

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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The African Commission: Amnesty International's oral statement on internally displaced persons

Amnesty International welcomes the report of the Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Africa and would like to thank him for the important work he is carrying out and encourage him to continue to do so.

We would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of our recent findings pertinent to the mandate of the Special Rapporteur.

Chad

According to recent United Nations estimates, 170,000 Chadians have been forcibly displaced within their own country due to the ongoing armed conflict. In addition, over 30,000 Chadians have sought refuge in Sudan. The internal displacement in Chad has occurred within the context of an existing humanitarian emergency created by the influxes since 2003 of more than 240, 000 Sudanese refugees into the eastern region of Chad .

Women and girls who are able to flee often lose everything -- their homes, crops and sometimes even their husbands, older relatives and children. Living for the most part in IDP sites they are depending, for their survival, on the humanitarian aid they receive. Their precarious new environment offers them little security -- indeed many are at risk of rape and similar such assaults, specifically outside the IDP sites when they go out to find firewood and other resources for their families. The alleged perpetrators of these abuses include all the armed elements operating in eastern Chad, namely Chadian and Sudanese armed opposition movements, the Sudanese militia known as the Janjawid from Darfur, and members of the Chadian national army.

In June 2007, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that in IDP sites the mortality rate was double the emergency threshold and that almost one child in five was suffering from acute malnutrition. At around the same time, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that, given the poor quality of shelter and lack of access to clean water, there was a serious risk of malaria and diarrhea epidemics.

Central African Republic (CAR)

There has been mass displacement of the population in northern Central African Republic (CAR). Tens of thousands of northern CAR citizens have fled to neighboring countries, and several hundred thousand others have been internally displaced as a result of the insecurity prevailing in the region. The people are fleeing from the armed conflict between government forces and armed political groups, as well as from armed bandits who abduct mainly children for ransom.

More than 50,000 people have fled to southern Chad and over 26,000 have crossed to Cameroon, while several thousand have fled from north-eastern CAR to Sudan. The refugees in southern Chad have limited access to healthcare and other humanitarian assistance. During their visit to refugee camps in southern Chad in May 2007, Amnesty International delegates learned that refugees were receiving only 8.4kg of maize meal flour, a few hundred grams of salt and a cupful of oil per month per person from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In many cases, refugees had to sell some of their meager supply of maize meal flour to buy vegetables to eat with the maize meal. By the start of August 2007, CAR refugees in Cameroon had no access to humanitarian assistance and were largely surviving on assistance provided by the local Cameroonian population and by selling the animals they had been able to flee with.

Over 200,000 people are internally displaced in northern CAR. The internally displaced persons (IDPs)

have had to abandon their homes, food reserves and other property, which are often looted or destroyed by government soldiers, armed groups or armed bandits. The displaced people have limited access to humanitarian assistance, and succumb to exposure and lack of medical care when they try to survive in the wild.

Sudan

IDPs

In Darfur the number of IDPs continues to increase -- from the beginning of the year till the end of August 250,000 people were displaced, some for a second, third or fourth time. The Sudanese Armed Forces continues to bomb and attack civilian areas. In May and June 2007 more than 2,500 people made a 10-day trek to the Central African Republic after the government and Janjawid attacked Daffaq in South Darfur. Civilians are also displaced in attacks by the fragmented armed opposition groups on each other and also in those caused by internal fighting between different ethnic groups. Some of the worst ethnic fighting has been between Arab groups, such as the northern Rizeigat and the Tarjem, who have joined the Janjawid and been heavily armed and incorporated into paramilitary forces by the government. Darfur has become awash with arms from government and other sources and with the fragmentation of armed opposition groups, often into factions based on ethnic groups, the IDP camps are becoming militarized and divided and increasingly dangerous.

Refugees

Hundreds of Ethiopian refugees, some with refugee status confirmed by UNHCR, were rounded up in Sudan during June and July. Some had lived as refugees in Sudan since the 1970s; others arrived more recently, during the 1990s. In Ethiopia they were in danger of detention and torture; nevertheless, at least 15 of those detained in Sudan were forcibly returned to Ethiopia in September. Those forcibly returned were reportedly handed into the custody of Ethiopian security personnel and their present whereabouts are unknown.

One of those who was handed to Ethiopian security forces was Atanaw Wasie, aged 74, who suffers from chronic asthma. Atanaw Wasie was a political opponent of the Dergue who has lived in Sudan for more than 20 years. He was arrested in July in the town of Gedaref in Sudan, and forcibly returned from Sudan on 27 September. His family has searched for him and requested information on his whereabouts from the Ethiopian authorities without success. On 11 October UNHCR condemned the deportation of 15 Ethiopian refugees, and said that Khartoum had not responded to its requests for information.

The above highlighted cases require a strong and effective legal framework and implementation mechanism to ensure that governments and other members of the international community take seriously their obligations towards refugees and IDPs. Amnesty international therefore urges the African Commission to support the adoption of a new regional legal framework focusing on the rights of IDPs, based on the Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement which have already been endorsed by the African Commission.