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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[9 February 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Palestinian Refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic in Thailand

Overview:

Thousands of Palestinians who had previously sought refuge in the Syrian Arab Republic fled the country following the outburst of the bloody hostilities in March 2011. Having escaped to bordering regions, hundreds then made it to Thailand, due to the relative ease with which they could obtain a visa to travel there. Dozens of Palestinians headed for Thailand, hoping to find a safe shelter in a country, which they thought would provide a safe haven from war.

According to data by Thailand-based NGOs, nearly 179 migrant families have sought shelter in Thailand, including about 50 Palestinian families from Syria, 65 women, and 110 children. The list also includes a number of elderly people, many of whom suffer from cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and psychological disorders and need regular medical follow-up.

Legal Status:

Palestinian refugees in Thailand are only granted a tourist visa, which legitimizes their stay in the country for no more than a couple of months, following which several Palestinian refugees are forced out of the country, often to Cambodia, before they are allowed into the Thai territories once again. Dozens of refugees have been subjected to crackdowns by the Thai authorities after they failed to shell out the costly fees of visa renewal procedures.

A law issued by the Thai government also prohibited renting homes to the refugees who overstayed their visas, and have, thus, been considered as lawbreakers rather than asylum-seekers. Scores of refugees have, meanwhile, been awaiting the UNHCR's response over their appeals for asylum in a safe destination.

The Thai government has been chasing down all refugees seeking shelter in its territories. Testimonies by stranded refugees have provided tangible evidence about the tragic conditions endured by Palestinian and Syrian refugees trapped in Thailand and held at I.D.C detention center in Bangkok for overstaying their visas.

As emerges in the affidavists, children, women, and elderly refugees are crammed in overcrowded detention centers, where they are made to sit and sleep in a squatting position, with their legs drawn up closely beneath or in front of their vulnerable bodies.

A woman who was released from a Thai detention center said several migrants have been kept in custody as they failed to disburse bails of up to \$1,550.

A stranded refugee said that one of the detainees has been kept in custody at I.D.C for over three years and that a number of children have been growing up at detention centers with no identity documents whatsoever. Others have had their travel documents invalidated due to the long detention periods.

Over recent years, activists have raised alarm bells over the dire conditions of captivity in Thai detention centers, where dozens of inmates are crammed into cells that can barely accommodate a handful of persons. Palestinian refugees are also locked up in cells where drug traffickers, sex traffickers, and criminals are held. The refugees, themselves, have spoken out against the scorching temperatures at the detention center, along with the medical neglect, the poor-quality food, and lack of ventilation.

Humanitarian Situation:

A state of panic has overwhelmed Palestinian families in Thailand on a daily basis for fear of being kidnapped by the Thai police from their shelters, being sent to jail, or forcibly deported to other countries.

The situation is far exacerbated by the failure of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to live up to its responsibilities as regards the crisis and the absence of vital services by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on account that Thailand falls outside of the agency's map of recognized field of operations. The calamitous condition has been made worse by the lack of vital services, most notably healthcare and education.

Recommendations:

The crackdowns pursued by the Thai authorities against the Palestinians of Syria have had disastrous fallouts on the refugees who can neither return to their homeland nor head for another destination. Therefore, serious steps should be urgently made to work out the crisis before it is too late.

The international community, UNRWA and other concerned UN bodies, and the Palestinian institutions should immediately step in and stand by the Palestinian refugees who have been stranded in Bangkok and treat them as asylum seekers fleeing war-stricken zones, rather than lawbreakers.

- The UNHCR, the Palestinian Authority, and international NGOs should pressurize the Thai government to lift the noose tightened around the refugees' neck and to treat them in accordance with international and humanitarian laws and conventions.
 - The Thai authorities should immediately release Palestinian and Syrian refugees and their children who have been arbitrarily held in custody and to implement international humanitarian law in this regard.
 - It is imperative that the extraordinary trauma inflicted on the refugees by the abduction sweeps and violent crackdowns are brought to an end and that refugees be granted legal stays in the country.
 - The League of Arab States should urge the Thai authorities to backtrack on the forcible deportation of the refugees and to cancel refoulement decisions against those who overstayed their visas.
 - All stakeholders and concerned parties should live up to their moral responsibilities regarding the situation of Palestinian refugees seeking asylum overseas and to work on securing their right to psycho-physical protection.
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