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EU COUNTRIES COMPROMISING GLOBAL REFUGEE PROTECTION BY ABANDONING THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES AT EU BORDERS, SAYS AMNESTY

(Brussels, Tuesday 11 October 2005) European Union countries are increasingly abandoning their responsibilities to protect refugees in an effort to combat "illegal immigration", as the recent tragic events near the Spanish enclaves in North Africa show, Amnesty International said today in an Open Letter to the UK Presidency of the EU.

(See "EU Member States threatening the integrity of the international refugee protection system - Amnesty International Open Letter to the UK Presidency" on <http://www.amnesty-eu.org>)

The human rights organisation said not only was the direction of EU policy ill-guided, but individual countries such as Spain may be guilty of breaking their own EU and international commitments.

In its Open Letter addressed to the UK Home Secretary Charles Clarke, Amnesty International calls for a radical rethink of EU refugee policy as EU Justice and Home Affairs ministers prepare to meet in Luxembourg tomorrow to discuss the new concept of "regional protection programs" which are supposed to enhance refugee protection in host and transit countries.

"Rather than enhancing refugee protection in the world, the overall direction of EU policy appears to be far more geared towards keeping people out of the EU at all costs," Dick Oosting, Director of Amnesty International's EU Office said.

Faced with a series of ongoing humanitarian crises on EU territory - in the Spanish enclaves in North Africa, and in Italy and Malta - EU countries have launched joint actions to deal with irregular immigration. But Amnesty International says very little collective effort is being shown to ensure refugee protection at the same time, and EU proposals released so far fail to adequately address root causes.

The organisation calls on EU governments to take immediate steps to implement such refugee protection measures, and adequate solidarity mechanisms to relieve the pressure on Spain and other EU countries which are facing these challenges.

"The present dire situation in North Africa, where people trying to gain entry to EU territory are reportedly being shot dead, or even dumped in the desert without food or water, relates directly to pressure exerted by EU countries to strengthen fortress Europe," Dick Oosting said.

“Shamefully, EU Member States are shifting the burden of refugee protection to other countries which may be ill-equipped to deal with the ever increasing numbers of displaced people. In the process, international commitments to humane treatment and the principle of 'non-refoulement' are being violated. The overall effect is not only to strain the EU's own credibility, but to threaten the very integrity of the international refugee protection system.”

For further comment/background and interviews:

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