

Greece forces refugees to participate in brutal “pushbacks” on Turkish border

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Greek border authorities are enslaving asylum seekers and coercing them to participate in illegal police “pushback” operations forcing desperate refugees back across the border into Turkey.

Those involved are promised transit through Greece into Europe.

Six asylum seekers who participated in pushback operations along the Evros river, running across the land border with Turkey in north-eastern Greece, gave testimony to a joint investigation by the *Guardian*, *Lighthouse Reports*, *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel* and *ARD Report München*. The journalists also interviewed Greek police sources, and residents in surrounding towns and villages.

The media outlets published their month-long investigation simultaneously on June 28, and in the Greek language *Reporters United*. The revelations confirm numerous accounts of “proxies” being used in pushback operations, most recently in a report published in April by NGO Human Rights Watch.

Pushbacks have increased since 2020, with the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR recording almost 540 incidents since then across Greece’s land and sea borders. This represents a fraction of the pushbacks that have taken place. The NGO Aegean Boat Report, which monitors the Greek government’s pushback operations across the Greek-Turkish sea border, recorded 81 such incidents in the last month alone.

Bassel, a man in his late 20s, was arrested in late 2020, according to *Reporters United*, as part of a group of Syrians “after they crossed the river in an inflatable dinghy. They were beaten and stripped to their underwear before being taken to the police station [in the border town of Tycheron] in a vehicle without number plates. There they took their belongings and locked them in a cell with 150 other detainees.”

At the police station, Bassel was “confronted with an appalling choice” according to *Lighthouse Reports*. Threatened with smuggling charges because he spoke English: “His only way out, they told him, was to do the Greeks’ dirty work for them. He would be kept locked up during the day and released at night to push back his own compatriots and other desperate asylum seekers. In return he would be given a travel permit that would enable him to escape Greece for Western Europe.”

Bassel was told the “work” would be unpaid but that “he could take his pick of the migrants’ belongings” according to the *Guardian*. Similar accounts were given by other asylum seekers interviewed, who stated they were beaten by police if anything went wrong.

Based on the testimonies received, *Reporters United* described in chilling detail what goes on during a pushback operation:

At night police transported the ‘slaves’ and the migrants to be ‘pushed back’ separately. The ‘slaves’ prepared the boats under the supervision of the policemen who were armed. During the pushbacks the border guards’ collaborators would often force migrants to take off all their clothes and if they found that they still had money hidden on them they would take it and beat them. This practice was corroborated by a police source. After that was the difficult part of getting across the river. Bassel recounted how he had to tie the rope onto a tree on the Turkish side of the river in order to pull the boat. The ‘slaves’ would then lead the migrants onto the boats. Usually 20 per trip (18 asylum seekers and two ‘slaves’ one at the front and

one at the back of the boat) until all the migrants had been pushed back across. Bassel has said that he saw people drowning in the river.

Some of the asylum seekers captured and forced to participate in “pushbacks” had been lured for this purpose by people smugglers, who handed them over to Greek border guards. This was the fate of three of the asylum seekers interviewed, who were held at the Neo Cheimonio police station. According to *Reporters United*, “they each paid €5,000 to a middleman in Istanbul who brought them into contact with a people smuggler who took them across the border from the Turkish side into the Greek side. There another Syrian known as ‘Mike’ was waiting to pick them up accompanied by police. Their collaboration with Greek police had just begun. Two of the three said that they weren’t aware before they came to Greece of what would be required of them. The third one said he knew.”

“Mike” reportedly works directly for the Greek police as recruiter and co-ordinator of migrants used in pushbacks. He lives in a container on the grounds of the police station in the border village of Neo Cheimonio. According to *Reporters United*, “Mike and his brother, who is also involved in trafficking, face multiple charges in Syria for fuel and people smuggling.”

The extent of the operation is such that it is widely known in the surrounding towns and villages. According to *Reporters United*, locals who were interviewed openly talked of “migrants who are collaborating with the police”, saying they could be found “working near the river” or “in the local area where they are often seen masked and accompanied by police officers as they buy supplies such as cigarettes, potato chips and croissants before going for the pushback operations at night-time so that they are not detected by the Turks.”

The policy of coercing migrants to participate in pushbacks was approved by the government. According to *Reporters United* one of the investigation’s police sources revealed “the idea was proposed to politicians as a means of protecting officers from direct involvement in pushbacks, given that they are afraid of being exposed to danger from skirmishes with Turkish

forces or with smugglers.”

Europe’s response to the revelations that a European Union member is engaged in state sponsored criminality on a massive scale was a perfunctory statement by European Commissioner spokeswoman on migration affairs Anitta Hipper asking Greece to investigate. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock responded with a tweet stating that events in Evros and Melilla are “unacceptable”.

In practice, the pushback operations are conducted not against the EU’s wishes but with its direct approval and participation. A recent investigation by *Lighthouse Reports* found that European Border Agency Frontex was involved in at least 22 confirmed pushback operations in the Aegean between March 2020 and September 2021 while the real number could be ten times higher than that.

The Greek government has avoided commenting on the revelations, assisted by Greece’s mainstream media which has barely reported the story. Its silence has been enabled by the pseudo-left Syriza, the country’s biggest opposition party, whose mention of the investigation was confined to comments by Kostas Arvanitis, a Syriza European Parliament member. He said, “these chilling revelations demand here and now concrete, responsible and convincing answers,” while claiming that “the EU has repeatedly expressed concern”.

In power between 2015 and 2019, Syriza set up camps to intern refugees fleeing hardship and persecution, at the behest of the EU. The most notorious was on Moria, on the island of Lesbos, dubbed by the BBC as the worst refugee camp on Earth before it burned down in September 2020.



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