

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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EUROPE: ACT NOW TO STOP HUMAN SUFFERING OF PEOPLE ON THE MOVE AT EASTERN BORDERS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL URGES THE NEW EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO ADDRESS THE SITUATION OF REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS FACING HARSH WINTER CONDITIONS IN GREECE AND ACROSS THE WESTERN BALKANS

On International Migrants Day, Amnesty International is calling on the newly installed European Commission to urgently protect refugees and migrants stranded across the Eastern Mediterranean route.

People seeking safety through the treacherous land and sea routes between Turkey and Greece and across the Western Balkans face deadly conditions as snow and freezing temperatures descend on the region. Almost 70,000 people have reached Greece in 2019, [14,000 of whom through its land borders](#).

From the overcrowded refugee camps on the Greek Islands, to the makeshift settlements in Bosnia, where thousands of people sleep rough or in inhumane and undignified conditions, people seeking shelter face barbed wire, dangerous paths and a harsh winter as temperatures plummet across the continent. European leaders now have an opportunity to draw a line under previous dangerous policies and provide people fleeing to Europe with the safety and dignity that they seek, and that the law provides.

People risking deadly river crossing

The deal struck between the EU and Turkey in March 2016, means that most of those who arrive irregularly on the Greek islands are subsequently trapped there for long periods of time before being transferred to mainland Greece or being returned to Turkey. While this is the fate for many, more and more people are now trying different ways to seek protection in Europe, attempting the dangerous crossing through the Evros river at Greece's northern land border with Turkey, before embarking on a perilous journey through the Western Balkans.

Since 2016 land arrivals per year through the Eastern Mediterranean route have seen a stark increase, going from under 4,000 in 2016 to [14,000 as of December 2019](#). This is despite the [latest serious allegations of pushbacks](#) and use of violence against asylum seekers and migrants in the Evros region, a practice that although [widely reported](#) in the past years, [has so far been not been addressed by the Greek authorities](#).

In the past days, [six people were reported dead of hypothermia](#) in various locations along the route between the Evros border and inland Greece, highlighting the urgent need to protect those attempting this increasingly dangerous route. It is suggested that those found dead had followed new paths in the route to enter Greece through Evros, avoiding the main roads and police controls. However, the Greek Government is failing to address the ever more precarious conditions of people on the move in this area, [and instead boasts of its plans to seal borders](#), even by installing a surveillance system to discourage crossings.

Amnesty is concerned that these plans will once more fail people at the borders, who need safe and legal pathways to access the territory rather than more repressive measures.

Bosnia faces a humanitarian crisis

Meanwhile, in the Western Balkans, Croatian police continue to violently push back people trying to enter the EU through its border, resulting in a mounting humanitarian crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet, despite overwhelming evidence of unlawful and violent practices by Croatian police, the European Commission has turned a blind eye and [recommended Croatia for accession to the Schengen Agreement](#).

In the first week of December, refugees and migrants went on hunger strike at the Vucjak refugee camp in Bosnia where, [before its subsequently announced closure](#), almost 800 people were living on a contaminated former landfill in flimsy tents without running water, adequate sanitation or proper heating. Some 3,000, out of estimated 8,000 people in Bosnia, unable to find a place in overcrowded camps, are sleeping under open skies braving freezing temperatures across Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thousands more are precariously living in other countries in the region, including Serbia, in a situation of permanent uncertainty.

Containment causes casualties on Greek islands

More than [40,000 people](#), including 13,800 children, are currently forced to live in appalling conditions on the Greek islands. Many of them are sleeping in flimsy tents, or thin-walled containers which will not protect them from winter conditions. Overcrowding has produced numerous casualties. On 6 December, [a woman died from a fire](#) in her container in the Kara Tepe camp, Lesvos, as overcrowding hit record levels in the island. Since August, three children tragically died in Moria, including a newborn who succumbed to severe dehydration, according to [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\)](#).

The policy of containing refugees and asylum-seekers on the Greek islands and fortifying external EU borders, means that thousands of people remain trapped for months on end in squalid conditions. The lives of people on the move on the eastern side of Europe are in limbo, crushed by the prospect of indefinite containment in insecure and undignified camps or being returned to a country that is not safe for them.

EU leaders must acknowledge the human cost of outsourcing migration control and refugee protection to its peripheries or even to third countries where the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are systematically endangered.

Encouraging heavy-handed deterrence at the external borders demonstrates the EU's ambivalence about its core values and the consequences of its policies, which are causing suffering on a massive scale and creating instability elsewhere.

Similarly to current attempts at establishing fair and predictable disembarkation and relocation arrangements in relation to the Mediterranean Sea, the EU should uphold its commitment to solidarity and urgently act to protect the rights of people on the move at the eastern borders, including through the creation of a mandatory distribution mechanism to support states.

Amnesty urges the EU to live up to its founding values and rethink its current policy of preventing entries at any cost, to ensure that this is the last winter refugees and migrants spend fearing for their lives in the cold.

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