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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Iran Coerces Afghan Refugees to Return to Afghanistan in Violation of International Agreements; Areas of Return Insecure

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In violation of international agreements, Afghan refugees living in Iran have been told this week that they must leave the country by August 20 or they will be "forced to leave," according to dozens of interviews conducted with returnees on the Afghan/Iran border crossing at Islam Qala by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR). The Tripartite Agreement, signed in April 2002, by the governments of Iran and Afghanistan and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), states that all repatriation must be voluntary.

The Boston-based group also learned that some Afghan children living in Iran were not being allowed to register for school in the fall, also in violation of international agreements ratified or acceded to by Iran such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

According to sources on the Afghan/Iran border, over the past several weeks there has been a substantial increase in the numbers of people crossing the border (thousands of families). Coerced or forced repatriation of large numbers of refugees to an unstable humanitarian situation will have significant consequences. Returning Afghan refugees will likely end up in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and overwhelm the limited resources of food, water, and shelter in Afghanistan and the already devastated health system, the medical group said. Furthermore, the security situation, particularly in the North and the West, documented by PHR and others, has been unstable. In May 2002, a PHR survey of internally displaced Afghans from the Shaidayee Camp in Herat study showed a shocking prevalence of attacks against ethnic Pashtuns and ongoing deprivation of basic needs.

"The refugees are being forced into a revolving door that may

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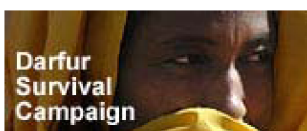
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ultimately lead them back into refugee status in Iran or elsewhere," said Dr. Lynn Amowitz, PHR Senior Medical Researcher, currently in Afghanistan.

On August 5, a message to the refugees to leave Afghanistan was broadcast in Iran on state-run TV and radio and printed in newspapers.

"I was forced to leave by the Iranian authority. If I did not choose to leave, they said that we would be removed by force. Twenty-five days ago, we were all collected into the mosque at the headquarters of the police. The chief of foreign affairs, told us that we must leave and that our children could not be registered in the schools for the next term," said a 35-year-old Afghan male living in Bandarabus, Iran for six years, originally from Kabul.

The Tripartite Agreement was signed in Geneva in April 2002 by the governments of Iran, Afghanistan and the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. It lays down the main legal and operational framework for the voluntary return of Afghan refugees in Iran. Article 5 of the Agreement states: "The Parties hereby reaffirm that the repatriation of Afghan refugees and displaced persons in Iran shall take place at their freely expressed wish based on their knowledge of the conditions relating to voluntary repatriation and the situation in intended places to return. The Voluntary character of the repatriation shall be fully respected."

According to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), "no contracting state shall expel or return "refouler" a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers or territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group.

Also, the Convention states that "the contracting states shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education." Iran acceded to the Convention on July 28, 1976. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child calls on state parties to recognize the right of the child to education and make primary education compulsory and available free to all". Iran ratified the CRC on July 13 1994.

Physicians for Human Rights calls on the Government of Iran to take immediate action to ensure the termination of all involuntary repatriation practices and to respect the provisions of the international human rights law and agreements to which it is bound.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) mobilizes the health professions to advance the health and dignity of all people by protecting human rights. As a founding member of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, PHR shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.

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