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Jordan's restrictions on refugees from Syria reveal strain on host countries

International support is needed to help Jordan end border restrictions on refugees fleeing the armed conflict in Syria, said Amnesty International. According to a new report published today hundreds fleeing to Jordan and other neighbouring countries are being turned back at borders.

The report, *Growing restrictions, tough conditions: The plight of those fleeing Syria to Jordan*, highlights the increasing difficulties faced by people who are trying to escape the conflict in Syria to Jordan, as well as other countries. Scores have also been forcibly deported back to Syria. In many cases those allowed to stay struggle to access basic services.

“It is unacceptable that scores of people from Syria, including families with small children seeking refuge from the fighting, are being denied admission by neighbouring countries,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Director of the Middle East and North Africa.

“People fleeing Syria to Jordan and other countries in the region are being hampered by tightening border restrictions. Many of them have already lost everything. Amnesty International urges neighbouring countries to keep their borders open to all individuals fleeing the conflict in Syria. It is also calling on the international community to step up its efforts to help them do so.”

More than two million refugees have fled Syria sparking the worst humanitarian crisis of this decade. Most have found refuge in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. At least a further 4.25 million are displaced inside Syria.

“The influx of refugees has placed an enormous strain on countries in the region. Their resources are understandably stretched. However, this should not be used as an excuse for denying people entry or forcibly returning people to the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Syria,” said Philip Luther.

“The international community has an important role to play in offering support to countries in the region who so far are shouldering the burden of Syria’s refugees with minimal resources. Immediate action is needed to step up international humanitarian aid and resettlement programmes and avert a worsening crisis.”

Despite statements by the authorities that the border has remained open to those fleeing the conflict, research by Amnesty International indicates that at least four categories of people are being denied access to Jordan. This includes Palestinian refugees from Syria, people lacking identity documents and Iraqi refugees living in Syria. Unaccompanied men with no demonstrable family ties in Jordan are also turned away.

In addition, border restrictions imposed by the Jordanian authorities combined with fighting in border areas have left thousands of displaced people indefinitely trapped near the border with Jordan. Families

told Amnesty International that they were turned back by Jordanian border officials. One woman, with six children, said their passports were stamped “return within one month”. She said that she and her children were forced to sleep on the road near the border with about 100 other families. They struggled to survive by eating whatever fruit they could find on nearby trees. After one month of waiting they were still denied entry and were forced to return to a nearby Syrian town.

For those who have been granted entry to Jordan - forced deportation is an additional risk. The Jordanian authorities told Amnesty International that they would not return anyone to Syria. However, in August 2012 some 200 refugees were deported back to Syria by the authorities after protests broke out at Za’atri refugee camp. Information obtained by the organization indicates that scores of other individuals have since been returned.

“Refugees who have fled the conflict in Syria are entitled to international protection. Forcibly returning such individuals to Syria is an appalling violation of human rights standards,” said Philip Luther.

Residents at Za’atri, the largest refugee camp in Jordan hosting some 120,000 Syrian refugees, told Amnesty International that they face difficulty accessing basic services and an adequate standard of living.

Access to clean drinking water, high levels of criminality and poor security were among the biggest challenges cited by refugees living in Za’atri. Only half of the children eligible for school were registered to attend formal education in the camp. Amnesty International met a number of children as young as 12 at the camp who were working to support their families and did not attend school.

Women and girls at Za’atri also said they live in fear of sexual violence or harassment. Many said they were too scared to go to the toilets alone at night for fear of being harassed. Doctors said women at the camp were increasingly developing urinary tract infections from frequently restraining themselves from using the toilets for long periods.

Others reported being approached by Jordanian men looking for “brides”. When prospective brides are young and there may be a perception that as refugees they have an inferior status, ensuing marriages, some of which may be temporary, can place the women at risk of exploitation.

Refugees outside of Za’atri camp also live in precarious conditions.

“The situation for women and children is particularly difficult. Refugees who have fled bombing and shelling must not now continue to live in fear lacking access to the most basic of services they need to live a normal life,” said Philip Luther.