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MACEDONIA : HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS ACTION NEEDED NOW TO PROTECT FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

As increasing numbers of refugees flee Macedonia, Amnesty International today urged all parties involved in the continuing conflict to respect the human rights of Macedonian, ethnic Albanian and minority communities.

"Unless action is taken now to protect freedom of movement and allow civilians fleeing the fighting to seek safety, the human rights crisis will deteriorate," Amnesty International said.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) over the last week 18,000 ethnic Albanians have left Macedonia and fled into Kosovo, bringing the total number of ethnic Albanian refugees in Kosovo to an estimated 32,000, while a further 2,500 have fled into the predominantly ethnic Albanian area of southern Serbia.

"The authorities in Macedonia and third countries must ensure that both internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees are granted the rights and protection they are entitled to in accordance with both the international law and the Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement," Amnesty International added.

The organization is further concerned at reports that Macedonian border guards have prevented some male refugees from crossing the border into Kosovo, in violation of the internationally recognized right of every person to leave their country of origin. These rights are protected by the International Covenant on Civil and political Rights and Protocol 4 to the European Convention for the Protection of Human rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Amnesty International is also alarmed at reports of the arbitrary arrest and ill-treatment of international journalists by the Macedonian police, and calls on both the government and the NLA to respect the right to freedom of expression.

In light of the reported call for a general mobilization by Macedonian ministers, the organization appeals to the authorities to respect the right to conscientious objection to military service should such a mobilization be called.

Background

Despite recent negotiations and cease-fire agreements, clashes continue between the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) and the Macedonian police and military forces.

Over the last month the intensity of fighting between the Macedonian army and the NLA, an ethnic Albanian armed political group, has increased. The NLA claims to fight for the equal rights of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia who make up between a quarter and a third of the country's population. Since the first clashes between the NLA and Macedonian police in January 2001, fighting has taken place in the villages of the Shar mountains to the north of the predominantly Albanian town of Tetovo in the west of Macedonia and in the villages around Kumanovo in the north of the country near the border with Kosovo.

In early June 2001 the NLA took over the village of Aracinovo, close to the capital Skopje, and threatened to attack both the capital and the nearby airport. Humanitarian organizations have reported great difficulties in reaching areas where, as a result of the heightened conflict, the civilian population are experiencing shortages of food, water and medicine.

In May 2001, under Western pressure, the Macedonian government was broadened to include both Macedonian and ethnic Albanian opposition parties in a government of national unity which is trying to negotiate a settlement which would meet the Albanian demands for equal social, economic and political rights and offering a limited amnesty to NLA members.

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