

PUBLIC

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UA 67/99 Protection of asylum seekers

6 April 1999

FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA **Ethnic Albanian refugees in the
Former Yugoslav Republic of
Macedonia**

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of ethnic Albanian refugees trying to flee from Kosovo to Macedonia, after reports that the Macedonian authorities are turning back some refugees at the border, and sending others to third countries against their will.

Huge numbers of ethnic Albanian refugees expelled from their homes or fleeing in fear are waiting at Blace on the Macedonian side of the border with Kosovo, in appalling conditions, short of food, water, and sanitation. Several have died. NATO forces stationed in Macedonia have erected three transit camps, and people are now being transferred to them from Blace, but the situation for those who remain, and those waiting to cross from Kosovo, is still desperate. There have been several reports that the Macedonian government has refused or restricted access to international humanitarian organizations seeking to assist those gathered at Blace.

Although there are already more than 120,000 refugees in Macedonia, with an estimated 70,000 at the border waiting to enter, the Macedonian government has said that it can only take 20,000 Kosovar refugees. After briefly closing the border on 3 April, the Macedonian government reopened it but stated that it was prepared to accept further refugees only if they could be sent on to other countries. Although several countries have agreed to accept limited numbers of refugees, among them Canada, Romania, the United States, Turkey and several member states of the European Union, the places so far offered are only a fraction of the total required.

On 5 April the Macedonian authorities began flying refugees to countries that have offered to accept them. However, some of the refugees transferred in this way were apparently put on the flights against their will by Macedonian police. Any transfers should be voluntary, with every effort made to keep families together, giving priority to vulnerable people or those with special needs. There are also credible reports that those attempting to cross the border at points other than designated border crossings have been refused entry by Macedonian soldiers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the beginning of NATO air attacks on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on 24 March, Yugoslav security forces have intensified their efforts to forcibly expel ethnic Albanians from their homes. On 5 April the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that 390,000 Kosovars had fled to neighbouring states, while hundreds of thousands more have been internally displaced and are seeking to leave.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/letters in English, German, French or Russian or your own language:

- welcoming the measures already taken by the Macedonian government to assist refugees, but asking them to let the asylum-seekers waiting at the border into the country;

- urging the Macedonian government not to transfer refugees to third countries against their will;
- reminding the Macedonian government of their international obligations not to forcibly return those seeking asylum at their borders, including asylum seekers seeking to enter at points that are not officially designated border crossings;
- asking the government to cooperate with, and provide access to, international humanitarian organisations.

APPEALS TO:

1) Minister of Foreign Affairs
Aleksandar Dimitrov
Ministerstvo za odnosi so stranstvo
Dame Gruev 4
91000 Skopje, FYR Macedonia
Fax: +389 91 115 790
Salutation: Dear Minister

2) Minister of Internal Affairs
Pavle Trajanov
Ministerstvo za vnatrešni raboti
ul. Dim...e Mir...ev bb
91000 Skopje, FYR Macedonia
Fax: +389 91 112 468 or 116 051
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 30 April 1999.