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Jordan: Stop forcible transfer of Syrian refugees to a no-man's land in the desert

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Jordanian authorities have on August 10 forcibly transferred at least 16 Syrian refugees, including eight children aged between four and 14, to an informal camp in a no man's land located in the desert between Syria and Jordan, said Amnesty International today.

“ Forcibly detaining and transferring refugees is a clear violation of their rights to liberty and to freedom of movement, and sending them to the berm violates their rights to an adequate standard of living and to health. ”

Marie Forestier

The informal [Rukban](#) camp is located in an isolated and inhospitable border area known as “[the berm](#)”. Its 10,000 residents lack access to sufficient and affordable food, clean water, medical care and sanitation. These conditions led one family who had been transferred by the Jordanian

authorities to return to Syria in desperation. And one 21-year old refugee removed from Jordan was forcibly transferred from the berm to an area controlled by the Syrian government.

“Forcibly detaining and transferring refugees is a clear violation of their rights to liberty and to freedom of movement, and sending them to the berm violates their rights to an adequate standard of living and to health. The conditions in the informal camp in Rukban are so dire that some refugees sent there have even opted to return to Syria, where their lives are at risk,” said Marie Forestier, Amnesty International’s Researcher on Refugee and Migrant Rights.

“We are urging the authorities in Jordan to put an end to forcible transfers immediately. They must ensure that all those transferred are allowed to re-enter Jordan safely. They also must ensure that all the camp’s residents have access to essential goods and services, including by urgently permitting unrestricted access to humanitarian aid.”

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Amnesty International spoke with two men who were deported to the camp along with their families, as well as two camp community leaders, a nurse, a female patient and a staff member at an international humanitarian organization.

Forced transfer without notification or reason

Houssam*, a 49-year old man from Deraa province, and Bassam*, a father from Hama, were transferred to the camp on 10 August along with their wives and respectively their five and three children. They told Amnesty International that Jordanian General Security forces arrested them at night in Azraq camp, a Syrian refugee camp in Azraq governorate, where they had been living for about five years, without notifying them of the reason and not allowing them to take any belongings with them.

Bassam said General Security agents questioned him about his family and particularly his 19-year-old son, who had been stealing materials used in building caravans in the camp. Houssam said that General Security agents confiscated his family’s Jordanian residency card.

On 10 August, General Security agents took Houssam’s son out of prison, where he had been detained for two weeks for alleged theft, and deported him together with his family, Bassam and his family, and two other men, to the “berm” by bus. Houssam and Bassam told Amnesty International that they did not have access to legal assistance, which meant they could not challenge their transfer and still did not know the reason for it.

Houssam and Bassam arrived with their families in the berm without any belongings and no money to buy food or water.

"Either you go to a regime-controlled area [under the control of the Syrian government], or you die here from hunger because the situation is so bad," Bassam said.

"We are literally sitting on the ground. We have no blanket to cover us at night, no pillow, no warm clothes. Everything is very expensive, it is very hard to get food," Houssam said.

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In addition to the 16 people forcibly transferred on 10 August, another two Syrian families were also transferred to the berm in late July, but Amnesty International was unable to establish whether this return was voluntary or involuntary.

Forced to return to a government-controlled area in Syria

Two community leaders in the berm told Amnesty International that one of the two Syrian families who was sent to the berm in July immediately returned to a government-controlled area in Syria, despite fears of being subjected to human rights violations, because of the camp's appalling conditions.

"Forcibly transferring refugees to a place where they are at risk of serious human rights violations or abuses amounts to *refoulement*, which is prohibited under international law. Moreover, the fact that these transfers subsequently pushed people to return to Syria, from where they had fled, underscores just how unbearable life is in the berm," said Marie Forestier.

" The Jordanian government must abide by its international obligations, including the duty to abide by the principle of non-refoulement. "

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"The Jordanian government must abide by its international obligations, including the duty to abide by the principle of *non-refoulement*."

Deporting people during a global pandemic also risks spreading COVID-19, especially since there is no quarantine space in the informal Rukban camp of 10,000 people. While Jordanian security officers took the temperatures of Syrians before transferring them, refugees said, this measure is insufficient to contain the spread of the virus. At the same time the medical facilities in the berm are wholly inadequate.

The deadly consequence of a lack of health care

Last May, Amnesty International [called](#) on the Jordanian authorities to allow residents of the berm to access medical facilities in Jordan. However, to date, residents of the “berm” seeking medical treatment are denied entry to Jordan, putting their health and sometimes their lives at risk.

On 2 September, a woman gave birth to a still-born baby in the camp. A nurse in the informal Rukban camp suspected the death to be a result of a lack of amniotic fluid due to potable water shortages in the camp. The woman told Amnesty International that she could not afford sufficient bottled water.

Both the Syrian and Jordanian governments must urgently ensure unfettered access to humanitarian aid to the berm which has been stopped for a year.

Amnesty International also continues to call on the international community to significantly increase resettlement commitments for Syrian refugees from Jordan, and to provide substantial financial assistance to the Jordanian authorities to support their efforts to host refugees.

* Names have been changed in order to protect their identity.

Background

In early 2015, tens of thousands of people seeking safety from the conflict in Syria ended up stranded in the no-man's land known as the berm, between the Jordan and Syria border, near the Rukban and Hadalat crossings. An estimated 75 per cent of the berm's population have returned to Syria since mid-2015, according to the UN. At the time of writing, at least 10,000 people remain there.

In March 2020, Jordan announced it would not allow relief aid to pass through its territory to deliver assistance and medical equipment to the camp, citing COVID-19 concerns. This is still the situation over six months later. The last humanitarian convoy allowed into the berm by the Syrian government dates back to September 2019.

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