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Egypt: End deplorable detention and deportation of refugees from Syria

The Egyptian authorities must end their appalling policy of unlawfully detaining and forcibly returning hundreds of refugees who have fled the armed conflict in Syria, said Amnesty International.

Following the deaths in recent weeks of refugees and asylum-seekers crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa, a short report published by Amnesty International today, ‘We cannot live here any more’: Refugees from Syria in Egypt, throws a spotlight on the tragic consequences of Egypt’s hardline stance towards refugees from Syria. More and more refugees are risking their lives to make the treacherous journey by sea to Europe – often paying smugglers up to US\$3,500 each to make the trip.

“The Egyptian authorities have a duty to provide protection to anyone who has fled the conflict in Syria and is seeking safe refuge in their country. At present Egypt is failing abysmally to meet its international obligations to protect even the most vulnerable refugees,” said Sherif Elsayed Ali, Amnesty International’s Head of Refugee and Migrants’ Rights.

“Instead of offering vital help and support to refugees from Syria the Egyptian authorities are arresting and deporting them, flouting human rights standards. Most refugees lost their homes and livelihoods when they fled Syria. Failing to help and protect them is a stain on the reputation of Egypt and could seriously damage its image as a key stakeholder in the region.”

Hundreds of refugees who fled Syria, including scores of children, many of them without their parents, face ongoing detention in poor conditions or deportation – in some cases separating family members. Amnesty International found two one-year-old twins among the refugees being indefinitely detained.

Several refugees told the organization that they felt compelled to leave Egypt due to the hostile conditions they face in the country.

The Egyptian navy has intercepted around 13 boats carrying refugees from Syria in their attempt to reach Europe. According to the latest figures from the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, 946 people have been arrested by the Egyptian authorities while attempting the crossing and 724 – women, children and men – remain in detention.

In most cases, once arrested people are kept in continued detention under orders of Egypt’s National Security agency, even after the public prosecution has ordered their release.

In one case a nine-year-old boy from Aleppo was arrested on a boat with a family friend. He was detained and denied access to his mother for four days.

Last week 12 people drowned when a boat carrying refugees from Syria sank off the coast of Alexandria. Earlier in October more than 300 people, including several Syrians, died when their vessel capsized trying

to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa.

One woman, interviewed by Amnesty International, whose husband was detained trying to reach Italy said:

“We live without hope as the days go past... All I want is to have my husband back. We want to be settled in any country where we can be safe... [or a] way to leave Egypt so that we don't have to use the sea. We cannot live here anymore.”

During a visit to a police station in Alexandria last week Amnesty International found approximately 40 refugees from Syria unlawfully and indefinitely detained there, including 10 children. The youngest of these were two one-year-old twins who had been held there since 17 September.

Lawyers also told Amnesty International they had been prevented from representing refugees detained in police stations along Egypt's Mediterranean coast. UNHCR does not have access to the detained refugees.

Refugees arrested face a choice between accepting deportation or prolonged and unlawful detention. Dozens of families have been forcibly separated as a result. Lawyers told Amnesty International that in at least two instances refugees were collectively deported back to Damascus, Syria.

“Sending refugees back to a bloody conflict zone is a serious violation of international law. Refugees who have fled are at an obvious risk of human rights abuses,” said Sherif Elsayed Ali.

Most recently a group of 36 mostly Palestinian refugees from Syria were deported to Damascus on 4 October. Many are believed to have been detained at the Palestine Branch of Syrian Military Intelligence in Damascus.

Syrian and Palestinian refugees were accused of being supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and being complicit in political violence in Egypt following the deposition of President Mohamed Morsi on 3 July. They face deep stigma and have been subjected to xenophobic attacks in the media.

In recent months, the Egyptian authorities have also imposed new restrictions on Syrian nationals entering Egypt requiring them to obtain visas and security clearance before they arrive. Amnesty International calls upon countries in the region to keep their borders open to those fleeing the conflict and upon the international community to increase the opportunities for vulnerable refugees to be resettled outside the region.

“Introducing restrictions that effectively seal off borders to refugees fleeing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria sends an entirely wrong message. Egypt should be helping Syrians get back on their feet, not hindering them at every turn,” said Sherif Elsayed Ali.