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Human Rights in Europe - Review of 2019 - Cyprus [EUR 01/2098/2020]

The year saw an upward trend in refugee and migrant flows and asylum applications

In November the UN Secretary-General met the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot leaders, who renewed their commitment to achieving a comprehensive and durable settlement within a foreseeable horizon.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Between January and September, 1,500 refugees and migrants arrived by sea, compared to 400 during the same period in 2018. Cyprus continued to have the highest number of registered first-time asylum applicants per capita in the European Union (EU). Between January and December, 13,259 people registered their asylum claims, in comparison to 7,761 during the whole of 2018. Meanwhile, despite a reported increase in the number of staff dealing with asylum claims, the backlog of applications reached over 16,437 by the end of the year.

The NGO Cyprus Refugee Council expressed concern that the increase in numbers worsened pre-existing shortfalls in asylum procedures and reception conditions. In particular, lack of capacity in the Kofinou reception centre, together with insufficient material assistance, resulted in many asylum-seekers living in housing of poor quality or being homeless.

At the end of September, Ahmed H., a Syrian national and a former long-term resident of Cyprus, was allowed to return to Cyprus and reunite with his family. He had been imprisoned for more than three years by the Hungarian authorities and unjustly convicted of “complicity in an act of terrorism”. Following his release, he spent more than eight months in immigration detention waiting for the Cypriot authorities to decide on his fate. During that time, Ahmed H. was at risk of being forcibly returned to Syria.

Enforced disappearances

Efforts to establish the fate of the people who went missing during the inter-communal fighting of 1963 to 1964 and the events of 1974 continued. During the year, the Committee of Missing Persons in Cyprus exhumed the remains of 28 people, bringing the total number of exhumations since 2006 to 1,217. Between 2006 and 2019, the remains of 969 missing individuals (700 Greek Cypriots and 269 Turkish Cypriots) were identified.

Violence against women and girls

In April, the uncovering of the murders of five migrant women and two young migrant girls by a serial killer drew international attention to the multiple forms of discrimination and exploitation experienced by female migrant workers in the country. The NGO KISA denounced the authorities' failure to take special measures to protect migrant women subjected to gender-based violence and called for an investigation into the handling of the case by the police.

Serious concerns arose about the reported shortcomings of the police investigation into a British teenager's report of being subjected to gang rape, and the fairness of a subsequent trial where she was convicted by a district court in December of making the claim falsely.

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people (LGBTI)

A bill on the legal recognition of gender identity opened for public consultation in 2018 had not been submitted to Parliament by the end of the year. The bill provides that transgender people can change their official identity documents without medical interventions or tests and mental health assessments being required. The bill does not impose blanket age restrictions, although for minors, a mental health assessment and a court order is needed.

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Report on the human rights situation covering 2019



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