

Amnesty International Report 2015/16 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Greece

The dramatic increase in arrivals of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants on the Aegean islands pushed an ineffective first reception system beyond breaking point. Collective expulsions continued at the Greek-Turkish border. Allegations of torture and other ill-treatment and excessive use of force by police persisted. A law extending civil unions to same-sex couples was voted at the end of the year.

Background

At the end of June, the government imposed capital controls on banks while in a July referendum 61.3% of voters rejected a stringent bailout plan by Greece's creditors. Shortly after, following several months of intensive negotiations, the government agreed a new bail-out plan with the European Institutions and the International Monetary Fund.

In October, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed concern about the severe impact of the financial crisis on the enjoyment of the rights to work, social security and health particularly by certain disadvantaged groups.

The trial of 69 people including the leader, MPs and supporters of Golden Dawn began in April. The defendants had been indicted for running and participating in a criminal organization and a range of other offences, including numerous racist attacks and the murder of anti-fascist singer Pavlos Fyssas in 2013. In September, the party's leader, Nikos Mihaloliakos, acknowledged during a media interview that the party had political responsibility for the murder of Pavlos Fyssas. During the same month, the party took third place in the parliamentary elections and elected 18 MPs.

Refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants

More than 851,319 refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants crossed the sea to arrive in the Aegean islands during the year. In the same period, more than 612 people, including many children, died or were unaccounted for in the crossing when the boats carrying them capsized.

Collective expulsions by police continued at the Greek-Turkish land border; several refugees and asylum-seekers reported instances of violent push-backs. Push-backs also continued at sea. Eleven push-back incidents were reported to have occurred at the Greek-Turkish land and sea borders between November 2014 and the end of August 2015. In October, the Prosecutor of the Thessaloniki Appeals Court ordered the Internal Affairs Directorate of the Police to conduct a criminal investigation into a series of reports by NGOs concerning collective expulsions of refugees and migrants by police in Evros.

In July, new legislation (Law 4332/2015) was adopted setting out requirements for the granting of Greek citizenship to children of migrants.

Reception conditions

The already ineffective first reception system proved incapable of adequately responding to the dramatic increase in refugees and migrants arriving on the Aegean islands. Poor planning, the ineffective use of EU funds and the deep financial crisis exacerbated the humanitarian crisis on the islands. Local activists, volunteers, NGOs and UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, tried to cover the enormous gaps in humanitarian provision for refugees.¹

Reception conditions on islands such as Lesbos and Kos were inhuman. Deficiencies included a lack of police and coastguard staff, insufficient tents, lack of food and poor hygiene conditions. The vast majority of new arrivals had no access to the First Reception Service.

In mid-October, the Greek authorities established a pilot scheme for the screening of new arrivals by the EU border agency and the Greek police. The “hotspot” operated at the Moria immigration detention centre on Lesbos. However, reception conditions there remained dire.²

There was inadequate accommodation and facilities for refugees and migrants arriving in Athens, the capital, where hundreds of people, including families, stayed for several days and nights in parks and squares of the city. In August, the authorities established a reception centre in the area of Elaionas, in Athens, to provide temporary shelter to new arrivals. Three stadiums in Attika were also used to provide temporary shelter to refugees and migrants when needed.

In November and December, reception conditions at the informal Idomeni refugee camp deteriorated markedly after Macedonian authorities imposed selective border controls on arriving refugees and migrants.³ The camp was evacuated following a police operation in mid-December. People not allowed to cross the border were transferred to Athens by bus and offered temporary shelter in a stadium.

Detention of asylum-seekers and migrants

In February, the Ministers for Migration Policy and Citizens’ Protection took some steps to reform the policy of systematic and prolonged detention of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants. In particular, the authorities ceased to implement the widely criticized policy of indefinite detention and released a large number of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants held for more than six months.

Unaccompanied children were often held with adults and remained in detention for several weeks under poor conditions. Conditions in immigration detention areas, including police stations, often amounted to inhuman or degrading treatment. At the end of the year, the authorities started detaining third-country nationals from Maghreb countries for immigration purposes.

Obstacles to accessing asylum procedures remained for both detained and non-detained asylum-seekers.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Allegations of torture and other ill-treatment of individuals, including refugees and migrants in immigration detention or during push-back operations, persisted.

In September, lawyers reported that nine individuals, some of them children, were ill-treated by police officers belonging to the DELTA special police unit following their arrest in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia in Athens. A criminal investigation was initiated by the Internal Affairs Directorate of the Police.

In April, the Athens Mixed Jury Court convicted two police officers of the torture in May 2007 of Christos Chronopoulos, who had a mental health disability. The Court handed down sentences of eight years' imprisonment to each officer; the sentences were suspended on appeal.

Excessive use of force

Allegations of excessive use of force by police continued. In August, more than 2,000 refugees and migrants were locked in inhuman conditions in the local sports stadium on Kos. Reports emerged of police being unable to manage the crowd and dispersing them by spraying them with fire extinguishers. On several occasions between August and October, riot police on Lesbos reportedly used tear gas and beat refugees and migrants waiting to be admitted for screening at the Moria immigration detention centre and those being registered in Mytilene port.

Discrimination

Hate crime

Hate-motivated attacks against refugees and migrants continued. In July, the Piraeus Felony Court of Appeals found a bakery owner guilty of abducting, robbing and causing serious bodily harm to Egyptian migrant worker Walid Taleb in 2012. The Court sentenced him to 13 years and two months in prison. Three other men were found guilty of abetting and were given prison sentences which were later suspended on appeal.

On 3 September, a group of 15 to 25 men, allegedly members of Golden Dawn, attacked refugees on Kos and threatened activists. Police took no action to stop the group from attacking the refugees, and riot police only intervened after the physical attacks had started.

During the year, the NGO Colour Youth documented in the project "Tell us" 73 incidents of hate-motivated attacks against members of the LGBTI community, compared with 22 incidents documented during the whole of 2014. On 24 September, two men were convicted of an attack against a transgender woman in a bar in Thessaloniki on 19 September and received a sentence of 19 months' imprisonment.

At the end of the year, the investigation of the homophobic and racist attack in August 2014 against Costas, a Greek national, and his partner, had made no progress. The perpetrators had not been found or identified.

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people

On 22 December, Parliament passed a law extending civil unions to same-sex couples. The new law enables same-sex couples to enjoy some of the rights granted to married couples, including emergency medical decisions and inheritance rights, but does not guarantee adoption rights and legal gender recognition for transgender people.

Roma

Roma children continued to face segregation or exclusion from education in many parts of Greece, including the towns of Aspropirgos, Sofades and Karditsa. Despite the 2013 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights in *Lavida and others v. Greece*, Roma children remained in a segregated separate school in Sofades, a town in Central Greece.

In April, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism expressed concerns about the housing conditions at the Roma settlement in Spata, a town near Athens, including the lack of electricity and its implications for the education and health of Roma children.

Women's rights

In October, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights reiterated its concerns over the high incidence of domestic violence and the low rates of prosecution, as well as the under-representation of women in political and public life.

Conscientious objectors

Alternative civilian service remained punitive and discriminatory. Men refusing military conscription who also refused to carry out alternative civilian service continued to face prosecution in the military justice system for insubordination, facing sentences of up to two years' imprisonment and significant fines.

1. Humanitarian crisis mounts as refugee system pushed to breaking point ([Press release](#), 25 June)
2. Urgent Action: Refugees face hellish conditions on Islands ([EUR 25/2798/2015](#))
3. Fear and fences: Europe's approach to keeping refugees at bay ([EUR 03/2544/2015](#))