

UNHCR Calls on Israel to Halt Policy of Relocating African Refugees



Geneva, January 10 (RHC)-- The United Nations refugee agency has called on Israeli authorities to scrap a new program that forces thousands of African refugees out of the occupied territories. William Spindler, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said in a press briefing in the Swiss city of Geneva that the program was not "coherent" and "has been implemented not in a very transparent manner."

"We are again appealing to Israel to halt its policy of relocating Eritreans and Sudanese to sub-Saharan Africa," Spindler said. "Official statements that the plans may eventually target families and those with pending asylum claims, or that asylum seekers might be taken to the airport in handcuffs, are particularly alarming." Spindler said some 27,000 Eritreans and 7,700 Sudanese lived in Israel, but authorities there had only granted refugee status to 11 since 2009.

In Europe, Eritreans have a very high rate of recognition as refugees fleeing war or persecution, the UNHCR spokesman said. "So we would expect that among them, many would qualify for refugee status." He added: "What we would like to see in Israel, and we are willing to help in that respect, is to find legal alternatives for these people, through resettlement in other countries."

Elsewhere in his remarks, Spindler said over the past two years, the UNHCR had interviewed 80 Eritrean refugees in Rome who arrived in Italy after a hazardous journey across Africa following their departure from Israel to Rwanda. “Along the way, they suffered abuse, torture and extortion before risking their lives once again by crossing the Mediterranean to Italy.”

Israel made arrangements to send the Sudanese and Eritrean migrants to Rwanda and Uganda over concerns that they may face danger if they return home. The plan was widely criticized when it was first unveiled last year. In early January, Israel started the implementation of its plan to force an estimated 38,000 African migrants out of the occupied territories, threatening to detain those who refuse to leave.

Large numbers of African refugees started coming to Israel though Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula in 2007. Those arrested at the Egyptian border were jailed in the Negev desert in southern Israel. On release, the refugees settled in an area south of Tel Aviv, but their presence caused harsh criticism among Israeli residents in southern Tel Aviv and right-wing politicians.

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