

Greece to build fortified border fence to deter refugees

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The character of the prevailing social order can be seen in the way it treats refugees. The Greek government's announcement that it is to erect a three-metre-high fence on the border with Turkey by April, to stop refugees entering the European Union, is an example of the contempt with which the ruling class in Europe regards ordinary people.

The border fence not only symbolizes "Fortress Europe", but is a model for the attacks of the European governments on the democratic rights of all the people. Built between the two NATO countries Greece and Turkey, the fence is a deliberate provocation to Ankara's aspirations to join the EU, which have been blocked and delayed for years on the most flimsy of pretexts.

Last Saturday, Greek Civil Defence Minister Christos Papoutsis, a member of the ruling social democratic PASOK, told the ANA news agency: "The limits of patience of Greek society have been exceeded long ago. Now we are planning to build a fence to ward off illegal immigration."

In fact, it is not so much the Greek people who are pushing for this measure as the EU, which has demanded that the government in Athens "block up the biggest hole in Europe's external border", as a Greek border guard described the land border between Turkey and Greece.

The proposed fence will not run along the entire border, but is meant to protect sensitive areas. The border between these two Mediterranean states runs along the river Evros, which in Turkey is called the Meric. The river is surrounded by minefields, some remaining from the Balkan campaigns of the First World War, and some that were laid during the Cyprus crisis in the 1970s.

Only between the two towns of Orestiada on the Greek side and Edirne on the Turkish side, does the river bend east, imitating a large arc. Here, the Evros can easily be crossed from Turkish territory via a bridge, and the border between Turkey and the EU reached on land. And it is here that the heavily guarded fence will be constructed, with motion detectors and heat-sensitive cameras, following the model of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa, or the border between the US and Mexico.

Although these types of border defences are a clear breach of the European Convention on Human Rights, according to which no person seeking protection must be rejected at the border, and is thus contrary to EU law, the EU Commission has been remarkably restrained. A spokesperson for EU Interior Commissioner Cecilia Malmström did express some criticisms of the Greek plans and urged compliance with applicable standards. However, the Greek government has let it be known that it was Malmström herself who, during a recent visit to the Greek-Turkish border, proposed the establishment of barriers to deter refugees.

Since November 1, 2010, the border has been secured by a rapid reaction force ("Rapid Border Intervention Team"—Rabit), part of the European border management agency Frontex. This is the first deployment for such a force, comprising 200 heavily armed border guards from 25 EU countries, including about 40 from Germany. Their mandate

was recently extended until the end of March 2011, when the border fence is to be completed.

The European Union decided to deploy Frontex after more and more refugees sought to enter the EU via Turkey. The coastal borders of Spain, France and Italy, and also in the Aegean, are now so heavily guarded that no more refugees can cross the Mediterranean by boat.

According to official figures, in the first nine months of 2010 more than 130,000 refugees without valid residency documents were apprehended and arrested. More than 30,000 of these were found on the narrow border between Orestiada and Edirne, four times as many as in the same period last year. Through the use of the Frontex force, the daily number of those apprehended has since halved, but in the eyes of the EU their number is still far too high.

The Frontex force serves not only to repulse refugees on the EU's external border, it is also directly involved in human rights violations in Greece, whose asylum system exists only on paper. A German border guard told a delegation from the human rights group Pro Asyl that the Frontex operation took place in a "moral abyss". He expressed qualms about handing over those apprehended to the Greek authorities.

The majority of the refugees come from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Somalia and North Africa. Regardless whether they are apprehended on the border or lodge an asylum request themselves with the authorities, they are arrested under the charge of "illegal entry" and are placed in special refugee camps.

Apart from the fact that refugees have no chance of entering the EU other than "illegally", since they are hardly in a position to obtain a visa and an exit permit beforehand, their criminalization and arbitrary arrest is a scandal. Conditions in the camps and police stations in Greece are catastrophic. Only in November last year, the Council of Europe anti-torture committee made accusations against the Greek authorities, and documented numerous cases of ill-treatment and torture in the refugee camps.

Other organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Pro Asyl and Welcome to Europe have documented the inhumane conditions in the Greek camps. There are no interpreters available for the refugees, who usually do not even know why and for how long they are being detained, with a detention of several months being not uncommon. They are denied every opportunity to lodge an asylum request.

The camp at the Evros consists of former warehouses, with grid fencing used to separate the cells, and is hopelessly overcrowded. Unaccompanied minors, families, women and men are crowded together indiscriminately. At the now-closed Camp Pagani on Lesbos, there were only 39 bunk beds made of metal with thin tattered mattresses for some 250 detainees. Most of the refugees had to sleep on the floor. "The toilets constantly overflowed, then water poured over the floors on which people were laying for whom there were no more beds," Afghan refugee Aziz Sultani told *tageszeitung*.

In other camps, there is not enough food for those stranded there;

medical care is unknown. In Camp Pagani, conditions were so intolerable that the inmates finally started fires in their cells in order to force the PASOK government to close the camp.

The European Frontex troops are now participating in these blatant human rights violations. They not only hand over refugees they apprehend to the Greek authorities in the knowledge of the catastrophic conditions in the detention camps, they are also directly involved in the process of deportation, including conducting screenings of refugees to determine their identities and origins. This procedure, which in Germany can last for days and is still prone to mistakes, is carried out on the Greek border in only a few minutes. The goal is to identify as many refugees as possible as being Iranians, Syrians or Iraqis, as they can then be deported immediately back to Turkey.

Since May 2010, Greece and Turkey have had a repatriation agreement for illegal immigrants who come to Greece from the neighbouring state on the Bosphorus. But Turkey will only accept back refugees that it can then deport to bordering countries. In this way, refugees are not only placed back in the hands of the thugs from whom they are trying to escape by reaching the EU, but Afghans and Pakistanis are swiftly declared to be Iraqis, in order to deport them as soon as possible.

Despite the harmonization of asylum law throughout the EU, the asylum system in Greece is egregiously backlogged. Nearly 50,000 cases have been waiting for years for a decision. Only 0.3 percent of all applicants receive a grant of protection; all other applications are dismissed as “manifestly unfounded”, with the refugees instructed to leave Greece within 30 days, thrown out on the street, penniless and illegal.

Some refugees then try to reach other EU countries, to make a new application for asylum. These states rely on the Dublin II agreement, which lays down that asylum can only be claimed in the country in which a refugee first disembarks. But because of the inhuman conditions in the camps there, deportation to Greece has been increasingly prevented by the courts. In 2010, Germany lodged about 2,000 transfer requests to Greece, but only 49 expulsions were actually carried out. The German Supreme Court has also announced it will be making a ruling on the legality of deporting refugees to third states without any prior investigation of their claim to asylum.

The hazy legal situation has compelled the European Commission to ask the government in Athens to make more effort to develop its asylum system, as the humanitarian situation of the refugees is “concerning”, as EU Interior Commissioner Malmström put it. However, the guise of humanitarian “concerns” hides the ruthless enforcement of the interests of the inner-European states, primarily Germany. The German government has laid the blame for the increase in asylum numbers within its borders at the feet of the Greek authorities. Wolfgang Bosbach (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), chair of the parliamentary committee for domestic affairs, said that the “EU and Germany have an overwhelming interest in the third country rule not being undermined.”

Like Malmström, Bosbach also sees the planned border fence as only one building block in the walls of Fortress Europe. “I would place a big question mark over whether the fence is an appropriate means to permanently control the flow of refugees”, Bosbach told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. The EU must “address the asylum issue at its roots”. What is meant is the complete closing of the borders to refugees before they can even reach the EU. According to Bosbach, what is necessary is close cooperation between the EU, Greece and third countries; he accused Turkey of showing too little zeal in ensuring the flow of migrants did not come to Greece. The Turkish government is deliberately being placed under pressure to act more aggressively against refugees, thus prolonging the EU accession negotiations with Turkey even further.

The EU states that insist on the enforcement of the Dublin II agreement and close their eyes to the conditions in the camps and on the border are just as guilty as the Greek government of human rights abuses against

refugees.

In August 2010, the Greek interior minister, Giannis Ragousis, presented the EU Commission with plans for a completely new asylum system and a “national action plan” to manage migration. But these pledges were mere lip service. The bankrupt Greek state lacks not only the will but also the money to implement the plan. In 2010, the EU made available €46 million to the Greek government for improvements to border management, and this year, a further €9.8 million are promised. But this is primarily being used to further fortify the border, while the situation in the camps and the asylum facilities is set to worsen. Although Greek banks received over a hundred billion euros, refugees continue to languish in the wretched conditions of the camps.

The PASOK government came to power in 2009 with the express aim of solving “the problem of immigration”. Anyone who at the time believed this meant improvements in the conditions faced by refugees has now been disabused.

Until the 1980s, Greece was a country of emigration; laws regulating entry and migration did not exist. Ever since 1990, Greece has increasingly become a destination for immigrants, at first coming from Albania and Macedonia, living in the country without documentation. They had no rights and worked for starvation wages in construction, agriculture, the tourism industry and as cleaners and nannies. But the Greek media and the people took little notice of them; as cheap labour they were even welcome.

This situation has changed suddenly since the dramatic financial and economic crisis gripped the country. The media and political officials have seized on asylum and migration as subjects of concern—not the inhumane living conditions and abuse of migrants and refugees, but rather the economic damage that the undocumented immigrants allegedly cause. Refugees are branded as scapegoats, ultimately blamed for the drastic cuts and austerity measures the PASOK government is imposing on the population.

The seed is now bearing fruit; more right-wing groups are forming, such as the Chrysi Avgi (“Dawn”), responsible for attacks on immigrants in some districts of Athens. In December 2010, a tent encampment erected by 100 refugees near the office of the UNHCR in Athens was violently dispersed by special police forces after a few days. The refugees were protesting against their inhumane treatment; some had even sewn their mouths shut and gone on hunger strike.

While the government is presenting the proposed border fence as a populist measure, it represents a direct attack on basic democratic and human rights. Refugees and migrants will be forced to seek other, more dangerous routes to come to Europe and many will die in the process.

The death toll at the Greek border is already enormous. According to official figures, between 2000 and 2006, nearly 100 refugees have died on the minefields along the Evros. In 2010, 41 refugees drowned on the Evros and washed up on the Greek side; how many ended up on the Turkish side is unknown. In August last year, a mass grave with 16 Afghans was discovered, and according to activists for the human rights organization Welcome to Europe, a local funeral home in the village of Sidiro had buried between 150 and 200 drowned refugees in the area without identification.



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