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China: Hundreds of North Koreans forced back across the border

Amnesty International sent an open letter today to the President of China, Jiang Zemin, expressing grave concern for hundreds of North Korean asylum-seekers who have been forcibly returned to North Korea by the Chinese authorities as a result of a new crackdown in north-east China.

"Those detained in the crackdown are being denied access to any refugee determination procedure and pushed back over the border to meet an uncertain fate. This could include imprisonment, torture and in some cases summary execution or death in detention from starvation and disease," Amnesty International said.

Tens of thousands of starving North Koreans have fled their country over the past few years, crossing the border to China's northeastern provinces of Jilin and Liaoning. Some hide in the hills along the border and survive by scavenging, begging or stealing. Others have been given support by China's local ethnic Korean community and foreign aid organizations, or have found work in local farms and enterprises. Their illegal status makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and harassment. Various sources have reported that some North Korean women have been sold as brides.

Police in the border areas have stepped up checks in people's homes and imposed fines on people caught helping North Koreans. At the end of July, it was reported that around 50 North Koreans were being

deported every two days from the border town of Longjing in Jilin province.

This crackdown intensified after widespread publicity surrounding a family of seven North Korean refugees who sought asylum at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Beijing in June.

The Chinese government continues to insist that all North Koreans are "illegal immigrants" and to bar the UNHCR from visiting border areas and providing appropriate assistance.

Amnesty International is calling on the Chinese government to review this policy and ensure that the rights of North Korean asylum seekers are respected by giving them access to a fair and independent asylum procedure. Until then the authorities should cease detentions and forcible repatriations.

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