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Asylum-seekers and migrants in Greece hounded by police operations and right-wing extremists

Greece is seriously failing to respect the rights of asylum-seekers and migrants, Amnesty International warned in a briefing published today.

Every year, tens of thousands of irregular migrants and asylum-seekers from the Middle East, Asia and Africa cross the Greek land and sea border with Turkey in search of shelter, refuge or just a better life within the European Union (EU). Few of them find it in Greece.

Amnesty International's briefing [*Greece: The end of the road for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants*](#) charts the obstacles they encounter entering the country and challenges they face once there.

"Greece's failure to respect the rights of migrants and asylum-seekers is taking on the proportions of a humanitarian crisis. Against a backdrop of sustained migratory pressure, profound economic crisis and rising xenophobic sentiment, Greece is proving itself incapable of providing even the most basic requirements of safety and shelter to the thousands of asylum seekers and migrants arriving each year," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

While the burden on Greece is great, there is no excuse for the obstacles asylum-seekers face in registering their asylum claims. A new agency set up by law in 2011 to hear asylum applications is yet to process a single case on account of staffing shortages.

In the meantime, at the Attika Aliens Police Directorate in Athens, only around 20 people succeed in registering their asylum application on the one day a week it opens. The queue forms days in advance and stretches hundreds long down the street. Amnesty International spoke to numerous asylum-seekers who had had to fight their fellows to keep their place.

The majority who do not manage – or give up trying – to register their asylum claims run the risk of arrest in mass sweep operations and of being detained in overcrowded, unhygienic detention facilities for up to a year or more.

"The Greek authorities continue to systematically detain asylum-seekers and irregular migrants including unaccompanied children in breach of international standards and seem to use detention – often in appalling conditions - as a deterrent," said Dalhuisen.

"The situation of unaccompanied children, who are amongst the most vulnerable, is particularly worrying. We found several children detained among adults in very poor conditions during a recent visit at the Corinth detention centre. If a place is not found at a reception centre, they are released with no shelter being provided for them.

"The Greek authorities must ensure that immigration-related detention is used only as a last resort and

that they prohibit the detention of unaccompanied children in law and end it in practice.

“Amnesty International has even received reports of people fleeing conflict and war in countries such as Syria being pushed back to Turkey through the river Evros.”

There has also been a dramatic rise of in the number of racially motivated attacks throughout 2012. Asylum-seekers, migrants, community centres, shops and mosques have been the target of such attacks which have been reported on an almost daily basis since the summer.

“The Greek authorities must condemn in a loud voice and effectively investigate and prosecute all racially-motivated violence” said Dalhuisen.

A draft presidential decree creating the specialized police units to curb racist violence is a first step towards the right direction, but falls short of guaranteeing the effective investigations and prosecutions for crimes where victims are reluctant to approach the police for fear of arrest and detention themselves.

EU asylum policy requires asylum-seekers to return to the first country they entered upon arrival in the EU. However, after the European Court of Human Rights concluded in 2011 that Greece lacked an effective asylum determination system, many EU countries have halted the return of asylum-seekers to Greece.

“Most European countries have taken the right step in stopping the return of asylum seekers to Greece until the country reforms its asylum system. However, they must share responsibility for processing asylum applications and supporting asylum seekers more equally among member states,” said Dalhuisen.

“The current situation in Greece is totally unworthy of the Nobel Peace Prize winning European Union and so far below international human rights standards as to make a mockery of them. Greece needs help but it must also accept its own responsibilities.”

Cases

In June 2012, N., from Aleppo, Syria, was on a boat with six other Syrians when in the middle of the river, where supposedly the Greek border starts, Greek police arrived in a patrol boat and reportedly started pushing their inflatable dinghy back towards Turkey. Then a police officer used a knife to stab the plastic fabric of the boat, which then sank, leaving people to swim to the Turkish shore.

K., an asylum-seeker of African origin who was trying to apply for asylum for months, was arrested during a sweep operation against irregular migrants in Athens in August 2012 held in a detention facility. K. kept on trying to apply for asylum while in detention and in October his asylum application was registered, following multiple interventions by non-governmental organizations. However, in December 2012, he was still being held in detention.

On 10 September 2012, two men dressed in black entered a barbershop run by a Pakistani man. Two Pakistani men who were present, one of them staff, told Amnesty International how the two men verbally attacked the Greek customer who was present for having a haircut in a shop owned by Pakistanis and stabbed him when he reacted. Then they started destroying the shop and throwing Molotov cocktails. The police came to investigate the incident and arrested two Pakistani nationals because they had no documents. In October, they were both in detention, pending deportation.