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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL EU OFFICE PRESS RELEASE

EU-AFGHANISTAN: NOT SAFE TO RETURN REFUGEES SAYS AMNESTY EU JHA Council, 8 May 2003

(Brussels 6 May, 2003) As the European Union prepares to launch a major programme this Thursday (EU Justice and Home Affairs Council, Brussels) to repatriate refugees to Afghanistan, Amnesty International calls on the EU to pull back from any plans for the moment. (see: "*Amnesty International Briefing on the EU Return Plan to Afghanistan*" on www.amnesty-eu.org).

Amnesty International experts who have just returned from a mission in Afghanistan report serious concerns about the plight of refugees who have been forced back as well as those who have chosen to return voluntarily.

"Afghanistan is not yet in a post-conflict situation and there is no rule of law. While Amnesty does not oppose the voluntary return of refugees to Afghanistan, the organisation is deeply concerned that forcible returns are made possible by the EU Return Plan to be launched this Thursday," said Dick Oosting.

Amnesty International's mission to Afghanistan reports that:

- There is a total lack of coordination as far as assistance to, and monitoring of returnees, is concerned.
- A deteriorating security situation covering two-thirds of Afghanistan but also affecting Kabul means returnees are often unable to reach their intended destination and are being forced into internal displacement or to flee the country.
- The security situation has led to serious doubts about the capacity of the international community, including the UNHCR, to monitor what is happening to returned refugees. UN agencies and NGOs are frequently forced to withdraw their staff, disrupting reintegration and reconstruction programmes. The latest incident involved the murder of an ICRC staff member.

Amnesty International strongly condemned the UK government's decision to forcibly return a group of asylum seekers to Afghanistan last month. Amnesty International experts have since interviewed in Afghanistan some of the refugees deported from Britain who have described the chaotic situation in which they have been landed.

"The international community, including the European Union, should not be holding Afghanistan's long-term reconstruction and rehabilitation hostage by rushing to return people to an unsustainable situation," said Dick Oosting.

"By pushing ahead with this programme, despite the situation on the ground, the EU will be sending a very negative message to other countries in the region which are hosting the majority of Afghan refugees," he said. "Iran, where two million have found shelter, has started to deport Afghan refugees".

On the humanitarian front, the European Commission itself has predicted that 4.3 million Afghans are facing food shortages over the next 12 months, because of drought, access problems in certain areas, poor infrastructure and lack of purchasing power. "The EU's investment in the reconstruction effort is important, but its policies clearly lack coherence",

said Dick Oosting.

To ensure that a return programme is sustainable in the long run, Amnesty International urges caution on the promotion of voluntary repatriation and warns against any forced returns at this time.

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