



CAUGHT IN A POLITICAL GAME

ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS ON THE GREECE/TURKEY
BORDER PAY THE PRICE FOR EUROPE'S FAILURES

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Cover photo: Migrants try to talk with Greek police officers during clashes on the buffer zone Turkey-Greece border, near Pazarkule crossing gate in Edirne, Turkey, on March 4, 2020.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 27 February 2020, following statements from the Turkish authorities that the country's borders with the European Union (EU) would be opened, families and individuals from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and from many other countries made a rushed journey to the border region with Greece. Pursued by Turkish and international media, thousands seeking safety approached the border in scenes reminiscent of the 2015 mass irregular migration of asylum-seekers through Turkey's western borders and onwards through the EU.

On 18 March 2016 EU countries and Turkey had agreed the 'EU-Turkey deal',¹ aimed at returning all those arriving irregularly on the Greek islands – including asylum-seekers – back to Turkey. Turkey committed to 'prevent new sea or land routes for illegal migration'. In exchange, EU member states among other things agreed: to take one Syrian refugee from Turkey for every Syrian returned back to the country from the Greek islands; adopt visa liberalisation measures for Turkish citizens; and mobilise significant financial support for reception and other projects benefitting refugees in Turkey. The arrival of people at the land border in 2020 came nearly four years after the deal was signed, amid accusations by the Turkish authorities that the EU had not honoured its agreement to provide a €6 billion contribution to hosting up to 3.6 million Syrian refugees. These latter make up most of Turkey's refugee and asylum-seeker population of four million people.

The Turkish government's announcement on 27 February that it was opening the border with the EU was made concurrent with its "Spring Shield" military operation in Syria's Idlib province, launched after at least 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in a single attack in that province. The Syrian military (supported by Russia) had at that point advanced into the last stronghold controlled by Turkey-supported opposition armed groups. Turkey requested NATO assistance with the "Spring Shield" operation.

The movement of people seeking safety via Turkey's western borders was starkly different from 2015 movements – merely tolerated by Turkish authorities. In 2020, according to reports and in what appears a calculated political gesture, Turkish border guards and security forces actively prevented access to the Bulgarian border. At the same time, they encouraged and facilitated movement to the Greek border. Whether to pressure the EU for support to Turkey in Syria, increase funding for hosting refugees or for reasons of domestic politics, the move was reckless and destined to lead to harm for those who attempted the journey. Amnesty International spoke to asylum-seekers and migrants, some of whom had arrived on free buses, who stated they had understood from those operating the buses that the borders had been completely opened and they would be able to walk through unrestricted. It was not clear who had paid for these buses, and some people we interviewed explained they had given up their accommodation and spent all their money to transport their families to the border.

The response from the Greek authorities was categorical. On 28 February Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime Minister, tweeted "Significant numbers of migrants and refugees have gathered in large groups at the Greek-Turkish land border and have attempted to enter the country illegally. I want to be clear: no illegal entries into Greece will be tolerated." Greece bolstered its ground border forces, sending in troops that used tear gas, water cannons, plastic bullets against people attempting to cross the land border, and sent 52 ships to prevent arrivals to the islands.

Greece passed an emergency legislative Act on 2 March suspending new asylum applications for a month. In consequence, at sea most new arrivals were held arbitrarily in port facilities and other areas, unable to claim asylum and at risk of return to Turkey or to countries of 'origin or transit'. Later on, Greece announced

¹ Council of the European Union, "EU-Turkey Statement," 18 March 2016, available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/pressreleases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/>. The document is technically only a "statement," but as it is usually referred to as a "deal," Amnesty International will use the latter term in this document.

that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, asylum services stopped receiving claims. In the weeks following Turkey's announcement to open its borders with the EU, hostility, threats and attacks soared against refugees, NGOs and journalists throughout the Greek islands. Greek authorities now face exceptional challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but all measures need to be taken to provide adequate medical care to those in need.

Greece's actions were initially supported by the EU, which, in the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, thanked the country for being "Europe's shield." The Greek authorities had in brazen violation of EU and international law temporarily suspended the right to seek asylum. In addition, evidence of grave abuses by Greek border troops had mounted, including excessive use of force, beatings, use of live ammunition and systematic pushbacks into Turkey.

1. METHODOLOGY

This briefing covers events which occurred at the land border between Greece and Turkey between 27 February and 27 March and the situation in the Greek islands between 27 February and 23 March.

The briefing refers to migrants, potential asylum seekers and refugees in general terms, without prejudging the status of each person which needs to be determined in a separate, individual procedure.

This briefing was finalised after Greece announced a full lockdown on 22 March in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. On 17 March, to address the risk of an outbreak, the Greek authorities implemented restrictions on the movement of people living in refugee camps. The briefing acknowledges, but does not delve into, the significant difficulties and risks that such limitations pose for the population of the camps, and the broader risks posed by the pandemic for asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants across Greece.

The sections of this report that cover the situation at the Turkey-Greece land borders were produced through on-the-ground research by an Amnesty International delegation on 4 and 5 March in Turkey's Edirne province, which borders Greece. We spoke to 21 men and 13 women seeking safety, and to NGOs and local people in the border area. We requested a meeting with the Governor of Edirne province but did not receive a positive reply. Amnesty International conducted telephone interviews with asylum-seekers, human rights defenders and humanitarian organizations and others on both sides of the border before and after this time.

With regard to the situation on the Greek islands, this report is based on desk research and remote interviews and exchanges with three people seeking safety (one man and two women), seven lawyers and members of legal NGOs, two journalists, six other NGOs and agencies operating on the islands, and various activists. Interviews with refugees and asylum seekers were conducted over the phone and through written exchanges. Where possible, information was corroborated through copies of legal documents, photos and videos.

When reporting extracts of interviews with refugees and migrants, only aliases are used save in cases published widely or where consent was received, in which case full names are used.

In reporting information provided by organisations and lawyers some names are kept anonymous at their request. For the desk-based research component, researchers consulted media and civil society reports in Greek, Turkish and English, legislative acts in Greek, as well as EU and UN press releases, factsheets and other NGOs' and civil society reports. Background information used for this briefing was also gathered in the course of a visit by Amnesty International researchers to the Greek islands of Lesbos and Samos between 8-16 February 2020.

Ahead of the publication of this briefing, relevant extracts of the text have been shared for comment with the Greek and Turkish authorities in March 2020.

2. UNLAWFUL PUSHBACKS AND USE OF FORCE BY GREEK BORDER GUARDS

2.1 PUSHBACKS, BEATINGS AND ARBITRARY DETENTION

“I crossed the river and walked inside Greece for four days and four nights before I was caught. They drove me to a place where they beat me and took my phone and money, 2000 Lira, it was all I had. They took me back across the river to Turkey and left me there without coat or shoes.”

“Mathab” from Deir ez-Zor, Syria on his experience of crossing into Greece on 4 March².

Testimonies by asylum-seekers to Amnesty International provided a consistent picture of how Greek border forces implemented government policy to repel asylum seekers instead of taking their asylum claims. Asylum-seekers who spoke to us and other NGOs reported widespread practices included beatings by border guards with truncheons, periods of detention at sites in the border area ranging from hours to several days, and returning groups of asylum-seekers to Turkey in boats across the Evros river. Amnesty International has previously reported on very similar abuses by Greek border forces implementing pushbacks in previous years.³

Amnesty International spoke to 23 men and women from Afghanistan, Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Pakistan and Syria, all of whom had attempted to cross into Greece irregularly across the Evros river during the first week of March. They explained that they had either been apprehended directly after crossing the river or after walking through Greece for hours or in some cases up to four days. All of the 16 men whom Amnesty International spoke with, bar one man who was already injured at the time that he was apprehended, said that they had been beaten, most often with truncheons, with blows to the body or head but also with kicks

² Interview 5 March

³ See for example Amnesty International *Fear and Fences: Europe's approach to keeping refugees at bay*, pages 57-66. Index no: EUR 03/2544/2015 available at <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EURO325442015ENGLISH.PDF>

and punches. According to the testimonies, beatings occurred at the time people were apprehended while being made to get into minibuses, and/or when they were held at detention sites in the border area. Some of the people we spoke to had obvious trouble walking and bruises on their bodies or head injuries. We spoke to a Syrian man after he had been pushed back from attempting to cross at the Pazarkule/Kastanies official border crossing point who was only able to walk with the assistance of a friend after he had been struck, he stated, by a Greek soldier using his gun. Asylum-seekers told Amnesty International that they were beaten by border forces wearing either military uniform, police uniform or by individuals in plain clothes working in cooperation with uniformed border forces.⁴ A health professional working in Turkey's border region told us that asylum-seekers commonly requested medical assistance following alleged beatings by Greek border guards, and that the numbers of people reporting such injuries had risen to an average of around 50 per day in that location during the first week of March, up from an average of six or seven per day in previous months.⁵

Fifteen people seeking safety, including those with young children, told Amnesty International that they were held in Greek detention facilities in the border area after being apprehended. None of those we spoke with had been informed by the Greek authorities of the reason for their detention, given an opportunity to seek asylum or provided access to lawyers during their detention. Detention periods described to Amnesty International ranged from several hours to several days. All 15 that we spoke with recounted that some or all their possessions, including phones, in some cases passports or other forms of identification, had been taken and not returned by the detaining Greek authorities. Some men, sometimes boys, had had their clothes or shoes taken from them. Asylum-seekers told Amnesty International that border forces also took their money, in some cases thousands of dollars – all the money with which they and their families had hoped to start a new life in Europe.

Interviewees told Amnesty International that they and their families were driven by Greek security forces in minibuses to the Evros river border and taken across to the Turkish side in groups of 10-15 people. Some reported remaining for several hours without clothes, shoes or phone (for communication) in cold temperatures, posing a further risk to their health before they could receive assistance.

2.2 ABUSIVE USE OF “LESS LETHAL” WEAPONS

Greek border forces used tear gas extensively against groups of asylum-seekers and migrants, including families with young children attempting to cross the border. On 4 March Amnesty International observed Greek border guards using tear gas constantly over the three hours that our delegation monitored the Pazarkule border gate. During this time several people returned to the Turkish side, visibly injured and complaining of being hit by tear gas canisters fired by Greek border forces. Other reports were received of use of projectiles and stun grenades that Amnesty International could not verify. A health professional working in Turkey's border region confirmed that some individuals had received medical treatment for injuries consistent with use of plastic bullets.⁶

2.3 DEATHS AND INJURIES RESULTING FROM USE OF LIVE AMMUNITION

Asylum-seekers and migrants frequently reported to Amnesty International and other NGOs that Greek border forces used live ammunition against them, both firing into the air and in their direction, as they attempted to cross the border. We were shown a bullet allegedly fired by a Greek soldier at a group of asylum-seekers as they attempted to cross the Evros river border south of the city of Edirne; allegedly, it narrowly missed them as it lodged in a tree. The Turkish authorities claim that three people were killed as

⁴ In Greece, police forces – including border police – operates under the direction of the Ministry of Citizen Protection, <http://www.mopocp.gov.gr/main.php?lang=EN>. On 12 March 2020 FRONTEX also sent additional assets at Greece's land border. See: <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/frontex-launches-rapid-border-intervention-on-greek-land-border-J7k21h>. Greek army forces in Evros were also enhanced during that period. See <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/ebros-enishyetai-stratos-epiheiriseis-sta-synora>. Further, it was reported that the Greek Supreme Court prosecutor ordered an investigation into news articles about the presence of members of far-right groups on Evros and Lesbos. See: <https://tvxs.gr/news/ellada/parembasi-areioy-pagoy-gia-toys-neonazi-ston-ebro-kaitis-pyrkagies->

⁵ Interview 4 March 2020.

⁶ Interview 4 March

the result of use of force by Greek border forces and that 164 had been injured by 5 March.⁷ A larger number of shootings have been alleged by asylum-seekers and migrants but remain undocumented.

One well-documented case is that of Muhammad Gulzari, a 43-year-old Pakistani man who attempted to cross into Greece at the Pazarkule/Kastanies border crossing point on 4 March. According to an official statement by the Edirne Governor's office he was shot in the chest and pronounced dead in hospital on the same day, while five others were injured with gunshot wounds in the same incident.⁸ Amnesty International witnessed ambulances rushing from the scene at the time of the incident and spoke to a Pakistani man who was uninjured but covered in blood and said that he helped carry his friend from the scene after he had been shot. Amnesty International has received a copy of Muhammed Gülzari's autopsy report which records the fact that a 5mm 5,56 nub bullet was removed from his body. An investigation into the death by Turkish prosecutors continues.

Another well-documented case is that of Muhammad al-Arab, a 22-year-old Syrian man, who also died in the area. The research group Forensic Architecture documented his fatal shooting on 2 March after he crossed into Greek territory.⁹

A less reported case is that of Fatma. On 29 February Fatma, from Syria, was attempting to cross the river Evros south of Edirne to enter Greece along with her husband and six children. Her husband Ahmed told Amnesty International that their six children crossed the river in a boat first while he and his wife and others waited on the Turkish side for the boat to return to take them across, but that as soon as the children reached the Greek side of the river six soldiers arrived in two army vehicles. He explained what happened next:

They fired in the air. My wife was afraid for our kids and wanted to go to them and she went into the river and I went with her. The water at first reached our waist. I am about 1.70 cm and my wife is shorter than me. The Greek soldiers shouted at us in a language I did not understand. I don't think it was English. It must have been Greek. We kept walking in the river towards the Greek side and as we reached just over halfway, towards Greece, the water was at our shoulder and my wife's neck. We raised our hands and kept walking and as we got about 2 or 3 metres from the river bank the Greek soldiers were right in front of us, on the riverbank, about 7 or 8 metres from us, pointing their rifles at us. They shot and we went into the water out of fear. I saw one with a handgun and one with a rifle. I reached the riverbank and my wife was behind me. The last sight I caught of her was when she was standing with her head above water about two meters behind me. The soldiers came towards me, I tried to go back to get my wife but they grabbed me and pushed me face down with my head away from the water so I could not see the river. I tried to get up but the soldier put his rifle to my head so I could not move. In all they shot at least three times.

Ahmed told Amnesty International that he attempted to ask the Greek soldiers about what happened to his wife but they did not answer. After he and his children were detained for four of five hours and their possessions and his and his sons' clothes taken from them, they were driven back to the river and put in a wooden boat that brought them and others back to the Turkish side. Ahmed has returned to the scene to discover what happened to his wife, and has been supported by lawyers in Turkey and Greece who approached the authorities in both countries, but no information is available on the whereabouts of Fatma or whether she was shot and killed, or injured or drowned in the river.

⁷ See Anadolu Agency İçişleri Bakanı Soylu: *Geride itmeleri engellemek için Meriç sınırına bin özel harekat polisi getireceğiz* 5 March, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/icisleri-bakani-soylu-geri-itmeleri-engellemek-icin-meric-sinirina-bin-ozel-harekat-polisi-getirecegiz/1755486>

⁸ Press release by the Edirne Governorship 4 March, available at <http://www.edirne.gov.tr/basin-aciklamasi->

⁹ See Forensic Architecture video *The Killing of Mohammad al-Arab* available at <https://vimeo.com/395567226>

3. CONDITIONS IN TURKEY

“We heard that the border was open, so we sold everything we had and came here. Now our money is finished. We’ve been here for six days.”

“Razan” a woman in her 30s part of family of six from Kirkuk, Iraq, sleeping at Edirne bus station

A wealth of evidence shows that the Turkish authorities facilitated and encouraged the movement of asylum-seekers and migrants to the Greek border after President Erdogan’s 27 February announcement that the country’s western borders would be opened. Amnesty International observed buses travelling towards the border in convoy escorted by ambulance and police vehicles, state officials paying for fuel for buses and gendarmerie officers disembarking people and instructing them to walk the short remaining distance to the river Evros border. This facilitation continued during the first week of March, after abuses by Greek border forces and deaths and injuries at the border had been reported. While after the first week of March the authorities began to encourage and facilitate travel away from the border, interviewees also told Amnesty International that they were provided with free bus transportation to the border but then required to pay inflated sums for travel back.¹⁰ Asylum-seekers and migrants also told us that they were told prior to boarding buses that “the borders were open”; they had understood that they and their families would walk through the official border gates unrestricted.¹¹ While states in any instance are required to ensure that the rights of all people within their jurisdiction are upheld, the Turkish authorities in these circumstances could be expected to have had a greater degree of preparedness to meet the needs of those who travelled to the border area seeking safety.

The most severe shortage observed by Amnesty International in the border area was lack of decent shelter. While there were instances of asylum-seekers and migrants being accommodated by the authorities, in a sports centre, for instance, almost all of the people seeking safety that we spoke with had slept in the open in the area close to the border.¹² We spoke with families who had spent up to five days sleeping in fields, some with makeshift tents made with tarpaulin or plastic sheeting bought at inflated prices, with blankets, or nothing at all. While transport had been provided for people to travel away from the border area as of 26 March an estimated five to six thousand people remained in the border area, groups of people were camped out at the transit point of Istanbul’s main bus station and other areas of the city. People who had remained at an informal camp told Amnesty International that on the morning of 27 March the Turkish authorities cleared the informal camp, burning tents at the Pazarkule border gate.¹³ The Turkish authorities reported that the

¹⁰ Interviews 4,5 March

¹¹ Interviews 4, 5 March

¹² Interviews 4,5 March

¹³ Interview 27 March

camp had been cleared and that 5,800 people had been transferred to nine different locations where they would remain in quarantine for 14 days as a precaution due to the spread of Covid-19.¹⁴

Sanitation was also a significant problem, with many people camped in rural areas close to the border. The Pazarkule border gate where thousands of people had gathered did have NGO-provided portable toilets and hygiene kits, but as with other services they were far below the number required for such a large group of people. An NGO representative told Amnesty International that the Turkish authorities had rejected a proposal to install showers, and washing facilities were absent, an issue of heightened concern given fears regarding the spread of Covid-19 and the particular vulnerability of asylum-seekers and migrants.¹⁵ Despite the best efforts of NGOs, food provision was also far below the level required, leaving people vulnerable to opportunistic private vendors selling food items at vastly inflated prices. This situation in addition to massively inflated prices for transport contributed to the destitution of already poor refugees effectively trapped in the border area.¹⁶

3.1 HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS

Amnesty International observed, and was told by journalists working in the border area that the Turkish authorities attempted to stop effective independent reporting of the events taking place in the border area.¹⁷ Journalists were prevented at various periods from filming or reporting at the Pazarkule border crossing point and at Doyran, a village next to the river Evros border where crowds had gathered to attempt the border crossing. A total of at least 13 international and independent Turkey media journalists were detained in both locations, mostly on grounds of entering or filming in a first-degree prohibited military zone, despite the fact that Turkish state media and government supporting media was present and filming at the same locations. Most journalists were quickly released without formal proceedings, but on 28 February police detained Rawin Sterk Yıldız and cameraman Mehmet Şirin Akgün, journalists for the Kurdish Erbil-based Rudaw news agency. While Mehmet Şirin Akgün was released on 4 March, Rawin Sterk Yıldız remains in pre-trial detention on unrelated but similarly baseless charges regarding his social media posts investigated by the authorities after he was detained at the Pazarkule border area.¹⁸

¹⁴ See for example Sendika.org *Çadırlar yakıldı, Pazarkule boşaltıldı: Yunanistan sınırındaki mülteciler sessiz sedasız illere götürüldü* available at <https://sendika63.org/2020/03/cadirlar-yakildi-pazarkule-bosaltildi-yunanistan-sinirindaki-multeciler-sessiz-sedasiz-illere-goturuldu-581793/>

¹⁵ Interview 4 March

¹⁶ Interviews 4,5 March

¹⁷ Interviews 29 February – 6 March.

¹⁸ See amnesty statement at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/2037/2020/en/>

4. THE SITUATION ON THE GREEK SIDE OF THE BORDER

4.1 THE SUSPENSION OF THE RIGHT TO SEEK ASYLUM IN GREECE AND THE EU'S RESPONSE

Greece responded to the situation unfolding at its land borders with Turkey with draconian measures across the country, in blatant breach of the right to asylum and the principle of *non-refoulement*. On 2 March, a new 'Act of Legislative Content' suspended the registration of asylum claims for a month for people entering irregularly from 1 March,¹⁹ so that they would be returned '*without registration, to the country of origin or transit*'. However, Asylum Services were temporarily suspended on 13 March due to the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁰ Other measures taken in response to Turkey's move²¹ included the strengthening of border control at land and sea employing 'security forces and armed forces to the maximum level', a request to the EU's Border and Coast Guard (EBCG) for the deployment of rapid border intervention teams (RABIT) and one of support to the EU Council.²² In response, the EU Commission mobilised 700 million Euros to support Greece's reception capacity and voluntary returns. Meanwhile, the EBCG arranged the deployment of assets for 2 RABIT operations and patrol assets and was requested to support a programme on returns.²³ The European Commission has so far refrained from recognising the illegality under EU law of Greece's suspension of asylum applications and ensuing returns.²⁴ EU Home Affairs commissioner Ylva Johansson hinted that the Commission would look at Greece's measures in light of derogations allowed under the relevant EU *acquis*.²⁵

¹⁹ Act of legislative content on the 'Suspension of the submission of asylum applications', 2 March 2020, in Greek at:

<http://www.immigration.gr/2020/03/pnp-anastolh-ths-yppovolis-aithseon-asylou.html?m=1>.

The 'Act of Legislative Content' ceased to apply on the 1 April 2020 as its duration was for a month. However, new arrivals and other individuals will not be able to register asylum claim because the Asylum Service's administrative services have been temporarily suspended since the 13 March following the Covid19 pandemic.

²⁰ See <http://asylo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Annoucement-Suspension-of-Services-to-the-Public-English.pdf>

²¹ Measures agreed by the Greek Government Council on National Security (KYSEA). See

<https://www.thenationalherald.com/289130/measures-to-guard-greeces-eastern-borders-to-be-stepped-up-to-maximum-kysea-meeting-decides/>

²² Notification pursuant to Article 78.3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

²³ European Commission, Press remarks by Vice-President Schinas on immediate actions to support Greece 4 March 2020, at:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_20_395.

²⁴ The Guardian, 'Greece warned by EU it must uphold the right to asylum', 6 March 2020, at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/12/greece-warned-by-eu-it-must-uphold-the-right-to-asylum>.

²⁵ Permissible derogations under the EU Asylum Procedures Directive No. 2013/32, Articles Nos 6(5), 14(1), 31(3)(b), 49; 'Return' Directive No. 2008/115 at Article 18.

According to UNHCR “neither the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor EU refugee law provides any legal basis for the suspension of the reception of asylum applications”.²⁶ Indeed, the measures enacted by Greece go well beyond derogations allowed under EU law.²⁷

We also question the legality of the deployment of EBCG’s assets given Greece’s suspension of asylum and evidence of pushbacks, police abuses and violence at the border.²⁸

4.2 IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: PROSECUTION OF ASYLUM-SEEKERS FOR IRREGULAR ENTRY AND ARBITRARY DETENTION AT SEA BORDERS

Following the suspension of asylum, those entering Greece irregularly face prosecution for irregular entry and prison sentences of up to four years, in a departure from previous practice where Greek courts refrained from prosecuting such crime in cases involving asylum seekers. Since 1 March, the legal NGO HIAS has assisted 10 cases where charges have been brought against people who arrived after 1 March and who are barred from claiming asylum. In seven of these the defendants were subjected to speedy trials, charged with 3.5 years in detention and are now in prison. In three cases, those charged are unaccompanied minors, currently awaiting trial in migration detention facilities.²⁹ Many more of these proceedings are likely to have been brought across the country since 1 March.

In the absence of a functioning asylum system, new arrivals are unable to show ‘good cause’ for entering irregularly. As such, such prosecutions are at odds with the prohibition of penalization of asylum-seekers and refugees for irregular entry, under Article 31 of the 1951 Refugee Convention,³⁰ which covers prosecution and detention for irregular entry.³¹

Since the suspension of asylum applications, new arrivals were also no longer granted accommodation in reception facilities for asylum-seekers, so authorities stopped transferring them to the hotspots on the Aegean islands. As a result, for at least 10 days, most of those landed in Lesbos were transferred to the ‘Rodos’ navy ship docked in Mytilini and in the port area, which ultimately hosted 510 people, including Syrians, Afghans, Somalis and Palestinians.³² The group included 210 children, some of whom were unaccompanied. People on the ‘Rodos’ were unable to claim asylum and were treated as irregular entrants and fingerprinted. They were held in detention pending a decision to return them to their countries of origin (repatriation), with no prior individual assessment, despite many of those onboard being nationals of countries with well-documented human rights violations. Amnesty International is informed that decisions were issued in cases of pregnant women, new mothers, who are protected from deportation under Greek law, as well as elderly people, people with disabilities, children and people in other vulnerable situations.³³

On 13 March, people in this group were unexpectedly served decisions to return them to Turkey (currently pending), under the EU-Turkey deal, in contrast with the original pre-repatriation detention orders issued under the Act of Legislative Content of 2 March. Through these decisions the original detention orders were extended.³⁴

²⁶ UNHCR statement on the situation at the Turkey-EU border, 2 March 2020, at:

<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2020/3/5e5d08ad4/unhcr-statement-situation-turkey-eu-border.html>. See also: UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, ‘Greece: Rights violations against asylum seekers at Turkey-Greece border must stop’, 23 March 2020, at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25736&LangID=E>

²⁷ See: Amnesty International, ‘Greece: Inhumane asylum measures will put lives at risk’, 2 March 2020, at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/greece-inhumane-asylum-measures-will-put-lives-at-risk/>.

²⁸ See EU Regulation no. 2019/1895, Article 46.5. Along the same lines, see the opinions of experts reported by Euronews, ‘Frontex border operation in Greece ‘lacks legal basis’ after Greece suspends asylum law’, 11 March 2020, at:

<https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/10/frontex-border-operation-in-greece-lacks-legal-basis-after-greece-suspends-asylum-law>.

²⁹ Interview with members of the legal NGO HIAS on 10, 16 and 18 March 2020.

³⁰ UN General Assembly, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951, Article 31.1

³¹ Goodwin-Gill, Guy S. “Article 31 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees: Non-penalization, Detention and Protection”, 2001, para. 29, at: <https://www.unhcr.org/3bcfdf164.pdf>

³² Based on interviews with “Firas”, see footnote no. 27 and legal NGOs who managed to have access.

³³ For the whole paragraph: Information from organizations operating in Lesbos. Also, interviews with the legal NGO HIAS on 10, 16 and 18 March 2020.

³⁴ Interview with members of the legal NGO HIAS on 10, 16 and 18 March 2020.

Legal NGOs in Lesvos also faced serious issues in accessing those on the ship or having meaningful interactions with clients.³⁵ Given the large number of people onboard, it is unlikely that access to legal information, representation or language assistance, as required by EU and international law, was secured for all.³⁶ According to Firas, a Palestinian man from Damascus on the 'Rodos' since 4 March, papers served to him were in Greek and no interpretation was available. Similar experiences were confirmed by legal NGOs' reports.³⁷

Furthermore, those on the ship lived in deeply inadequate conditions. Firas, on the ship since 4 March, explained that food was inadequate and hygienic facilities severely lacking. There were only eight chemical toilets without running water and no showers. "*We have been here 10 days with the same clothes, without showering*", he told Amnesty International.³⁸ Medical care was inadequate, despite the presence of people with disabilities or health issues, including a girl in need of dialysis.³⁹

On 14 March, 450 of those on the ship were eventually transferred to detention camps in mainland Greece in Malakasa and Sérres.⁴⁰

Amnesty International has also learned of new arrivals being held in various areas of Lesvos, including – since the 5 March – on the beaches of Skala Sikaminias (42 people), later in Korakas (28), and in a building in Eftalou (24), without registration, in unclear legal circumstances and deeply inadequate conditions. Those in Skala Sikaminias and Korakas were left without any shelter nor access to washing facilities. As of 17 March, those in these groups including a new mother, had been delivered a three-day provisional detention decision in view of an upcoming repatriation decision.⁴¹

Those in these locations, together with the remainder of those held on the 'Rodos' were transferred to detention camps on the mainland on 20 March.⁴²

However, to Amnesty International's knowledge, hundreds of others have been held in conditions similar to those on the ship in various other port locations across the other Aegean islands of Leros, Samos, Kos and Chios.

On **Leros**, around 250 were held first in the yard of the coastguard and subsequently in the port area, in inadequate conditions.⁴³ In **Samos**, 93 persons were held in a coastguard facility in the capital Vathy.⁴⁴

On the island of **Kos**, at least 220 new arrivals, many of whom were children, were kept in the port area. Some were held in a building normally used as a waiting area, while some were left to stay in tents and exposed to harsh weather conditions.⁴⁵ As of 18 March, all of them were moved to a building used for customs controls. Pregnant women, children and people with disabilities were in the group. Manar, a Syrian woman, told Amnesty International that medical assistance was inadequate and that people's phones were confiscated. Manar, who has renal calculi, says that during her stay in the facility the police mistreated her, including by kicking her and forcing her to stand up from the floor and sit on a chair when she was too fatigued to do so, and left her to wait for over an hour before she was transferred to receive medical assistance.⁴⁶

³⁵ Some NGOs who were prevented access were directed by the port authorities to the Public prosecutor, who confirmed their right to access those on the ship. Phone interview with HIAS on 16 and 18 March and written exchange with RSA (Refugee Support Aegean) on 30 March 2020. See also Lesvos Legal Centre (LLC) report, 'No man's land for Europe's undesirables', 13 March 2020 <http://legalcentresvos.org/2020/03/13/no-mans-lands-for-europes-undesirables/>.

³⁶ In violation of Article 13.3 the EU Return Directive.

³⁷ Phone interview with Firas on 10 March 2020. The NGO Lesvos Legal Centre (LLC) confirms similar accounts from others on the ship (report in footnote n.14)

³⁸ Phone interview with Firas on 10 March 2020

³⁹ Phone interview with members of the legal NGO HIAS on 10, 16 and 18 March 2020 and subsequent written exchanges.

⁴⁰ From 13-17 March the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) carried out a rapid reaction visit to Greece to assess the treatments applied to new arrivals since 1 March 2020. In addition to locations in Evros, the CPT visited the camp of Malakasa, where many of those held in the military ship in Lesvos have been transferred, and the detention cells under the authority of the Hellenic Police at the Coastguard premises in Samos. At: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/-/anti-torture-committee-undertakes-rapid-reaction-visit-to-greece-to-examine-treatment-of-migrants>. See: local media (in Greek) on the new camp in Serres: <https://www.stonisi.gr/post/7757/189-apo-th-lesvo-gia-to-kleiditw-n-serwn>

⁴¹ Information from organizations operating in Lesvos. The legal NGO HIAS is assisting one person from this group: interview with members of HIAS on 30 March 2020.

⁴² Full breakdown at Aegean boat report as of 20 March at: <https://www.facebook.com/AegeanBoatReport/>.

⁴³ Interview with a solidarian working in Leros, on 11 March 2020.

⁴⁴ Based on publicly available reports as to 13 March 2020: <https://www.documentationews.gr/article/exwdiko-astynomikwn-sta-nhsia-enantion-xrysoxoidh-mhtarakh-kai-kikilia-eiste-aneparkeis-kai-tha-logodothsete>.

⁴⁵ interview with Kos local 18 March 2020

⁴⁶ Phone interview and written exchange with Manar on 22 March 2020.

In Chios, 254 were held in the port area.⁴⁷ Aiki Potamianou, a Chios-based lawyer working for the legal NGO Equal Rights Beyond Borders, told Amnesty International that the prosecutor denied her access and her requests for access to the police remained pending up until the transfer of detainees to the mainland.⁴⁸

As of 20 March, most of new arrivals held on the Aegean and other islands up to that point were transferred to detention facilities on the mainland.⁴⁹ As of 23 March, sea arrivals to Greece for the month amounted to 2.281 people,⁵⁰ over 500 of whom arrived on the smaller Dodecanese islands.⁵¹

4.3 ATTACKS AGAINST AND HARASSMENT OF REFUGEES, NGOS AND JOURNALISTS

Within the context of these developments, tensions mounted within the local population in the Aegean islands and in several cases led to attacks against refugees, NGOs and journalists and other organisations. Even before Turkey's announcement, the constant state of overcrowding of refugees' facilities in the years following the EU-Turkey deal had fuelled social tension on the islands. From 2019, the government began to adopt a rhetoric of increased hostility and suspicion against NGOs working with refugees, in some cases blaming them for episodes of unrest among the refugee population and putting them under stricter controls.⁵² In the words of the Greek government's spokesperson Stelios Petsas, "many NGOs may have helped decisively [...] but others operated in a faulty and parasitic manner."⁵³

The root of the new friction appeared to be the government's plans to create new "closed" asylum facilities on the islands, pursued despite opposition by locals.⁵⁴ As the government took steps to implement the plans in February 2020, including by expropriating private land, clashes followed in Lesvos and Chios between the islanders and riot police units.⁵⁵ Allegations of use of teargas and water cannons by the police against local protesters, as well as attacks on the riot police, were reported in local media.⁵⁶

Turkey's announcement of 27 February that it would no longer stop crossings into Greece occurred against this backdrop. This set the stage for an escalation of locals' reactions to new arrivals via sea, which also increased over this period⁵⁷ and led to attacks by local vigilante groups on refugees, journalists and NGOs.⁵⁸ On 1 March in Lesvos a dinghy with 50 adults and children on board arrived in Thermi and was actively prevented from disembarking by a crowd of locals gathered in protest on the dockside, verbally abusing those onboard.⁵⁹ Giorgos Christides, a journalist for Der Spiegel there to report on the incident, was also attacked. He recalls: "*When I tried to report on what was happening and to record the scene on my phone, I*

⁴⁷ Local media reports: https://www.ethnos.gr/ellada/94470_hios-ta-mpopor-sikosan-ston-aera-ton-katavlysmo-prosfygon-sto-limani. Partly different numbers here: <https://www.documentonews.gr/article/exwdiko-astynomikwn-sta-nhsia-enantion-xrysoxoidh-mhtarakh-kai-kikilia-eiste-aneparkeis-kai-tha-logodothsete>.

⁴⁸ Interview with Aiki Potamianou, of Equal Rights Beyond Borders, on 13 and 16 March.

⁴⁹ Full breakdown at Aegean Boat Report (ABR) as of 20 March at: <https://www.facebook.com/AegeanBoatReport/>, specifically: People from the Aegean islands and some Dodecanese islands were boarded on the boats "Aqua Blue" and "SuperJet" and transferred to the camps in the area of Klidi, Sérres, northern Greece, and Malakasa, north of Athens: "Arrivals in detention from Lesvos(192 people), Chios(283 people), Samos(129 people) and Kea(190 people), will be taken to Sérres deportation center. Arrivals in detention from Leros(252 people), Kos(237 people), Kastelorizo(106 people), Syri(21 people), Kalymnos(60 people) and Rhodes(43 people), will be taken to Malakasa deportation center". It should be noted that, also due to developments occurred in the meantime, final numbers reported by ABR differ from numbers reported in the main text.

⁵⁰ Estimates by Aegean Boat Report (ABR) as of 18 March 2020, 09:04 am, at: <https://bit.ly/3dplFNB>. Partly different estimates by UNHCR's, which, as of 18 March, indicated a monthly total of 2.368 arrivals.

⁵¹ UNHCR Aegean Islands Weekly Snapshot of 2-8 March and 9-15 March, at: <https://bit.ly/2JcgU5f>.

⁵² DW, Greece: NGOs accused of stoking unrest in refugee camp, 10 February 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/greece-ngos-accused-of-stoking-unrest-in-refugee-camp/a-52320720>

⁵³ Euractiv, Greece passes new law to better monitor NGOs dealing with migration, 5 February 2020, at:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/greece-passes-new-law-to-better-monitor-ngos-dealing-with-migration/>. See also: Punishing compassion. Solidarity on trial in fortress Europe, March 2020, p. 52, at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0118282020ENGLISH.PDF>.

⁵⁴ The Guardian, Greece to replace island refugee camps with 'detention centres', 20 November 2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2y2Dzot>. Also, Exchange between Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović and the Minister of Citizen Protection of Greece, Michalis Chrysochoidis, 3 December 2019 at: <https://bit.ly/3bkPLze>.

⁵⁵ The Guardian, Greek authorities scramble to calm tensions over migrant detention camp, 25 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ds3xC1> and 'Police and protesters clash on Greek islands over new migrant camps', 25 Feb 2020, <https://bit.ly/39hu4ij>.

⁵⁶ For reports of clashes see: Al Jazeera, Scuffles break out over migrant camps on Greek islands, 25 Feb 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2JmiiZf>. See also: <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2020/02/25/greece-islands-lesvos-chios-police-migration-centers/>. For the attacks on the police see: <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2020/02/26/lesvos-chaos-locals-weapons-against-riot-police/>.

⁵⁷ UNHCR Weekly Snapshots of 02-08 March and 24 February - 1 March 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2vROLWf>. Between 1 and 2 March reports also emerged of dangerous practices by the Greek Coastguard: <https://bit.ly/2Ulsms3>. A refugee child drowned after a dinghy capsized off Lesvos, 2 March 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3bqYK1Z>.

⁵⁸ For a comprehensive timeline of the attacks see: <https://rsaegean.org/en/timeline-of-attacks-against-solidarity/>.

⁵⁹ For media reports see: <https://bit.ly/2QKzXOo>.

*was threatened, pushed and shoved by locals on the dock. A policeman on duty at the scene saw the incident but failed to intervene. I complained to him but I was told 'don't provoke them'.*⁶⁰

Christides was also attacked at the many roadblocks patrolled by locals around Lesbos. A group targeted his rental car, others tried to block his way and hit him twice on the hand with a stick through the car window. He remarked to Amnesty International: "In general, you are not in danger working as a journalist in Greece. I have been covering the country since 2011. This was the first time I was scared, that I felt I should be looking over my shoulder".⁶¹

German journalist Franziska Grillmeier and photographer Julian Busch faced similar attacks on 2 March. When driving towards Moria camp, they came across a big group of men carrying sticks, stones and sharp pieces of glass. Grillmeier recalls: "*When one of them noticed us and realised that I was a foreigner, he tried to jump on the car and open the doors, calling the others in the group. We managed to speed up and leave, although one man tried to throw himself on the car to stop it and others ran beside it throwing stones and sticks*".⁶²

NGOs and international organisations have also been targeted by attacks in this period. MSF, which runs a clinic outside Moria camp and a clinic for people with severe mental health issues in Mytilene, was forced to suspend operations for two days,⁶³ because of the situation of insecurity and uncertainty and the limited access to the camp due to the roadblocks in the area.⁶⁴

Other NGOs suffered more lasting damage. UNHCR's "Stage 2" transit camp for refugees in North Lesbos was set on fire on 1 March.⁶⁵

On 7 March, a fire also hit 'One Happy Family' (OHF) Community Centre in Lesbos. There were no injuries or casualties, but substantial damage was inflicted on the property, as the Centre's 'School of Peace' was burned down as well as the two main offices of the NGO. "*We had been closed for two weeks at the time of the fire following the tensions on the island, so luckily nobody was inside*", OHF's coordinator Julia Bürge told Amnesty International "*The fire brigade acted fast and did a very good job. Now we are trying to figure out how to move forward. There are still many unanswered and open questions*".⁶⁶ On 20 March, the Mytilene police classified the incident as arson and three individuals were charged.⁶⁷

In **Samos**, although to a lesser degree, attacks have also left a mark. The car of a nurse working at the Samos hospital⁶⁸ and one of the vehicles of the NGO Arsis - implementing partners of UNHCR's ESTIA project⁶⁹ were set on fire.

In **Kos**, after clashes broke out in front of the RIC on 4 March, early on 5 March a group of locals attacked the van of the NGO Metadrasis, as three staff members were transferring two refugees to Kos General Hospital.⁷⁰ On 3 March in **Chios** a warehouse run by volunteers, providing non-food items to refugees and marginalised groups, was destroyed by a fire, later determined to be arson.⁷¹

Many other attacks have taken place across the islands. According to M., one of Chios volunteers, "*a change is happening on the island: we are starting to see negativity by locals towards NGOs and volunteers, whereas in the beginning of the refugee crisis they were applauded*".⁷² Following the incidents, many NGOs have been forced to reduce or suspend operations, being unable to operate effectively or safely. This has

⁶⁰ Interview with Giorgos Christedes on 11 March 2020. On 1 March, another journalist, Michael Trammer, and a member of UNHCR were also attacked. See: VICE, 'Video Shows Greek Mobs Attacking Migrant Boats and Aid Workers', 3 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/39nFdhs>.

⁶¹ Interview with Giorgos Christides on 11 March 2020.

⁶² Interview with Franziska Grillmeier, 11 March 2020

⁶³ See MSF statement condemning attacks, 29 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bqZzb5>.

⁶⁴ Interview with MSF field coordination in Lesbos on 12 March 2020.

⁶⁵ Stage 2 camp had been ordered to close on 31 January 2020 by municipal authorities and had been recently proposed for re-opening temporarily, See: <https://bit.ly/2wtcpXl>.

⁶⁶ Interview with OHF's coordinator Julia Bürge on 9 March 2020.

⁶⁷ Two foreigners and a national of foreign origin were arrested. See Police press release (in Greek) on 20 March 2020.

<https://bit.ly/33QhQfp> and OHF's own reactive statement: <https://bit.ly/2QEpm7R>.

⁶⁸ Also, an apartment where NGO volunteers resided had stones thrown at: <https://bit.ly/33T6siT>. Other media reports at: <https://www.efsyn.gr/node/234264>. Criminal charges have been brought against 4 people found to have been involved in the 3 incidents, see reports of 27 March 2020: <https://www.efsyn.gr/node/236825>.

⁶⁹ Interview with a NGO member operating in Samos, on 12 March 2020. ESTIA provided accommodation to vulnerable asylum seekers: <http://estia.unhcr.gr/en/home/>.

⁷⁰ See Metadrasis' own statement on 13 March 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2QvbZXh>.

⁷¹ Local media report (in Greek) and photos see: <https://bit.ly/2QIQxhK>.

⁷² Interview with a volunteer operating in Chios on 11 March 2020.

weakened the support system available to refugees on the islands, who increasingly turn to NGOs for basic services like education or healthcare.⁷³

The restrictive measures adopted by the Greek Government in response to COVID-19,⁷⁴ including movement restrictions in camps and rules preventing NGOs from working inside camps, further limited the rights and freedoms of the refugee population in camps. This, combined with the temporary suspension of asylum service operations, is likely to significantly affect the lives of the over 40.000 refugees on the islands.⁷⁵

In the midst of the above, the Greek authorities took some steps to address the attacks on NGOs. On 6 March two residents of Lesbos were sentenced to three months' suspended prison sentences for threatening a member of the NGO PIKPA on social media and planning to carry out attacks on NGO staff.⁷⁶ More cases of attacks have been brought and investigated since, and while the attacks have fuelled fear and uncertainty, they have also encouraged solidarity for and support to NGOs. *"During this time support has been overwhelming. Many locals have shown great solidarity"* says Julia Bürge *"We have been grateful for the offers of support, however what we need most right now is political change"*.⁷⁷

⁷³ See also the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants flagging concerns about the hostility against humanitarian workers, HRDs and journalists in Greece (footnote n.7)

⁷⁴ Restrictions in General on 17 March, <https://www.stonisi.gr/post/7728/kleinei-h-moria>.

⁷⁵ Restrictions were adopted on 17 March: Ministry of Migration and asylum, Coronavirus protection measures at Reception and Identification Centers, Hosting Structures and the Asylum Service, at: <https://bit.ly/2JcQXJh>. Since 22 March, the country announced a full lockdown: <https://bit.ly/39ohFsS>.

⁷⁶ Report (in Greek) on the case in local media, 05 March 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2UjohUZ>.

⁷⁷ Interview with OHF's coordinator Julia Bürge on 9 March 2020.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GREEK AUTHORITIES:

- Urgently restore the right to seek asylum in the country.
- Protect people entering Greece from land and sea borders: ensure safe access to the territory and access to protection procedures and basic services. Refrain in all cases from pushbacks, *refoulement* and collective expulsions. Conduct prompt, impartial and effective investigations into allegations of such practices.
- Ensure that measures such as restrictions on movement implemented in response to Covid-19 are applied in a manner consistent with international human rights law and standards, including the protection of the right to seek asylum and the principle of *non-refoulement*.
- Ensure that despite the temporary closure of the Asylum Service in Greece, the right to asylum is upheld at all times. People affected by the temporary suspension of the Asylum Service operations should not be exposed to risks as a result, including risk of *refoulement*, and should be provided with access to healthcare, accommodation, material support and other basic services. To this end, where applicable, the validity of the documentation required to have access to health care and other services should be automatically extended during this period.

WITH REGARD TO PEOPLE HELD IN DETENTION ACROSS GREECE AND NEW ARRIVALS FROM 1 MARCH:

- Immediately release all people held in arbitrary detention conditions across the country and grant them access to basic services, including adequate shelter, and access to protection procedures.
- Halt the criminalization of irregular entry of asylum seekers, who should be exempted from both criminal prosecution and detention and granted access to protection procedures.
- Regarding those who entered Greece from 1 March and have so far not been registered with the authorities or served with return decisions, Greece must urgently clarify their legal status, grant them access to legal assistance and information and where applicable, release them from detention as above and grant them access to protection procedures.
- Conduct prompt, impartial and effective investigations into the allegations of mistreatment of people held in the port facilities of Kos, as well as any allegation of mistreatment or abuse raised in relation to the detention of new entrants.

WITH REGARD TO NGOS AND JOURNALISTS:

- Protect humanitarian actors, members of NGOs, volunteers and activists working with asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants. Create the conditions for them to operate effectively and safely in Greece.
- Protect journalists and media workers and ensure that they can exercise their role free of threats or intimidation.
- Conduct prompt, impartial and effective investigations into all incidents of violence, threats, harassment or other undue interference with the activities of these groups.

TO EU INSTITUTIONS AND MEMBER STATES:

- Take urgent measures to ensure that Greece restores conditions that ensure the respect of European asylum and fundamental rights law.
- In view of the suspension of the asylum system in Greece for a month, of the evidence of pushbacks and violence at the border, withdraw the deployment of EBCG's border control and intervention assets.
- Affirm the right to asylum and respect for international law in Europe, and unequivocally condemn pushbacks, collective expulsions and unlawful returns.
- Uphold the principle of solidarity under EU and international law by effectively and meaningfully relocating asylum seekers from Greece and resettling refugees from Turkey. While the relocation and resettlement programmes may be temporarily affected by public health restrictions adopted in response to Covid-19, this should not have the result of impeding the transfer of asylum seekers, with priority to those in vulnerable circumstances, nor the continuation of relocation and resettlement plans on the longer term. Such efforts should continue without prejudice to health screenings or checks that might be necessary.
- Recognise the vital role of HRDs helping refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants and insist that in Europe, aid workers and journalists should operate unhindered and be protected from violence

TO THE TURKISH AUTHORITIES:

- Press the EU and its member states and other wealthy states to accept their responsibility for hosting refugees and asylum-seekers and to make greater financial contributions to countries such as Turkey and others who host a disproportionately larger number of refugees, through negotiation and dialogue in a way that does not threaten the rights of people seeking safety.
- Refrain from making announcements or taking unilateral actions that are likely to result in greater harm rather protection for people seeking safety.

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CAUGHT IN A POLITICAL GAME

ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS ON THE GREECE/TURKEY BORDER PAY THE PRICE FOR EUROPE'S FAILURES

On 27 February 2020, the Turkish authorities announced that their western borders would be opened to asylum-seekers and migrants in the country wishing to leave. Families and individuals from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries rushed to the land border with Greece, in the belief that their borders were open. They were not.

The response of the Greek authorities was categoric. Across the country, asylum applications were suspended for a month. At land borders, violent pushbacks, water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition were used against those trying to enter, in disregard of international human rights law. Border control measures at sea were reinforced.

In the face of these actions, EU authorities initially commended Greece for being Europe's "shield" and only in a second moment sought to address human rights concerns. Meanwhile, some of those entering Greece irregularly faced prosecution and prison sentences. Hundreds of people reaching the Aegean islands were detained arbitrarily in various port areas and threatened with return without having the opportunity to seek asylum. Tensions on the islands mounted, with local vigilante groups engaging in a spree of attacks against asylum-seekers and migrants, NGOs and journalists, in a climate of increasing hostility.