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Turkey: In search of asylum

People arriving at Turkey's borders in search of asylum are putting their lives at risk on a daily basis because of the failure of the Turkish authorities to provide them with international protection, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

The report [*Stranded: Refugees in Turkey denied protection*](#), focuses on the barriers people, for the most part fleeing persecution in their own countries, are facing in Turkey from the moment they reach Turkish territory.

"The risks people trying to reach Turkey are prepared to take show their desperation. However, the country maintains double standards and refuses to recognize them as refugees," said Andrew Gardner, Amnesty International's expert on Turkey.

Turkey is the only state and signatory to the Refugee Convention which, in effect, does not recognize nationals of countries outside the Council of Europe as refugees. As a result, an increasing number of people in need of international protection are denied it.

In Turkey, the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, undertakes the task of determining refugee status and facilitates the resettlement of some of those recognized as refugees in third countries.

While in 2006, according to official data, the UNHCR received 4,550 new asylum applications from non-European countries, the number rose to 12,980 in 2008. Most of them arrived from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. In the meantime, many thousands more may be remaining in Turkey irregularly – there are no reliable figures available.

Asylum-seekers in Turkey face severe restrictions in gaining access to health care, adequate housing and work in violation of Turkey's obligations under international law.

Cases highlighted in the report also demonstrate the government's disregard for international law in its persistence in forcibly returning people to countries where they are at risk of serious human rights abuses.

In April 2008, Amnesty International was informed about an Iraqi family which was under arrest in southern Turkey after fleeing Baghdad. However, police officers refused to admit that the family was in detention and denied them the opportunity to apply for asylum despite a request being made by the UNHCR on their behalf. The family was forcibly returned to Iraq despite fears for their lives.

"The Turkish authorities violate the rights of asylum-seekers on a regular basis from the moment they attempt to enter the country. The violations continue while their asylum claims are underway and after they

are granted refugee status,” said Andrew Gardner.

Asylum-seekers are often detained for extended periods in poor conditions and with insufficient food and without a clear justification for the detention. They may be expelled without any adequate legal procedure being followed, returning them to countries where their lives may be at risk.

An Afghan national told Amnesty International about his treatment in police detention in the west of Turkey: “If we didn’t give money then they beat us. They used our money to send us back to Afghanistan.”

In April 2008, four people drowned after a group of 18 people were forced to swim across the River Tigris dividing Turkey and Iraq after Iraqi authorities refused to accept them back into their territory.

In September 2008, 24 Uzbek refugees, 15 of them children, were forced into Iranian territory by Turkish security officials. During the deportation, members of the group were allegedly beaten and women and girls threatened with rape. In Iran, the group were held hostage by an unnamed group which threatened to kill them. They were released after paying a ransom of \$5,000 and returned to Turkey irregularly. In October, the group was once again deported to Iran. According to information supplied by human rights activists, the group was living high in the mountains close to the border after the Iranian authorities had refused them entry, and the children were suffering from hunger.

Amnesty International is calling on the Turkish authorities to legislate for and implement a fair domestic asylum procedure. This should ensure that all persons in need of international protection are recognized and provided with such protection, and fully respect the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees.