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RABAT CONFERENCE: TACKLE CAUSES, NOT PEOPLE

(Brussels/Madrid, 7 July 2006) A long term, human rights-based policy is urgently needed to resolve the humanitarian crisis of irregular migration to Europe, says Amnesty International ahead of the Rabat Conference on Migration and Development.

In a press conference today in Madrid, the human rights organisation presented a set of concerns and recommendations, including fresh findings from an investigative mission to the Canary Islands. (**Amnesty International's Statement available at www.amnesty-eu.org**)

Amnesty International remains deeply concerned about the disrespect for basic rights of migrants in Europe and northern Africa, as well as the obstacles faced by refugees seeking protection.

“Spanish authorities are assuming that most people arriving in the Canary Islands are economic migrants, making possible refugees invisible”, said Itziar Ruiz-Giménez, expert on migration of Amnesty International’s Spanish Section.

“Adequate mechanisms have to be put in place to identify people who would be a risk of being sent back to a situation of danger”, she added.

The human rights organization also deplores the violence that migrants continue to face. The recent deaths of three unarmed civilians in Melilla demonstrate that behind the political declarations of good faith and humanitarian concerns, the overriding aim remains to keep people out at almost any cost.

As host of the Conference, Morocco has special responsibility to carry out an independent and thorough investigation into this week’s deaths of three migrants at the border with the Spanish enclave of Melilla and to ensure that proper safeguards are put in place to prevent excessive use of force by security forces charged with combating irregular migration.

Amnesty International believes that in order for this Conference to fulfil its self-proclaimed aims of going past the rhetoric and laying the basis for an authentic cooperation, it needs to seriously address the causes that are making people flee and not just the ways to stop them from entering Europe.

“The politically correct statements that are generated by these kinds of events can no longer hide that there is a deep divide between Europe’s repressive immigration agenda and Africa’s interest in increasing development aid and opening legal channels of migration; with inevitable human rights consequences”, said Dick Oosting, Director of Amnesty International’s EU Office, at the press conference in

Madrid.

“We challenge the participants of this Conference to break the current deadlock. The EU and its Member States must abandon the illusion that it is possible to stop people with ever tougher controls, and develop an immigration strategy that offers the prospect of real solutions, with the basic rights of migrants and refugee protection at its core”, added Oosting.

Amnesty International concerns at Spanish southern border

In its mission to the Canary Islands in mid-June, Amnesty International representatives visited Tenerife, to assess the situation of thousands of people from Sub-Saharan Africa that recently arrived in the island.

“Amnesty International observed a lack of effective legal assistance as well as lack of access of specialised organisations that could provide legal aid. There were also no adequate interpretation services in African languages”, said Itziar Ruiz-Giménez.

“This results in a serious lack of information and knowledge by the migrants on their administrative and legal situation, their right to apply for asylum and what might be their next destination,” she added.

For further comment/background and interviews:

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