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Syria's neighbours must ensure stranded refugees are allowed access to safety

Countries neighbouring Syria must ensure that refugees who are stranded on their borders are allowed to find sanctuary, Amnesty International said.

The organisation wrote to the Turkish and Iraqi authorities calling on them to open all border crossings to refugees from Syria, after both nations continued to prevent access to safety for those fleeing the escalating violence by delaying entry to their territories.

 "Civilians have born the brunt of large-scale crimes against humanity, war crimes and other human rights abuses committed in Syria, and any obstacles or delays in allowing refugees to reach a place of safety would place them at risk of further serious human rights abuses in breach of international law," said Ann Harrison, Amnesty International's Deputy Programme Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Amnesty International calls upon countries neighbouring Syria to keep their borders open to those fleeing the conflict, and urges all countries in the region and elsewhere to ensure they do not force anyone to return.

"Amnesty International also calls on the international community to urgently and generously respond to calls for funding for relief efforts, directed at Syrian refugees in the region, in the spirit of solidarity and responsibility-sharing."

More than a quarter of a million people who have fled from Syria since March 2011 have either been registered as refugees or are awaiting registration in neighbouring countries, namely Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, with numbers growing daily, according to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR.

Many more Syrian refugees are believed to have reached these countries but have not registered.

Refugees stranded at the Turkey/Syria border

There are more than 10,000 people stranded inside Syria, close to the Turkish border provinces of Kilis and Hatay, waiting to be admitted to Turkey, according to information received by Amnesty International.

Amnesty International understands that, although small groups of people are being allowed to cross into Turkey and are transferred to camps, significant delays in screening and registration have meant that thousands have remained stranded inside Syria since the end of August.

They are reported to have been provided with some basic assistance such as food and water.

Amnesty International recognizes the need to put in place effective screening and registration

arrangements for new Syrian arrivals into Turkey. In addition to providing guarantees for general security, effective screening and registration are also required to preserve the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum and refugee camps.

However, these requirements must be discharged in a manner that does not jeopardize the life or safety of anyone attempting to flee Syria, in line with Turkey's obligations under international law. Amnesty International also acknowledges the logistical challenges of having to increase camp capacity in response to the large numbers of people fleeing Syria and seeking refuge in Turkey.

In its letter to the Turkish authorities, Amnesty International reiterated previous concerns that the camps should be relocated to a safe distance away from the border, as their proximity to it poses a serious security threat to those living there.

The organization also called again for human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, and civil society organizations to be allowed access to the camps to independently monitor conditions and speak to the refugees there.

Refugees stranded on the Syrian side of the al-Qa'em border post

Although Amnesty International understands the al-Waleed and Rabhia border crossings between Iraq and Syria currently remain open, the organization is concerned that the border post at al-Qa'em has been closed to persons fleeing Syria since 16 August 2012, with several hundred people reportedly stranded on the Syrian side in poor conditions.