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Greece: Alleged torture of asylum-seekers must be investigated

Amnesty International is appalled at reports that Greek police officers have subjected a group of Afghan asylum-seekers to interrogation techniques which included the torture of adults and minors alike. In a letter to the Greek Minister of Public Order Giorgos Voulgarakis, the organization calls for a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation of the allegations and for the perpetrators to be brought to justice.

It has been reported that on 13 December 2004, civilian policemen visited a house in the Agios Panteleimonas area of Athens, where between 40 and 60 Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees were lodging. The police wanted information about an Afghan national who had escaped from court where he had been taken on charges of staying illegally in the country. The police collected all those present in the house, including minors, in one room and allegedly beat them severely torturing some of them. The same sequence of events was repeated in the following days. Police officers took a 17-year-old boy to the police station and reportedly tortured him there. He said that they undressed him, forced him on the ground, spread his legs and put a gun to his temple threatening to kill him. A policeman reportedly took a photograph on his mobile phone. Reportedly, around 60 Afghans were beaten, but only 30 of them dared to complain. At least 17 of them were aged 15 to 17.

"They had bruises on their arms and legs. The beating was carried out with a blunt instrument. This action constitutes torture. Torture is every practice that causes severe pain and which is done intentionally for a specific reason and is authorised by the authorities," Maria Kali, Director of the Medical Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture, said. Reportedly, in one of the cases there were scratches from the barrel of a gun on the throat of one of the Afghan asylum-seekers.

"Amnesty International condemns such ill-treatment in the strongest possible terms. These incidents are even more abhorrent when perpetrated against the most vulnerable groups in society like minors and people who have come to seek refuge from persecution. The UNHCR guidelines on Detention of Asylum Seekers clearly state that conditions 'should be humane with respect for the inherent dignity of the person'," Marianna Tzeferakou from Amnesty International Greece said.

"Several of the Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers are minors. Under the terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Greece has ratified and is therefore legally bound to uphold, these people are children. The Greek state has a special duty of care towards them," Marianna Tzeferakou said.

Amnesty International has, in the past, had concerns about the impunity, enjoyed by the Greek police, for the violation of human rights including torture and ill-treatment. There is a very real danger that

these practices may continue unless the Greek authorities take strict measures to make police officers accountable for their actions and ensure that they do not get away with committing human rights violations.

"Greece has signed and ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture. Its authorities are obliged to take effective measures to prevent acts of torture. The message should be delivered loud and clear to all police officers that torture or ill-treatment or threats thereof are absolutely prohibited," Marianna Tzeferakou said.

Amnesty International is very concerned about the status of asylum-seekers in Greece. In this particular incident, it was reported that police took documentation from three of the Afghans and failed to return their papers to them. All the Afghan men in question are thought to be currently in the process of seeking asylum in Greece. Many are in an extremely vulnerable position as "persons without papers" which leaves them susceptible to human rights violations.

Amnesty International is unequivocal in its view that the circumstances, which led to previous refugee movements, have not yet changed in a manner that should lead hosting countries to believe that it is safe to return asylum-seekers and refugees to Afghanistan. Greece as a European country and a state party to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees must afford adequate protection to this vulnerable group.

Public Document

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