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PANAMA: AUTHORITIES SHOULD NOT RESUME FORCED REPATRIATION OF REFUGEES TO COLOMBIA

Amnesty International is urgently calling on the Panamanian authorities not to return the approximately 300 Colombian refugees who have fled to Panama over the last month to escape political violence in north-west Colombia.

According to reports, the Panamanian and Colombian authorities plan to forcibly return the refugees to Colombia this week, in violation of Panama's international obligations. A number of refugees have already been transported closer to the border as part of the deportation process .

"We are outraged by the indifference of the Panamanian authorities, who openly admit that they have no idea what will happen to the refugees if repatriated back to the region they originally fled from, where political violence is rife," Amnesty International said. "Relocating refugees to other regions is not a feasible solution as they will still face a serious threat to their lives."

The Panamanian authorities repatriated 88 refugees, mainly women and children, to Colombia with the cooperation of the Colombian Air Force in November 1996. Although the Colombian authorities guaranteed the refugees' safety, on their return they were housed in the *Hogar Juvenil de Apartadó*, Apartadó's Children's Home, where they reportedly had to live in cramped and unsanitary conditions. There is also a high level of paramilitary violence in the rural and urban areas of Apartadó and one of the returned refugees has reportedly since been murdered.

"If the Panamanian authorities insist on carrying out their threat the safety of repatriated refugees can in no way be guaranteed given the present level of violence in North-west Colombia," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organisation implores the Panamanian authorities not to deport anyone back to a country where they would be at risk of serious human rights violations, which would be a grave violation of the country's international obligations. "Panama should recognize that these people are refugees fleeing political violence and should ensure that they receive protection against *refoulement*," Amnesty International said.

Humanitarian and church organizations in both Panama and Colombia have called for the refugees to be allowed to remain in Panama and to be housed in a permanent camps to replace the temporary shelters where they are presently living.

Groups of peasant farmer residents of Riosucio and Unguía of the Colombian jungle province of Chocó started crossing the border into the Darién province of Panama in March, seeking refuge from the sharp increase in violence between leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups and the military in the region, according to reports received by Amnesty International.

The violence has caused an estimated 11,000 farmers to flee their homes in the area in the last four months. Except for the approximate 300 farmers who undertook the extremely dangerous walk to the border with Panama, the rest are displaced internally within North-west Colombia. Authorities in the already overstretched Colombian provinces of Chocó and Antioquia have publicly recognized that they do not know what they will do with the refugees in Panama should they be returned.

The Panamanian authorities halted deportations back to Colombia in November 1996 following international appeals and UNHCR requests. Amnesty International strongly urges the Panamanian authorities not to reinitiate such deportations and to afford refugees effective and durable protection.

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