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Greece: Human rights violated on the margins of society

Foreigners shot on the border, asylum-seekers detained in metal containers, Roma forcibly evicted from their homes in Athens -- these are some of the examples of consistent pattern of human rights violations, Amnesty International reveals in a report today.

The report, *Out of the spotlight: The rights of foreigners and minorities are still a grey area*, highlights the failure of the Greek authorities to combat discrimination.

"People living on the margins of society -- asylum-seekers, migrants, Roma and members of other minorities -- are the most likely victims of discrimination in all its forms. Most often, their tormentors are representatives of the state," Olga Demetriou, Amnesty International's researcher on Greece, said.

Amnesty International's report focuses specifically on the failure of the state to comply with international human rights law and standards regarding access to the asylum process, the detention of migrants and protection from discrimination and ill-treatment.

"Thousands of people from Albania, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and elsewhere come to Greece seeking refuge. Some are shot and killed on the border, others are charged with 'illegal entry' straight away and detained without having the chance to apply for refugee protection. The conditions of detention in particular areas of the country do not adhere to international law and standards," Olga Demetriou said.

On the island of Chios the authorities have used a metal container to detain people. They have repeatedly detained others, including pregnant women and children, and failed to protect women and children who were victims of trafficking. Some migrants have been abused by police officers.

Y.S., an Iraqi national of 24, who had been arrested and detained upon entry into Greece stated: "there is no phone here and I have not spoken to my parents since I came here... they do not know whether I am dead or alive... my mother has a heart problem, and I have not been able to phone and let her know... we have not died but I wish I had." He claimed that for the first month of his detention he slept on cardboard and that people in his dormitory room had "insects" on their skin.

The report documents the mechanisms that contribute to this failure and urges the Greek authorities to meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of marginalized people.

Over the last two decades, Greece has rapidly transformed from a traditional emigration country to

one attracting migrants, thus marking the border between the global south and the European Union. This rapid transformation has brought to the surface the inadequacies in the country's laws governing migration as well as in practices violating the human rights of refugees. Specifically, the Greece's legal framework fails to adhere to international human rights law and standards in two respects:

At no stage of the process does it provide for an independent review of a rejected application on the substance of the claim;

It lacks provisions explicitly safeguarding against the risk of *refoulement*.

Although there has been a sharp increase in the number of people seeking refuge, Greece has some of the lowest asylum application rates in Europe. At the same time it has some of the lowest refugee rates. According to a global overview of refugee populations in 2004 conducted by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Greece has the lowest rates of refugee recognition (0.3 per cent for the first nine months of the year) and granting of protection status (0.9 per cent) out of 148 countries considered.

"The rapid transformation of Greece into a country attracting migrants cannot be an excuse for its authorities to turn their back on the needs of refugees and to ignore their international obligations," Olga Demetriou said.

Living also on the margins of society, Roma and other minority groups bear the brunt of direct or indirect discrimination. In Athens and Patras, Romani residents were forcibly evicted from their houses, taking on much of the financial burden of the resettlement themselves. Roma have also been the target of racist abuse, which in some cases the authorities have tended to overlook. Members of minorities have their rights to freedom of expression, religion and association violated due to gaps in national anti-discrimination legislation, as well as the failure by the Greek authorities to adopt relevant international legislation and standards.

"In the last few years the Greek authorities have admitted that they have not been effective enough in responding to the needs of migrants and minorities. This ineffectiveness is having a negative impact on the way these vulnerable groups are perceived and treated in the country. It is creating a climate for tolerance of racism and xenophobia within the wider Greek population," Olga Demetriou said.

"Everybody in Greece, whether a member of the majority, the minorities or a refugee must enjoy the human rights to which they are entitled. It is the responsibility of the Greek authorities to make sure that this happens."

See: *Out of the spotlight: The rights of foreigners and minorities are still a grey area* (AI Index: EUR 25/016/2005) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur250162005>

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