

AI Index: PRE01/137/2013
20 March 2013

Refugees dying on dangerous routes to asylum in Europe

In a case highlighting the risks people take when fleeing conflict in their countries to seek refuge in Europe, the authorities of Lesbos continue their search for the bodies of asylum-seekers who had attempted to reach the Greek island.

Since last Friday, they have found the bodies of six Syrian nationals including a 17-year-old pregnant woman and a mother with her young children. They are now searching for the bodies of three more Syrian nationals whose families had reported missing to the island authorities after the nine attempted to cross from Turkey on 6 March 2013.

Lesbos is one of the main crossings for migrants and refugees trying to enter the European Union via Greece. Last December, 21 people (mostly Afghans) drowned close to the shores of the island, after the boat they were in capsized.

Since last summer, people fleeing the conflict in Syria have featured among those attempting the crossing, including many families with young children.

“As Greece is tightening the border controls in Evros, including the completion of a 10.5km fence last December, people take more and more dangerous routes. This was a tragedy waiting to happen,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Director of the Europe and Central Asia Programme.

“It is vital that the Greek authorities ensure protection to all asylum-seekers reaching the country. Instead, the Greek asylum system is grossly failing them. People who flee conflict, including many Syrians and Afghans who make it to the shores of Lesbos, are detained in police stations in overcrowded and poor conditions or in many cases left destitute to sleep in the streets.”

“The Greek authorities should also take urgent measures to improve the reception conditions of those arriving at its shores and end the detention of asylum-seekers. In addition, Syrian nationals with no papers fleeing the conflict, must not be detained or issued with deportation orders and the authorities should proceed with a fair and effective examination of their asylum claims.”

“It is very painful to watch the same tragedy repeating in the shores of our own island,” said Efi Latsoudi, a local activist and member of the ‘Village of All Together’ – an initiative run by of volunteers who step in when state support for refugees and migrants is not available.