

Press release
29 October 2007

“The truth may be bitter, but it must be told”
Greece: PRO ASYL and Greek Group of Lawyers reveal
systematic human rights abuses in the Aegean
Call on EU to react

On two fact-finding missions in July/August and in October 2007 representatives of PRO ASYL and the Greek Group of Lawyers for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants examined the situation at the EU external border in the Aegean.

The research findings are shocking. Serious human rights violations are taking place:

- The Greek coast guard systematically maltreats newly arrived refugees. It tries to block their boats and force them out of Greek territorial waters. Regardless of whether they survive or not, passengers are cast ashore on uninhabited islands or left to their fate on the open sea.
- In one reported case on the Chios island, the degree of maltreatment amounted to torture (serious beating, mock execution, electric shocks, pushing a refugee's head into a bucket full of water).
- The police detain all refugees and migrants on their arrival on the islands, including minors. This is in contravention of international law. Without exception, all new arrivals are placed under a deportation order, also in breach of international law. The detainees are left without any information about their rights and without legal counsel.
- All three of the detention camps visited by the delegation offer unacceptable living conditions. The circumstances of detention amount to degrading and inhuman treatment.

Today PRO ASYL and the greek Group of Lawyers for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants issued an extensive documentation under the heading ***“The truth may be bitter, but it must be told”*** in Athens and Brussels.

It is the publishers' view, that these critical findings have to be placed within a European context. The border which we visited is one of the external borders of the European Union. The European Union bears responsibility for what is happening there. Otherwise Europe is jeopardising its achievements in human rights development – of which it is rightly proud – at its very own borders.

PRO ASYL and the Group of Lawyer for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants call upon European institutions to take immediate action in view of the blatant abuses and human rights violations in Greece. The European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, its Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) and also the national governments of the EU member states cannot accept the gross violation of international law by one of their members. The practices of Greek border guards and the coast guard constitute a breach of the European Convention on Human Rights, the Geneva Convention on the Protection of Refugees and European directives. As long as the systematic practice of violating human rights is not halted and Greece has not introduced an appropriate system for receiving refugees it is irresponsible to return refugees to Greece in the framework of the Dublin II regulation establishing the competence for asylum procedures within the European Union.

Karl Kopp - Director for European affairs (PRO ASYL),
board member of the European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)

Annex

Excerpts from interviews with refugees on the East Aegean islands:

“We had nearly reached the greek island of Lesbos, which lay in front of us. Suddenly a boat from the Greek coast guard appeared. The officials beat us. Then they drove us back into open water. We had to take off our belts and shoes, and were made to disembark on an uninhabited island, without food or water.”

“The Greek coastguard forced us back into the rubber dinghy on high seas. Before we got back on they made small cuts in it with knives. Ever group only got one oar. Our shoes were thrown into the water. It was very difficult for us to reach the shore in the damaged boat and with only one oar.”

“They stopped our dinghy and forced us to enter their boat. The beating started right away. They took my mobile phone and looked in my mouth, even in private orifices. They took all the money I had on me. Before my eyes they threw the Holy Book (note: the Koran) into the sea. Then they set course for Turkey and left us on an island.(...)”

“I had been in Mitilini for three hours. Then other police came. I had to get into a car and we drove off through the mountains to another coast. From there I was taken back to Turkey on a small boat.”

“We were a group of 22. We were in the middle of the sea when the greek coastguard arrived. (...) Then they pulled us out of the water and they began beat us and shoot....they beat me up and broke my rib. We had to lie flat on the floor and they stood on us. All this took place on coast guard’s boat. “

Chios- Case: Torture during interrogation

“...I had to kneel down. One policeman stood behind me while two stood in front of me. The one behind me hit me with a stick on the head, deliberately and hard. He hit me on the crown of my head repeatedly with the stick. I tried to protect myself with my arms. Then he hit my arms. I tried to look behind me, and he started hitting me again. The two policemen in front of me were armed and showed me their weapons while I was being beaten. They looked at me very seriously. They said: ‘We are going to kill you’. The expression on their faces was terrifying. I was very scared. The other policeman-a fat one- came up to me and said into my ear: ‘Tell the truth. These two policemen are very dangerous. They will kill you’. (...)”

Then they brought a plastic bucket full of water. I was kneeling the whole time. ‘Do you see the water?’ My arms were pressed together behind my back, held by one of the policemen. The other policeman put his hand on the nape of my neck and pushed my head down into the water; I couldn’t breathe anymore. I was only pulled up after some time. ‘Do you now know the colour and name of the boat?’ I said ‘no’. He punched me twice in the face. The policeman behind me grabbed my arms again. I wanted to take a deep breath of air. The policeman in front of me asked ‘do you remember now, or not?’ I said no again. He grabbed my head and pushed it into the water. I was absolutely terrified. I thought I would not survive. When I came up again the policeman again asked, ‘so you don’t remember?’ I repeated that I did not.

So then the policeman took a plastic bag and put it over my head. With one hand he tightened the bag around my neck. I couldn’t breathe anymore. They repeated the process of the plastic bag three times - every time they asked the same question. Then a policeman signalled with his hand: that’s enough.”