

TURKEY: TURKISH GOVERNMENT SHOULD STOP FORCIBLE EXPULSION OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

The Turkish Government should immediately stop the expulsion of refugees and asylum-seekers to countries where they could face serious human rights violations, Amnesty International said today, as it launched international action to put pressure on the Turkish authorities to respect their obligations under international refugee law.

Under regulations introduced in November 1994, non-Europeans wishing to claim asylum in Turkey must first register with the police within five days of arrival. Failure to do so renders them liable to immediate deportation without scrutiny of their claims.

“It is appalling that the Turkish Government is allowing non-Europeans only five days to register their asylum applications and may be using the provisions of security agreements with other countries to override its responsibilities to those people who are seeking protection,” the organization said. “These vulnerable people should not be made victims.”

Dozens of people have reportedly been forcibly returned as a result of failing to register in time. One such case was Mehrdad Kavoussi, a member of the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran, who was recognized as a refugee by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). He had arrived in Turkey in August 1995 but did not register with the authorities. On 25 April 1996, he went to the police to register, accompanied by a UNHCR lawyer. He was arrested and deported to Iran on the same day, amid fears for his safety. Since then, unconfirmed reports have suggested that he is being detained in Tehran in incommunicado detention. If true, it is feared he is at risk of torture.

The Ankara office of the UNHCR accepts all asylum-seekers for registration regardless of their date of entry to Turkey. This is in recognition that people in flight do not always know what procedural requirements there are, or are in such fear that they will not immediately identify themselves to the authorities. Clearly, a five-day limitation on registering an asylum claim is unreasonable on any accounting.

In some cases, people who failed to comply with these procedures and who were subsequently recognized by UNHCR as refugees and accepted by a third country for resettlement, were denied exit visas by the Turkish authorities. In some such cases, refugees have actually been forcibly returned to their country of origin. UNHCR is in an extremely difficult position given that when asylum-seekers present themselves to the UNHCR office, they are obliged to refer them to the Turkish authorities for registration, even though this may result in the asylum-seeker being detained and deported.

Diplomatic relations between Turkey and Iran have deteriorated recently, culminating in the expulsion of some of each others’ diplomats in April 1996. Since then, reports indicate that the numbers of Iranian refugees forcibly returned have increased. It is feared that Turkey may be

expelling Iranian asylum-seekers and refugees under a security agreement with Iran which reportedly includes the reciprocal exchange of opposition activists.

International standards require that all asylum-seekers be granted access to a full and fair procedure to assess their claims, and that no one be returned to countries where they may risk persecution.
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