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Statement delivered by Amnesty International Secretary General Irene Khan at symbolic event Cementerio de Santa Lastenia, Canary Islands

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Dozens of unidentified migrants who lost their lives trying to get to European territory through one of the main entry points, the Canary Islands, are buried in this cemetery.

The number of people reaching the Canaries, as well as other southern frontiers like Italy, Cyprus, Malta or Greece, has grown considerably over the last years. Many of them are fleeing poverty and grave human rights violations. Many of them have not made it and have died in the attempt.

Today, in the name of Amnesty International, and its more than 2 million members and supporters around the world, I want to acknowledge this terrible human tragedy and acknowledge the suffering of these people.

And through this tribute I want to remind European governments that just because some persons do not have documents, it does not mean they do not have rights.

Every human being has human rights, regardless of their legal status, but in many cases human rights are being put at risk because of the immigration control policies pursued by European countries.

This is unacceptable.

Everyone has the right to be treated humanely and with dignity. Asylum-seekers fleeing from persecution have the right to seek asylum. Migrants have the right to be treated humanely and with dignity.

Amnesty International recognizes that States, including Spain, have the right to control their borders and the entry of foreigners into its territory, but not at the expense of undermining the human rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

On Wednesday 18 June, European parliamentarians will be taking a very important decision on the return of irregular migrants – voting on a directive which will allow EU countries to detain people who have not committed any crime, including minors, for up to one year and a half.

The proposed directive is unacceptable as an EU standard and I call on all MEPs to vote to reject it. Detention should only be used in very exceptional cases, always for the shortest possible time and must not be prolonged or indefinite. Standards for returns are needed, but we do not they should be at all costs. The directive must include safeguards that ensure that the return of irregular migrants is carried out in a way that respects their fundamental rights.

Europe can do better than this. I strongly urge Members of the European Parliament to refuse the current compromise and make sure effective safeguards are included.

As unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable, the directive should prohibit detention of unaccompanied children and ensure that they are represented by a guardian.

Later today, I will visit the "La Esperanza" centre and meet some such minors. My purpose in doing so will be to draw attention to the vulnerability of young people, and the duty of all governments, including that of Spain, to provide protection for them. Our concerns in this area include reports that the Spanish authorities have deported unaccompanied minors illegally, without taking into account the best interests of the child and other safeguards under international law.

Prioritizing immigration control should not mean turning our backs on the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, a particularly vulnerable and unprotected group.

The EU is a union of value based on democracy and human rights. It must live up to those values and protect the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.

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