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South Africa: grave concern at continuing violence against refugees and migrants

Amnesty International deplores the failure of the police at local and provincial level to protect the safety and property of refugees living in the Siyathemba/Balfour area of Mpumalanga province. Last night, for the second time in less than eight months, refugees and migrants were forced to flee the area after receiving threats. An armed crowd of several hundred looted and damaged their shops and other property, destroying their means of livelihood. At least 134 adults and children, mainly Ethiopian refugees, appear to have been affected by the violence and have sought shelter in safer areas locally or in other provinces.

Despite efforts on Sunday by humanitarian and human rights monitors including Amnesty International, and senior police being alerted to the threatening situation, there appears to have been a significant failure by the provincial police to prevent the violence from escalating.

Among those affected were refugees who were experiencing violence and displacement in South Africa for the third time since 2008. As one of them told Amnesty International, "They told us to go out [of Siyathemba]. They have wrecked our shop. I have lost everything again. I am very scared."

In September 2009 Amnesty International wrote to the Minister of Home Affairs, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, to express concern about threats of violence and verbal abuse against refugees and migrants who had been attacked and displaced in Siyathemba/Balfour during community protests in July that year over local government failures to provide services. Amnesty International was also concerned that the refugees and migrants were being coerced into withdrawing their criminal complaints and to not seek compensation, apparently as a condition for re-integration back into the same community from which they had been expelled.

In a memorandum to the government in August 2009 Amnesty International welcomed President Jacob Zuma's public statement condemning violence against non-nationals and his decision to meet the refugees and migrants who had been displaced during the July protests. The human rights organization acknowledges, as well, that by late 2009 senior police officials at the national level were responding positively to a civil society and UNHCR-led initiative to improve the prevention of and police emergency responses to violence against refugees and other non-nationals.

However, as indicated by the repetition of violence on 7 February 2010 in Siyathemba/Balfour and other large-scale incidents which occurred during 2009, there remains a culture of impunity for crimes against refugees and migrants. There persists also low public awareness of the country's human rights obligations towards refugees and others in need of international protection.

Amnesty International calls on the government to ensure that there is a swift and effective investigation into last night's attacks and the police response to them. Those found responsible for human rights abuses should be brought to justice and the victims fully compensated.

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