

Refugees subject to vicious treatment by Greek, Italian police

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A report by Human Rights Watch documents the way in which Italian border police are deporting groups of asylum seekers to Greece without any attempt to examine their grounds for asylum.

Many unaccompanied children were among the deported refugees arriving from Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq. Such group deportations constitute a blatant violation of internationally binding legal agreements and provide a classic example of the ruthless treatment meted out to refugees within the European Union (EU).

In the second half of 2012, Human Rights Watch interviewed 29 refugees deported from Italy to Greece. All testified to human rights violations and abuses committed by the Italian and Greek security authorities.

The refugees had tried to escape the life-threatening conditions in Greece by crossing the Adriatic Sea to Italy as stowaways. Following their discovery by Italian border guards, however, they were sent back to Greece within hours. There, they were handed over to the Greek police, often maltreated and imprisoned for weeks, without being accused of any crime.

The accounts of the human rights group are consistent with a report published by the Greek Refugee Council in conjunction with the German refugee aid organisation ProAsyl in the summer of 2012.

Group deportations violate both the Geneva Convention and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to these international accords, unaccompanied children are not to face deportation if it puts the child's welfare at risk.

The Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (CRSR) also embodies the principle of "non-refoulement". This prohibits deportation or refusal of entry at a border crossing if a refugee is threatened with torture or maltreatment, which is almost a daily occurrence in Greek refugee camps. Additionally, the signatory states of the refugee convention are obliged to submit asylum applications to due process. Expulsion of refugees without examining their reasons for flight is illegal.

Only one of the 13 children deported from Italy and interviewed by Human Rights Watch was medically examined by Italian police to determine his age. All the others were

returned to Greece regardless of their age. The youngest was just 13 years old.

Fifteen-year-old Ali M. from Afghanistan was expelled without any attempt to establish his age. "I told them I'm 15, but they didn't listen to me. First they took me to the ticket counter and then onto the ship," he told Human Rights Watch.

None of the children had the chance to speak to a refugee counsellor or gain access to social services, which the UN convention states as mandatory. Instead, they were locked in the engine room or small cabins on the ferries, without access to basic sanitation and often without food.

Adult refugees are also routinely deported without having the opportunity to apply for asylum. Non-government organisations (NGOs), which are officially commissioned at the ports to support refugees and process asylum claims, are deliberately kept away from the refugees. This allows the border police to conclude the deportation process unobserved. In most cases, the refugees are even denied translators to enable them to communicate their request for asylum.

According to statements issued by the local border police, a regular asylum procedure was accorded to only 12 of the 900 refugees apprehended at the port of Bari between January 2011 and June 2012. All the others were immediately deported without any consideration of their reasons for flight. A similar process occurred at the ports of Ancona, Venice and Brindisi. Judith Sunderland of Human Rights Watch thus estimates that several thousand people are illegally deported by the Italian authorities every year.

The Italian government refused to end this practice in January 2011, when the European Court of Human Rights invoked the Dublin II Regulation to prohibit deportations to Greece because of continuing serious human rights violations on the part of the Greek asylum authorities.

According to this regulation, the responsibility for conducting official asylum procedure within the EU is assigned to the country that a refugee first enters. The Dublin II Regulation has led to the emergence within the EU of a gigantic deportation bureaucracy that transports refugees back into the country they allegedly first entered.

In December 2011, the European Court also prescribed a general screening of refugees' conditions in the state to which

they are due to be deported.

Because of these two decrees, numerous EU member states have suspended deportations to Greece. The Italian government, led by Prime Minister Mario Monti, was not prepared to do so, but announced it would check individual cases to determine whether refugees would be threatened with a violation of their human rights if they were to be deported. This has been exposed as a lie by the group deportations immediately after arrival, as documented by Human Rights Watch.

The catastrophic situation of refugees in Greece has now been extensively documented. In its report of December 2012, the Amnesty International human rights organisation described the situation there as a “humanitarian crisis in the middle of Europe”. Even Cecilia Malmström, the EU commissioner responsible for asylum affairs, described the conditions in the Greek refugee “reception centres” as “downright disgusting”.

These deportation prisons are hermetically sealed and guarded. The inmate’s only “crime” is to have entered the EU without permission in the hope of securing a better life. They must on occasion share a cell with more than 70 people, are given moldy bread to eat, and are accommodated in unhygienic and foul conditions. Even infants are occasionally detained for weeks on end.

The conditions are so unconscionable that a court in the Greek port of Igoumenitsa recently acquitted 15 refugees who had escaped from detention. The 15 refugees had been forced for months to endure living in a 15-square-metre cell 24 hours a day—without any fresh water, beds, showers or clean clothes. Some of them were infested with parasites and were suffering from typhoid infection. The court deemed that their escape was lawful because it was undertaken in order to protect health and life.

There is effectively no possibility of receiving a normal asylum process in Greece. Authorities in the city of Athens—with a current population of more than 3 million people—accept only about 20 cases a week for processing. All other refugees are forced to subsist on the streets of Athens as illegal immigrants without any financial or material support.

They thus become fair game for gangs of fascist thugs and especially the police. Since the Greek government initiated operation “Xenios Zeus” in August 2012, the police have been hunting down migrants and refugees. They have arrested more than 67,000 migrants as part of this campaign in Athens alone. More than 4,000 of these were incarcerated because they had no residence permits, and they will now be deported.

The refugees interviewed by Human Rights Watch also reported abuse meted out by the Greek police in the form of punches, kicks, and being set upon by dogs. Seventeen-year-old Zamir M. from Afghanistan, who struggled through four years in Greece without accredited refugee status, said life in Greece was so hard that it might have been better for him to stay in Afghanistan, “even with the Taliban.”

Greece has become a test case with respect to how far the EU’s human rights standards in its refugee policy can be reduced. So far, the EU has done little more than shrug off the degrading and inhumane treatment of refugees in the detention centres.

EU commissioner Cecilia Malmström has merely paid lip service to demands for some “reception centres” to be closed because of the unacceptable conditions. In any event, her comments have not been able to deter countries like Germany, France and Austria from continuing to deport refugees to Greece legally.

The EU itself contributes a large portion of the funding for the construction and maintenance of refugee prisons. In 2012, the EU provided €90 million to help contain refugees within Greece and on its borders; most of this financing goes to the policing of borders and expansion of detention facilities. In contrast, only €4 million was made available for measures to assist in the “integration of third country nationals”, or for the support of accredited refugees.

The EU directive, “Standards for the Reception of Asylum Seekers”, which is due for adoption by the European Parliament, expressly intends the detention of refugees, as commonly practised in Greece, to become the norm for the whole of the EU. Even pregnant women and children will be allowed to be placed behind bars.

Moreover, the legislation does not even prescribe a maximum period of detention. Mention is only made of “the fastest possible processing”, a term that can be stretched a long way. In October, the Greek government ruled that the detention period of refugees could be extended to 12 months.

Refugees in the EU are not seen as people in need of support, but treated as lawless, criminal intruders.

Under pressure from the EU, the Greek government has also tightened its border controls. It has had a fence erected and a trench dug for patrol guards along the Evros border river between Greece and Turkey.

With reports of refugees drowning in inflatable boats slashed by Greek border police, people from Turkey seeking asylum in the EU are increasingly trying to escape across the sea to the Greek island of Lesbos. But the voyage across the Aegean Sea is extremely dangerous. In mid-December 2012, a boat with 28 refugees on board capsized, and only one of them survived.

In the meantime, more than 100 refugees have drowned off Lesbos, according to the ProAsyl refugee agency. This has happened almost directly in front of the Greek coast guard and the European border agency, Frontex—forces that want to prevent boats reaching the Greek island at any cost.



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