



Press Release

UNHCR-GSO AGREEMENT FAILS TO PROTECT REFUGEES IN LEBANON

Beirut, March 20, 2008, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-General Security Office (GSO) Agreement fails to recognize and protect Iraqi refugees from detention and refoulement, Frontiers and FIDH said.

Under a new agreement between the UNHCR and GSO reached on February 14, 2008, GSO will allot Iraqi refugees a one-time, three-month grace period to regularize their status or leave Lebanon. The agreement was intended to address the hundreds of Iraqi refugees currently in indefinite detention for “illegal” entry.

However despite the flurry of press releases, the agreement is an empty gesture. It has no novel provisions and does not even acknowledge that refugees have a right to non-refoulement and to freedom from arrest and detention. The only novelty is that UNHCR has committed itself to pay the 950000LL (US\$ 630) fines for illegal entry to GSO in return for their “conditional” release.

Under this agreement, Iraqi refugees (like all illegal migrants) will have only three months to regularize their status. To do so, unless they have Lebanese spouses or parents or school enrollment, they must find sponsors, obtain work authorization, pay a \$300 residency fee, present proof of a \$1000 bank deposit, and shoulder other costs such as medical tests and insurance. Many, if not most, refugees will not be able to meet these conditions, particularly in the mere three months allotted them. Even those who succeed in finding a work sponsor and the funds to obtain a work permit and residency will remain at their employers’ mercy, vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Following this agreement, GSO issued on 18 February 2008 a grace period for all illegal migrants to regularize their legal status in the country or leave. According to reports, so far GSO has released only around 70 Iraqi detainees. Other releases are expected to follow for those whose sentences have long expired. However, considering that the releases are carried out on a case by case basis, the administrative routine to complete the formalities for the releases is further prolonging the refugees’ arbitrary detention.

The UNHCR-GSO agreement is nothing new. GSO has periodically issued general grace periods for all illegal migrants, most recently in 2007. It does so mainly because the prisons are overcrowded, not out of legal or humanitarian concerns.

Indeed, the agreement will not protect refugees and will not bring Lebanon into compliance with international law. There is nothing in the agreement that recognizes the special legal status of refugees, as opposed to other migrants.

Iraqi refugees, like all refugees, have a right to real protection, not empty gestures. Frontiers and FIDH call on the Lebanese government to adhere to UNHCR’s refugee policy that Iraqis are entitled to *prima facie* refugee status. Iraqis are therefore entitled to temporary residence, non-refoulement and basic rights such as shelter, food, education and health care. More broadly, Frontiers and FIDH urge the government to adopt legislation regulating asylum. Frontiers and FIDH ask UNHCR for further negotiating with the government to achieve these necessary measures.