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## **ITALY: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPEATS ITS CALL TO PROTECT ALBANIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS**

Amnesty International is alarmed at reports that the Italian Government has forcibly returned almost 300 asylum-seekers to Albania, and is calling on the Italian authorities to ensure that they do not reject asylum-seekers at their borders.

"No one should be returned to a country where they have no recourse to the protection of a government. Given the current chaos in Albania, all Albanian asylum seekers should be given protection," Amnesty International said on the day it launched its global campaign on refugees.

European Union delegates returning today from a fact-finding mission described the Albanian police and security infrastructure as "in shambles".

The organization has previously called on all governments in the region and the international community to ensure effective assistance to neighbouring countries and to share responsibility for hosting the Albanian refugees equitably.

The Italian Government declared a state of emergency today to respond to more than 10,000 Albanian asylum seekers who have fled to its shores, which will allow aid and temporary protection to be offered to the asylum-seekers. Residency permits, however, will only be issued to the most vulnerable for up to 60 days, with renewals only allowed for a maximum 30 days.

"Time alone cannot be a criteria for ending protection," Amnesty International said. "The situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina has shown that temporal benchmarks alone cannot determine whether a person will be safe. Protection should be given to Albanian asylum seekers for as long as the situation requires."

The Italian Government also announced that Albanians who were considered dangerous to public security would be "kicked out" immediately. Some 1,000 prisoners escaped or were released from prisons in Albania amidst the unrest; those with less than two years remaining of their sentence were pardoned by presidential decree on 16 March 1997.

Amnesty International is calling on the Italian Government to ensure that asylum seekers are not summarily excluded from protection. Italy must respect the principle of *non refoulement*, which includes non rejection at the frontier and returning people to a country where they would be at risk of serious human rights violations.

"We have launched our campaign on refugees to remind the world that refugees are real people with real fears -- people who have had to take the terrible decision to leave their homes, their communities and their countries because they are in real fear of their lives," Amnesty International said. "The situation of Albanian refugees highlights the urgency of addressing the issue of protecting those at risk."

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Amnesty International is urging the Italian Government to abide by its international obligations towards refugees and asylum seekers, most importantly, the internationally recognised principle of *non refoulement*.

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