

Greek Syriza government colludes with EU in refugee crackdown

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30 January 2016

Greek authorities, in collaboration with officers from European Union border agency Frontex, have clamped down on the activities of volunteers and NGOs helping the hundreds of thousands of refugees crossing into Greece by sea. The refugees are fleeing the war zones of the Middle East and North Africa.

On the island of Lesbos, five aid workers were arrested in the early hours of January 14 by the Greek coastguard after they were caught towing a boat full of refugees on the Greek-Turkish sea border. Two of the volunteers were Danish nationals working with an NGO called Team Humanity, while the other three were firefighters from Seville in Spain, working with an NGO called Proemaid.

According to news web site irinnews.org, the two Danish volunteers “received a call on Thursday about a boat in distress.” One said he notified the Greek coastguard, “who told him they couldn’t respond without knowing the coordinates. The Team Humanity volunteers took their boat out to look for the sinking boat. Before they found it, they were intercepted by the coastguard and later arrested on suspicion of people smuggling.”

After a court hearing on January 16, all five were released on bail after being charged with people trafficking, which carries a prison sentence of up to four years. No date for a trial has been set. Bail was set at €5,000 for all volunteers except for Salam Aldeen, one of the two Danes, who had to pay €10,000. Aldeen is also forbidden from leaving Greece and has to report to a local police station once a week.

According to irinnews.org, “Team Humanity [had] raised €30,000 to purchase a professional rescue boat so they could patrol the coast of Lesbos, responding to boats in distress.”

“We’ve rescued as many as 700 people”, stated

Ayman El Ghiouane, a spokesman for the group.

In that same week on the island of Chios, a Spanish volunteer was arrested on a charge of espionage after he was caught taking pictures of a Dutch patrol vessel that was part of the Frontex contingent on the island. Authorities later searched the house where the Spaniard was staying and arrested two Swiss volunteers after 47 grams of cannabis and 12 canisters of pepper spray were found in their possession. According to their testimony, the canisters were meant for self defence and they planned to hand them out to other volunteers as well after having witnessed violent episodes while doing aid work in Croatia.

The two Swiss volunteers received suspended sentences and were fined €700 each, while the Spaniard was released pending trial. According to Greek Law, espionage offences carry prison sentences of up to 10 years.

Since the start of the year there have been mixed patrols between Greek coastguard forces and Frontex forces in the sea border between Greece and Turkey. According to Chios Chief of Police Andreas Damiris, “The aim of these patrols is to inspect all those who aid refugees at reception centres. Specifically all NGOs will be gradually inspected as the legality of their presence here and to the role each one has.”

The arrests are part of wider plans to crackdown on the activities of NGOs and volunteers helping refugees stranded on the Greek islands bordering Turkey. In 2015 over 850,000 people made the boat crossing from Turkey to Greece, with 60 percent of them going to Lesbos. Over 44,000 have already crossed into Greece just in the first weeks of 2016. According to the International Organization for Migration, at least 158 women, men and children have died in the Aegean Sea since the year began.

This process was stepped up last week, when authorities in Lesbos announced plans to “record, identify and accredit all independent volunteers and NGOs working on the island.”

The additional measures were justified on the grounds that they seek to better coordinate the activities of NGOs. In reality, the Syriza-led government is colluding with the EU to crackdown on any initiatives that cut across the European ruling elite’s agenda of deterring refugees from seeing Europe as a safe haven.

Last week EU Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos stated that Greece and Italy must set up “hotspots” within the next four weeks. Hotspots are essentially concentration camps where refugees are detained and have their fingerprints taken like criminals before being deported in summary proceedings. A hotspot already exists on the island of Lesbos, while additional hot spots will be established on the islands of Chios, Kos, Samos and Leros.

Faced with criticism from ruling circles in Europe for not doing enough to police its external borders, and even being threatened with expulsion from the Schengen treaty for passport-free travel in Europe, the pseudo-left Syriza government has been anxious to offer its assurances that its policies are in line with the EU agenda.

In an interview with *Deutsche Welle* last week, Immigration Minister Yannis Mouzalas heaped praise on German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s handling of the refugee crisis, stating, “Mrs. Merkel’s policy is one that chooses the road of the Enlightenment and Romanticism for Europe, against another policy which wants to lead Europe to the Middle Ages.”

In the same interview, Mouzalas rebuffed claims that Greece did not want to collaborate with Frontex, stating categorically that he supported the establishment of a European border police force and went on to criticise the EU from the right for not doing enough to make this happen. He said that of the 1,800 Frontex officers that Greece has requested only 900 have so far arrived, while it took five months for the EU to approve the funds for 100 Eurodac fingerprinting machines.

“We have deported 130 people back to Turkey in the last 15 days,” boasted Mouzalas in the interview. “In the same space of time 30,000 refugees and illegal immigrants have arrived from Turkey. This ratio leads to an impasse. Europe will have to act soon so that

deportations happen fast and in large numbers.”

Last Friday, 45 refugees, including 17 children, drowned near the island of Farmakonisi off the coast of Turkey. The tragedy was followed by two days of protests in the Greek town of Orestiada near the land border with Turkey in northeastern Greece. Thousands of protesters demanded that transit restrictions between Greece and Turkey are eased so that refugees are not forced to make the perilous journey across the sea.

On Wednesday seven refugees, including two children, drowned near the island of Kos. The following day a boat capsized near the Greek island of Samos, drowning at least 25 people, 10 of them children. Just 10 people were rescued.

While most of the border is separated by the river Evros, a 12.5 kilometre stretch is made up of land only, which is divided by a fence and guarded by police and military patrols, including some officers from Frontex.

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias callously responded to the protests in Orestiada by stating that the existence of the fence is “not a negative fact” and that “it is thanks to our policy in Evros that no refugees have crossed by land, but only by sea.”



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