



General Assembly

Distr.: General
16 June 2021

English, French and Spanish only

Human Rights Council

Forty-seventh session

21 June–9 July 2021

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

**Joint written statement* submitted by American Association
of Jurists, Associazione Comunita Papa Giovanni XXIII,
International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL),
Mouvement International d'Apostolate des Milieux Sociaux
Independants, World Organization for Early Childhood
Education, non-governmental organizations in special
consultative status, Mouvement contre le racisme et pour
l'amitié entre les peuples, a non-governmental organization
on the roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 May 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Human rights violations in the hotspots of the Greek Aegean islands

Hotspots (official name: First reception facilities) are first reception camps. The ones we are talking about, located on the islands of Lesbos, Samos, Kos, Leros and Chios, were set up in April 2015 by the Greek government in order to carry out an initial sorting of asylum seekers on European soil, at the request of the European Union Commission, which is funding them. According to EU guidelines, the length of stay of asylum seekers in these reception camps should not exceed a maximum of six months.

In spring 2021, there will be around 34,000 refugees on these islands, a third of whom will be children. The largest camp is on the island of Lesbos (6,400 refugees), at Kara Tepe, a former army firing range on the seashore, which is frequently flooded by storms in the Aegean Sea.

For all the hotspots, the sanitary, hygienic, food and medical situation is catastrophic. The refugees live behind a triple barbed wire fence. They are only allowed to leave the camp with permission from the Greek authorities and for a maximum of three hours once a week, to go to a neighbouring town. The tents and containers are overcrowded, with each person having only 6 m² of living space.

Only one hot meal is distributed per day, delivered from the mainland to the islands by private catering companies. This food is usually insufficient and often inedible. Refugees have to queue in front of the distribution counters for 3 to 4 hours every day, in the rain, snow, mud or under a blazing sun.

In Kara Tepe, only one military doctor is supposed to take care of the refugees, who are often physically and psychologically scarred by the trauma of the flight and the journey.

Neither the containers nor the tents surrounding the official camps - makeshift shelters - are heated, while during the winter months the temperature can drop below 5 degrees.

For example, the Kara Tepe camp has only a limited number of toilets - 1 per 100 people. They are often unsanitary, smelly and blocked. Running water taps are rare. 500 people share one tap. As for the showers, they are totally insufficient in number: the 6,400 refugees have only 250 showers at their disposal, of which only half provide hot water.

Hygienic conditions are terrible: scabies, other skin diseases, kidney infections affect a majority of the refugees. Rubbish is rarely removed, rats and snakes are a constant threat to small children. Rats gnaw through the walls of tents and attack babies.

There are no crèches or schools in the camps.

Administrative procedures are extremely slow and frequently violate the basic rights of refugees (incompetent interpreters, extremely short interrogations, etc.). These flawed procedures are documented in detail by several NGOs that are closely monitoring the situation¹.

It is common for refugee families to wait 2, 3 or 5 years for a first decision from the authorities on their asylum application.

Médecins Sans Frontières, which maintains a medical centre outside the Kara Tepe camp, reports an ever-increasing number of self-harming children and attempted suicides by adolescents and adults.

¹ <https://www.medecinsdumonde.org/fr/actualites/europe/2016/11/16/les-malades-de-leurope>
<https://www.msf.org/greece>
<https://www.medico.de/fr/protection-des-frontieres-au-lieu-de-protection-des-refugies-17971>
<https://drc.ngo/about-us/for-the-media/press-releases/2021/3/eu-turkey-deal/>
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/03/european-leaders-must-end-the-humanitarian-and-human-rights-crisis-at-europes-borders/>
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/01/greece-lead-contamination-threat-migrants-unresolved>

The lack of communication, the agonising wait for the decision of the Greek authorities, creates despair and a number of mental illnesses.

Pope Francis, visiting Lesbos in 2016, said that the Moria camp (destroyed in September 2020 by fire and since replaced by the Kara Tepe camp) reminded him in some ways of "the concentration camps of terrible memory". The German newspaper *Die Zeit* (Hamburg, May 2019) wrote that on the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea refugees were "treated like animals".

According to European civil society activists working on the ground, the inhumane detention conditions of Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, South Sudanese refugees, etc. are part of a clear EU strategy. The Danish Refugee Council writes: "The hotspot approach is a form of deterrence". By creating unbearable social, hygienic and food conditions in the camps, the EU hopes to dissuade the persecuted from leaving their countries of origin and seeking shelter and protection in Europe (Fundamental rights and the EU hotspot approach, Copenhagen, 2019).

This strategy is contrary to human rights. Moreover, it is ineffective: every month, hundreds of new asylum seekers, threatened in their lives, land on the islands.

In the Aegean Sea, armed boats of FRONTEX, the EU border security agency, and the EU-funded Greek coastguard hunt the refugees' dinghies. They force them, often with extreme violence causing frequent shipwrecks, back into Turkish territorial waters. These refoulements prevent refugees from applying for asylum on European soil.

Recently, another form of refoulement has been implemented: the Greek police arrest refugees who have managed to land on one of the islands, force them onto rafts and push them back into the sea.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution."

The right to asylum is a universal human right. It is a conquest of civilisation. Anyone who is bombed, tortured or persecuted in his own country has the right to cross a border and seek refuge and protection in another country. There is no such thing as an illegal border crossing for the persecuted. The United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 28 July 1951 defines the rights of refugees (non-discrimination, prohibition of refoulement and expulsion, respect for all human rights, etc.).

What is currently happening in the official and unofficial camps on the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea is a tragedy and an intolerable scandal.

The Human Rights Council must address this situation without delay. It must ask the Special Rapporteurs on the right to housing, on the right to health, on the right to education, on the right to food and on the right to clean water, to visit the camps and report back to the Council.

The Human Rights Council should call for the immediate evacuation of the camps. It should invite the High Commissioner for Human Rights to present a report to the 49th session of the Council on the implementation of this evacuation and on the relocation plan negotiated by the EU in 2016. This normative plan assigns each EU member state to receive a specific quota of refugees (calculated on the basis of its Gross Domestic Product and population pool).

The refoulements carried out by FRONTEX and the Greek Coast Guard, financed by the EU, prevent refugees from applying for asylum on European soil in violation of international law. Inspired by the European Parliament's resolution of 29 April 2021, the Human Rights Council must demand that the EU Commission immediately put an end to all forms of refoulement.

The Human Rights Council must ensure that the EU abandons its strategy of terror and deterrence and that its Member States scrupulously respect the asylum procedures as defined in the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.