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World Refugee Day: Lives in danger as governments deny refugees protection in Europe

Governments in Europe are putting lives at risk by denying refugees protection, Amnesty International warned today. On World Refugee Day, the doors to Europe are closing as the rights of those seeking sanctuary are ignored.

“Refugees are risking their lives to find safety only to be turned away when they reach Europe,” said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Director at Amnesty International. “Governments must stop putting lives in danger and start meeting their international obligations to protect these vulnerable people.”

Countries at Europe’s border are showing a flagrant disregard for their international obligations towards refugees:

- Italy is intercepting refugees in international waters and physically transporting them, without assessing their protection needs, to Libya, where migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees are at risk of ill-treatment and forcible return to countries where they risk serious human rights abuses.
- Turkey continues not to recognise people from outside Europe as refugees, meaning thousands of people are denied the protection they need.
- Greece pushes back people at its land border and sea borders with Turkey without first assessing their asylum claims. For those that do enter the country there are many legal obstacles for refugees to gain protection.
- Spain’s bilateral agreements with several countries in Africa are used to justify the arbitrary arrest, detention and deportation of asylum-seekers and migrants in these countries.

On World Refugee Day, Amnesty International warns EU states that their actions are undermining the protection of refugees not only in their own countries but across the world, by sending a dangerous message on the treatment of refugees. All countries must meet their obligations towards refugees and asylum-seekers not only within their own borders but wherever they exercise effective control.

Background

Italy

Libyan leader Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi’s recent visit to Italy did not dispel concerns about the fate of refugees who, according to the bilateral agreement between Italy and Libya, are to be intercepted in international waters and taken to Libya. Between 6-11 May, approximately 500 people were intercepted by Italy after they sent rescue requests and were transported to Libya, where Italy claimed they could seek protection. They included people from Somalia, Eritrea and other African countries.

In May, an Amnesty International fact finding mission to Libya confirmed the country has no functioning asylum system, ill-treats foreign nationals and undertakes forcible returns of individuals back to their

countries of origin without assessing their international protection needs. The delegation visited the Misratah Detention Centre, some 200 km from Tripoli, where between 600 and 700 alleged irregular migrants mostly from other African countries, including Eritrea and Somalia are held in squalid and severely overcrowded conditions.

Turkey

For many wishing to access protection in the EU, Turkey is where they become stranded. For the thousands of asylum-seekers that arrive in Turkey each year, accessing their rights presents often insurmountable challenges. Asylum-seekers from countries such as Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Afghanistan face serious obstacles in accessing the asylum system both at legal and practical levels.

Turkey is effectively the only state party to the Refugee Convention that does not recognize people from outside Europe as refugees, meaning thousands in need of protection are denied it. Asylum-seekers are often arbitrarily detained for extended periods in poor conditions, and subjected to ill-treatment. Further, forcible returns of individuals from Turkey to countries where they face serious human rights abuses are common.

Many people, seeing no hope of obtaining protection in Turkey, attempt to move on to the EU either by sea or land. For some this journey ends in disaster as they are then pushed back by the Greek authorities, at times with lives lost in the process.

Greece

Due to its geographical position, Greece could play a key role in providing refugee protection. However access to the asylum determination system is a major challenge for asylum-seekers either through being physically pushed back when attempting to access the country or through obstacles in the system.

Currently Greece is attempting to amend domestic law to further restrict protection by eliminating the right to an effective substantive appeal in the asylum system, in breach of international and European law. Furthermore, serious concerns over the detention conditions of asylum-seekers and migrants continue to exist.

On June 11, the European Court for Human Rights ruled unanimously that the Greek authorities violated the rights of a Turkish national seeking refuge in 2007. The court ruled that Greece violated the man's right to be free from torture and inhuman and degrading treatment, as guaranteed under Article 3 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR). This was because of the conditions in the detention centres where he was held. The Court also ruled unanimously that Greece violated his right to liberty and to challenge the legality of his detention guaranteed under Article 5 sections 1 and 4 in the ECHR.

EU

EU Heads of State and Government discussed at their Summit meeting of 18 and 19 June the issue of irregular migration in the Mediterranean. This included measures to relocate within the EU individuals in need of international protection in order to assist Southern EU Member States who are facing "particular pressures". The Summit also discussed measures to "strengthen the capacity" of countries in North-Africa to provide protection to persons in need of it. The European Commission is expected to present a proposal in July on internal relocation from Malta to other EU member states.