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## **East Timor: The refugee crisis continues**

*"We are not thinking about integration [with Indonesia] or independence for East Timor, we are thinking about returning to our homes." (a refugee in Nenuk, Atambua, 10 November 1999)*

For the more than 100,000 refugees trapped in makeshift camps in West Timor, the human rights crisis is far from over, Amnesty International said today on the release of its latest report documenting the continuing plight of East Timorese refugees in West Timor.

"Refugees in West Timor remain virtual prisoners in some camps," Amnesty International said. "Their lives are still ruled by the militia groups that destroyed East Timor."

"The Indonesian government's failure to completely disband and disarm the militias operating in the camps continues to undermine the prospects for the safe and voluntary repatriation of the remaining refugees in West Timor."

The report, based on information collected by an Amnesty International team which has recently returned from the region, found that many refugees are unable to freely decide to return to East Timor.

Often intimidated, harassed, extorted and in some cases subjected to unlawful killings and sexual violence by militia groups they live in a constant state of fear. Misinformation about the situation in East Timor and attacks on refugee convoys have also discouraged many refugees from attempting to return.

"Given the general climate of fear, degradation and misinformation, it is no wonder that the flow of refugees across the border between West and East Timor has slowed down to a trickle in the last few weeks."

"While ensuring the right to return should be an urgent priority, Indonesia's failure to protect the refugees from human rights violations is compounding and prolonging the original violation of mass expulsions from East Timor," the organization added.

At the same time, humanitarian conditions in the camps, exacerbated by the rainy season, continue to deteriorate. Poor shelter and sanitation have resulted in the spread of diseases such as chronic diarrhoea and tuberculosis. According to the UNHCR, between 22 November and 1 December, 32 children and three adults died in Tua Pukan camp alone.

Access for the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies to all refugee camps and settlements in West Timor still remains limited. Their personnel also risk threats and physical attacks from militia groups when they visit the camps. As a result, the UNHCR has been forced to operate a "smash and grab" approach -- arriving with little or no notice in the camps with empty trucks to collect the refugees and return them to East Timor.

"The repatriation of refugees is never a straight forward exercise," Amnesty International added. "While some progress has been made, there is still a long way to go before the process is complete and the remaining refugees are safe."

Refugees interviewed by Amnesty International who had returned from camps in the Belu district in West Timor to Dili in November, spoke of repeated incidents of rape by militia and Indonesian soldiers (TNI). According to two refugees, a number of women were held in sexual slavery at the house of a TNI member.

There are also indications that certain categories of refugees may be facing particular obstacles when trying to return to their homes in East Timor. Wives and children of some members of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) have been prevented from returning home to East Timor. It appears that they are being targeted in revenge for the political activities of their kin.

A wife of one CNRT member, who tried to leave with her five children, was reportedly told that she could leave, but if she attempted to take her children with her, she would be killed.

"The international community must not ignore this continuing human rights crisis," the human rights organization urged. "It must continue to place pressure on the Indonesian authorities to take swift and meaningful action to disband and disarm the militias, thereby allowing the refugees to make their own decision on whether or not to return to East Timor."

Amnesty International also calls on the Indonesian authorities to grant the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies full and unimpeded access to refugees in East Timor and ensure that all the refugees are given adequate humanitarian assistance.

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**For more information or to receive a copy of the report '*No end to the crisis for East Timorese refugees*', please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>**