refugees between them for more than 20 years. However, in recent years, there have been increasing signs that "asylum fatigue" in those countries have led to pressures on Afghan refugees to return, in contravention of international human rights standards.

Suggesting that it is safe to do so, non-neighbouring states including the UK and Australia have also indicated a willingness to forcibly return Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees, a position which raises serious concerns.

"If refugees are unable to sustain their return to their country of origin there is also an increased likelihood, borne out by events in Afghanistan in 2002 and 2003, that they will once again attempt to seek refuge in other countries. Ensuring the sustainability of returns is, therefore, in the interests of the refugees themselves, the country of origin, as well as countries of asylum, be they in the immediate vicinity of the refugee-producing country or further afield," Amnesty International pointed out.

"We urge non-neighbouring states hosting Afghan refugees, especially industrialized states such as European Union countries and Australia, to be aware that the forced return of refugees or rejected asylum seekers from their territory sends out the misleading message to developing states hosting far larger numbers of Afghans, that return to Afghanistan should be promoted,"

The organization stresses that sufficient and effective reconstruction assistance must be made available to Afghanistan, that an effective degree of security is provided in the whole of the country and that national institutions of justice, policing and social reform are able to operate in a rights-respecting manner throughout the country.

"Only when these conditions are fulfilled will it be possible for refugees and IDPs to break the cycle of displacement and return to their places of origin in a manner that is truly voluntary and sustainable," Amnesty International concluded.

For the full report, please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa110142003>

To receive pictures for publication , please go to www.news.amnesty.org or call: Magda Wendorff-Kowalczyk on +44 207 413 5729 or +44 7778 472 173

For an interview , please call:

Pia Oberoi, Refugee Researcher based in Geneva, on + 41 22 906 94 82 or +4179 366 8168

Magda Wendorff-Kowalczyk , Asia/Pacific Press Officer, on +44 207 413 5729 or +44 7778 472 173

Susie Sanders, Researcher/Campaigner on Afghanistan, on +44 207 413 5526

Margaret Ladner - Afghanistan Field Presence Coordinator in Kabul, on +93 702 79363

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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