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Neighbouring countries must ensure that refugees stranded at Syria's borders are allowed access to safety

Neighbouring countries must ensure that refugees stranded at their borders with Syria can find sanctuary.

Amnesty International has written to the Turkish and Iraqi authorities calling for all border crossings with Syria to be opened to refugees fleeing the escalating violence in Syria. Both Turkey and Iraq continue to delay refugees from entering their territory, thus preventing them from accessing safety.

Amnesty International welcomes efforts made by all neighbouring countries to host large numbers of refugees and acknowledges the considerable responsibility that these countries shoulder in providing much needed assistance and protection. The international community must do more to support these efforts by responding generously to calls for funding, as outlined in the United Nations Syria Regional Response Plan.

According to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, over 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. Many more Syrian refugees are believed to have reached these countries but have not registered.

Refugees stranded at the Turkey/Syria border

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

Amnesty International understands that, while small groups of people are being allowed to cross the border 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. According to reports, those stranded 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 refugee camps accommodating Syrians were located extremely close to the border with Syria. In April 2012, refugees at or near Kilis camp were reportedly injured by stray bullets from clashes in Syria. Amnesty International believes that the proximity of the camps to the border with Syria poses a serious security threat to those living there and that they should be relocated to be at a safe distance. 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

Amnesty International understands that currently the al-Waleed and Rabbia border crossings between Iraq and Syria remain open. However, 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 of the border post.

Large scale crimes against humanity, war crimes and other human rights abuses have been committed in Syria, with civilians bearing the brunt. 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.

Amnesty International calls upon countries neighbouring Syria to keep their borders open to those fleeing the conflict in Syria. Countries in the region and elsewhere should not force anyone to return to Syria. 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.