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SOUTHEAST ASIA: OTHER GOVERNMENTS SHOULD FOLLOW PHILIPPINES
GOVERNMENT NEW STANCE ON TREATMENT OF FAILED ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Amnesty International is calling on Southeast Asian governments to follow the Philippines Government's commitment to no longer use violent methods to force failed Vietnamese asylum-seekers to return to Viet Nam.

Asylum-seekers who have yet to sign up for voluntary repatriation are being treated ever more harshly across Southeast Asia. The organization has received reports of worsening conditions in the refugee camps as basic services are removed by the authorities.

"People have been shot, beaten, forced to sleep outside without shelter, and have had only partial access to fair refugee status determination procedure," Amnesty International said.

"The decision of the Philippines Government to call a halt to this situation shows there is another way. There is now no excuse for other governments in the region and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) not to follow their lead."

Amnesty International calls on other governments in the region to ensure that measures taken in relation with the Vietnamese asylum-seekers do not lead to ill-treatment.

The recent ill-treatment of failed asylum-seekers during repatriation from the Philippines to Viet Nam is a reminder of the appalling situation in camps across the region as the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) draws to a close.

On 14 February Philippine police clashed violently at Puerto Princesa air base with about 1,000 Vietnamese asylum-seekers who had stormed out of a camp onto the base to prevent the voluntary return to Viet Nam of a group of 84 Vietnamese nationals. The Philippines authorities used water cannons and tear gas to disperse protesting Vietnamese demonstrators as they dragged people across the tarmac onto the plane. Following consultations with the Roman Catholic Church the government announced on Thursday that such methods will no longer be employed against failed asylum-seekers in the country.

"The courageous decision of the Philippines Government to uphold the rights and dignity of failed asylum seekers in keeping with international standards sets a positive precedent in the region."

Since a decision in January by host governments and the UNHCR to ensure that the CPA to deal with the Vietnamese asylum-seekers will end by July 1996, treatment of failed asylum seekers in camps in Southeast Asia has become increasingly harsh, amounting in some cases to ill-treatment.

"Tens of thousands of Vietnamese failed asylum-seekers held in camps across Southeast Asia are being stripped of their dignity and basic rights by governments and other officials anxious to ensure they return to Viet Nam as soon as possible," Amnesty International said.

Tensions have risen throughout 1996, with increasingly desperate measures by the asylum-seekers to prevent their return home being met with violence by the security forces of host governments. Under the terms of the CPA, asylum-seekers who have failed to qualify for refugee status should return voluntarily to Viet Nam. However, thousands are refusing to do so, and some host governments have used increasing levels of force to return these people.

On 18 January, a police raid in the Malaysian camp of Sungei Besi, on Pulau Bidong island, led to violence between camp inmates and police and to the death by gunshot of an inmate reportedly uninvolved in the violence, and the wounding of at least one 15 year-old girl. Dozens of camp inmates allegedly involved in violence were beaten after arrest by police. For several days after the incident, camp inmates were denied access to housing and forced to regroup under rudimentary shelters. On 25 January, inmates returned to the camp from detention in police premises were forced to spend a night outside, with no adequate clothing and no protection from rain.

Education services for the thousands of Vietnamese asylum-seekers who remain in Indonesia's Galang Island camp reportedly ended in late 1995. UNHCR presence and monitoring of camp conditions are reported to have been minimal since the refugee determination process ended at the camp in October 1993.

Asylum-seekers in Thailand's Sikiew camp have reportedly faced incommunicado detention in 1995 if they complained about camp conditions and denial of refugee status. The camp is reported to lack adequate social, medical, food and water services. It was reported in December 1995 that those inmates who refused voluntary repatriation were subjected to worse conditions of detention than others.

Amnesty International understands the financial constraints faced by UNHCR and host governments, and the problems caused by the reluctance of failed asylum-seekers to seek voluntary repatriation. However, the organization believes that the desire of governments and officials to close camps in the region should not take place at the expense of the fundamental human rights of those affected.

"Ill-treatment of failed asylum-seekers either in the camps or during the repatriation process is not acceptable," Amnesty International said.

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