

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: MDE 12/014/2008 (Public)

Date: 20 June 2008

Egypt: Amnesty International calls for President to stop flights to possible torture in Eritrea

Amnesty International wrote today to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak calling on him to urgently intervene to stop any further forcible returns of Eritrean asylum-seekers from Egypt back to Eritrea and to ensure that Egypt honours its commitment to allow a meaningful access to the asylum-seekers by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Egypt.

Asylum-seekers returned to Eritrea are at risk of torture and other ill-treatment, particularly those who have fled from compulsory military service. Amnesty International urges the Egyptian authorities to heed the calls made on 19 June 2008 by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour to stop the forcible returns and by UNHCR requesting unhindered access to all asylum-seekers currently in custody.

Since 11 June 2008 the Egyptian authorities forcibly returned up to 1,000 asylum seekers to Eritrea, and further deportations are expected. Among those returned were some 400 Eritrean asylum-seekers who, according to Egyptian security sources, were deported from Cairo International airport on Egypt Air flights to Asmara, on 18 June 2008. The deportees included 35 men and 30 women who had been detained in Qanater prison, south of Cairo, and who were reportedly beaten by prison officers on 17 June, as they tried to resist their deportation. They were then forced into trucks of the Ministry of Interior and driven to the airport. Security forces escorted all deportees and forced them into an Egypt Air airplane. Some reportedly attempted to escape but failed.

Amnesty International is concerned that those deported were not given access to the UNHCR in Egypt to assess their protection needs, and are reported to have been subjected to ill-treatment during their transfer to the airport.

The organization reminded the Egyptian President that these forcible returns of Eritrean asylum-seekers to Eritrea go against assurances made by the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 15 June 2008 that UNHCR office in Egypt would be granted access to the Eritreans to assess their asylum claims. The same night it was reported that about 90 Eritrean asylum-seekers were deported from Aswan airport to Eritrea.

Amnesty International has already expressed its concerns to the Egyptian authorities with regard to some 700 Eritrean asylum-seekers who have been deported since 11 June 2008 from Aswan airport on specially chartered Egypt Air flights to Massawa airport, in Eritrea.

In its letter to the President of Egypt, Amnesty International reminded Egypt of its obligation not to deport Eritrean asylum-seekers to Eritrea where they would be at risk of torture and other forms of persecution. Such deportations are prohibited by the principle of *non-refoulement*, as recognized in the

UN Convention against Torture, the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, to which Egypt is a state party; as such, they constitute violations of Egypt's obligations under international law.

Public Document

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