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FRY -- Kosovo: the plight of refugees must not be ignored

The exodus of ethnic Albanians trying to flee Kosovo is being hindered by the closure of border crossings into Macedonia and Albania, and now by Serbian police ordering them to turn around and go back, Amnesty International learned today from observers in the area.

These alarming reports follow the proclamation of a "unilateral cease-fire" in Kosovo by Serbian authorities yesterday, and their call on ethnic Albanians fleeing the province to return to their homes.

"Many of those attempting to leave Kosovo -- mainly women, children and elderly people -- had been waiting to cross for up to five days, and are weak from lack of food and exhaustion," Amnesty International said.

"These people urgently need medical attention and have nothing to go back to," the organization added, expressing further concern at reports that the Macedonian authorities are turning back some refugees at the border and sending others to third countries against their will.

"No refugee should be sent to a third country unless it is voluntary, and every effort should be made to keep families together, giving priority to vulnerable people or those with special needs," Amnesty International said.

The organization is calling on the international community to share the responsibility for the refugees' safety and welfare with the neighbouring countries.

"Although several countries -- including Canada, Romania, the United States, Turkey and several member states of the European Union -- have agreed to accept limited numbers of refugees, the places so far offered are only a fraction of the total required," Amnesty International said.

Refugees in Northern Albania have eye-witness tales of systematic extra-judicial executions carried out by security forces and paramilitary groups while forcing people out of their homes in towns and villages. Although the accuracy of such reports is difficult to confirm due to the lack of access for foreign journalists and other international observers, many of them appear credible.

A disproportionate number of those who have succeeded in fleeing the country are women, children and elderly men. Many of those arriving continue to testify that during the expulsion or their flight they were stopped by members of the Serbian police, armed forces or paramilitaries, who separated the men from the women and children.

The men were either detained while the women and children were ordered to continue their journey, or rounded up and taken away. Other refugees have reported being detained and used as human shields by the security forces in clashes with the KLA.

Background

By 6 April there were more than 130,000 refugees in Macedonia. The Macedonian government has said that it can only take 20,000 Kosovar refugees. After briefly closing the border on 3 April, the Macedonian government reopened it but stated that it was prepared to accept further refugees only if they could be sent on to other countries.

On 5 April refugees were flown to countries that have offered to accept them at least on a temporary basis. However, some of them were apparently put on the flights against their will by Macedonian police. Others have been reportedly put on buses or trains and transferred to Albania, which has offered to accept Kosovar refugees without limits, despite the strain on the country's limited resources.

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