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Worrying reports about Uzbekistan expelling refugees to Kyrgyzstan

Amnesty International is concerned about reports that on 22 June, Uzbekistani authorities started to forcibly remove refugees located on the territory of the cotton factory in the Pakhtaabad district of Andizhan region to Kyrgyzstan.

The organization was told that camp officials and security forces reportedly forced refugees onto two buses. They allegedly referred to an agreement between local authorities in Uzbekistan and the governor of the Jalal-Abad region in Kyrgyzstan about returning refugees.

Refugees remaining in the Pakhtaabad district told Amnesty International that they had not been alerted or informed about such an agreement and were scared of what they might face if forcibly returned to Kyrgyzstan. Reports about raids by Kyrgyzstani security forces, including using excessive use of force, and clashes over the removal of barricades set up last week to protect Uzbek neighbourhoods and villages have aggravated fears amongst refugees. Moreover, many of them have no home to go back to. According to satellite images assessed by the UN Institute for Training and Research, 1,807 buildings in Osh have been “totally destroyed” and others have been severely damaged.

On 23 June, one of the leaders of a group of refugees from Bazar-Korgan in Kyrgyzstan told Amnesty International that he was among large numbers of refugees making their way to the border: “The governor of Jalal-Abad Region visited the camps in Pakhtaabad yesterday and told the refugees that everyone has to return to Kyrgyzstan by 25 June. Many of us don't want to go, we fear for our lives, but we have no choice.”

An estimated 400,000 people, both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, fled their homes following the violence in Osh, Jalal-Abad and surrounding areas which erupted on 10 June. About 100,000, mainly Uzbek women, children and the elderly, have sought refuge in neighbouring Uzbekistan before the country closed its borders on 14 June. About 300,000 were internally displaced within Kyrgyzstan.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on 23 June could not confirm the numbers of refugees returning from Uzbekistan and whether these returns were voluntary or forced but said that they were receiving reports of large numbers returning.

The governor of Jalal-Abad region, Bektur Asanov, who visited refugee camps in the Andizhan region in Uzbekistan on 22 June, was quoted by media as stating that he “can guarantee... that hopefully everything will be good” and that people whose houses were burned down or destroyed would receive compensation.

However, the security situation in southern Kyrgyzstan remains volatile and unstable, amidst reports that the interim government is not in full control of its security forces. The European Union's Special Representative to Central Asia warned on 23 June that violence could flare up again and spread from the south of Kyrgyzstan. The interim government nevertheless has announced its decision to go ahead with a referendum on a new constitution on 27 June and has said that mobile ballot boxes would be provided in areas affected by the violence. The

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has withdrawn 300 election monitors because of security concerns.

The Uzbekistani authorities should therefore refrain from forcibly removing, coercing or persuading refugees from Kyrgyzstan to return until they can do so in safety and dignity.

Amnesty International is also concerned that encouragement by the Kyrgyzstani interim government for refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their homes is premature as Kyrgyzstani security forces do not appear to be able to ensure the safety and security of these persons. Confidence building measures by the Kyrgyzstani interim government should include an invitation to a team of international investigators to start urgent impartial, independent and thorough investigations into the human rights violations and abuses committed during the recent violence. This would send a clear signal of the authorities' willingness to provide accountability for killings, lootings and other human rights abuses in an independent and unbiased way, regardless of the ethnic origin or the affiliation of alleged perpetrators.

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