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Afghanistan: Refugee returns should not be encouraged

On World Refugee Day (20 June), Amnesty International is urging the international community not to return refugees to Afghanistan while the country remains unsafe and insecure.

After the fall of the Taleban, officials from certain countries, including the United Kingdom and Australia, have indicated that they felt the situation had changed to such an extent that Afghan asylum seekers could return or be returned to the country.

"Afghanistan is far from stable - fighting continues, crime and banditry are rife, women and ethnic groups have been targetted for abuse, and there are thousands of unexploded landmines," the organization said. "While the situation remains fluid, governments should not encourage voluntary repatriation."

Although hundreds of thousands of refugees have returned from Pakistan and Iran, many of them appear to be returning because they are not protected in their countries of asylum and transit. While the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is facilitating these returns, it is not encouraging voluntary repatriation.

"Governments should take the lead from UNHCR. Encouraging returns or forcibly returning refugees at this tender stage in Afghanistan's transition is premature, irresponsible and unsustainable," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about the approach that is being taken by a number of states to refugee returns. The so-called "wave" of asylum seekers in countries such as Australia, Belgium, France, Sweden and the United Kingdom, is but a trickle when compared with the massive displacement from such conflicts as those in Angola, Colombia, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

"Those making decisions on Afghan asylum claims must be bound solely by international standards for protection, rather than any domestic political agenda," Amnesty International urged.

*** On the occasion of World Refugee Day, Amnesty International welcomes the award by UNHCR of the Nansen medal, the highest international accolade for services to refugees, to the Captain of the MV Tampa, Arne Rinnan, who rescued 434 asylum seekers amidst an international standoff between Australia, Indonesia and Norway in late August 2001.*

Background

After more than two decades of armed conflict, Afghanistan is in a process of major transition which does not have the stability or absorption capacity for the promotion of voluntary repatriation, much less non-voluntary return of refugees.

Ethnically targeted attacks against civilians have led to new internal displacement and flows of refugees. Thousands have been seeking safety and assistance in Pakistan and camps for internally displaced persons inside Afghanistan. It is not yet clear how much authority the new Transitional Authority will have in areas outside Kabul. The Interim Administration, which held office from December 2001 until June 2002, had little control outside the capital. Delays in the provision of aid has also reportedly affected the ability of the Afghan government to provide protection and support to vulnerable sections of the population.

Public Document

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