



Thursday 26 July, 2007

UNHCR deplores reported forced return of 135 Iraqis by Turkey

GENEVA – The UN refugee agency is deeply concerned at reports that the Turkish authorities forcibly returned 135 Iraqis to their home country earlier this week. Some individuals among the group reportedly expressed their wish to apply for asylum in Turkey. Given the current situation in Iraq, UNHCR is extremely concerned for the safety of these people. No information is currently available on their whereabouts.

The 135 were apprehended in Urla, Izmir, earlier this month as part of a larger group of some 500 people - most of them Iraqis, Palestinians, Sri Lankans and Afghans - who were about to depart Turkey irregularly.

UNHCR understands some of those deported had made an asylum claim. If this is confirmed, the deportations would be a clear violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*, under which no refugee or asylum seeker whose case has not yet been properly assessed, can be forcibly returned to a country where their life or liberty may be at risk. *Refoulement* is explicitly prohibited by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and it is also contrary to international customary law.

In addition to seeking urgent clarification from Turkey on the events surrounding the deportation, and further information on the fate of the deportees, UNHCR has also sought assurances that in the future, persons in need of international protection will be treated in full respect of Turkey's international and national legal obligations.

At the same time, UNHCR requests the Turkish government to admit into the asylum procedure the claims of those persons among the remaining group who have expressed a fear to return to their country of origin. UNHCR is pleased that Turkey has agreed to conduct an initial joint screening exercise with UNHCR to identify those in the group who may wish to apply for asylum.

On 18 December 2006, UNHCR issued an advisory on the international protection needs of Iraqis outside Iraq, which was shared with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey.

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In the advisory, UNHCR notes the overall situation in Iraq can be characterized as one of generalized violence and one in which massive, targeted violations of human rights are prevalent. In light of this situation, UNHCR recommended that no Iraqi from southern or central Iraq should be forcibly returned to Iraq until such time as there is substantial improvement in the security and human rights situation in the country. UNHCR, in particular, advises against returns to the three Northern Governorates (Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk) of persons not originating from there.

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