

## No more separations of families!

Refugees in Greece are waiting for indefinite periods for their family reunification to Germany

*PRO ASYL and Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) are calling for an end to be put to the suffering of more than two thousand refugees who are stuck in Greece while waiting to be reunited with their family members in Germany. Lives have already been lost during periods of separation. There are still refugees who desperately fear that they might not see their wives, husbands, children or parents alive again, as they are waiting in limbo for an answer to their applications for family reunification and for their transfer to finally take place. Meanwhile, long waiting periods in Greece result in more anguish for already vulnerable protection seekers, and poor reception conditions are leading to a deterioration of the physical health of many refugees and in some cases even severe injuries.*

### Losing a child

*“We escaped from Syria because of the war and because we wanted our children to stay alive.”*

Abdala A. (44 years old)

The family of Abdala A., a 44-year-old man from the IS-held town of Al Asharah in the Deir Ezzor province in Western Syria, reached the Greek island of Chios on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016 – only shortly before the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and



©Salinia Stroux / March 2016 in the hospital

new restriction on thousands of refugees who could no longer leave the Aegean islands. *“We escaped from Syria because of the war and because we wanted our children to stay alive. We already had lost four children: Three died of heart problems and one due to a weak liver. Bombs falling in the neighbouring houses, the sound of the war planes flying close over our heads, the lack of doctors and medicine... these problems were not bearable for us – even more due to the health problems of our kids,” says Abdala.* His oldest (but still underage) son had left Syria earlier with his uncle. They reached Europe, applied for asylum in Germany in December 2015 where the child was granted refugee status in March 2016.

When the rest of the family reached Greece, they were with a three-month-old baby who was suffering from a serious heart condition (myocardial disease), which had not been diagnosed yet by that moment and a six-year-old girl who suffers from a kidney disease (nephropathy), as well as their two other children. Together with hundreds of other refugees this highly vulnerable family was evacuated during the government's attempt to clear the islands before the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement. They were transferred to Katsikas camp, which at that time was officially categorised as one of the "emergency accommodation sites".

Katsikas camp is located in Northern Greece, about 20 minutes' drive from the city of Ioannina. The army-run tent camp was built on pebble stone ground. During the first days there was reportedly no electricity and thus no light at night. There were not even plastic sheets on the floor of the tents. According to activists who were in the area at that time, UNHCR entered the camp more systematically only in May to provide basic protection mechanisms, and in July a few NGOs followed to offer legal advice and aid. Primary medical aid was provided initially only by the Hellenic Army, which since mid-April, reportedly had only a sporadic presence in the camp and refugees who required medical attention had to refer themselves to the already overburdened public health system, without interpreters and with a waiting time for an ambulance which frequently exceeded 30 minutes. Only in May 2016, NGOs started to offer primary health care and medical aid for refugees with chronic diseases or mental health problems. *"Everything in Katsikas was a problem,"* the father said about their living conditions during the first months in Greece.



©Muhammad Ali of Katsikas Live / Katsikas Camp November 2016

At the beginning of June 2016, Abdala's family applied for a visa for family reunification at the German embassy. *"We did only the embassy procedure for family reunion, because there was no other procedure at that time; they only started the asylum applications in July/August 2016. For four months I kept trying to make an appointment at the Asylum Service, calling via Skype, but without success."* Later, in the summer of 2016, when pre-registration started, a representative of a humanitarian organization reportedly told the family that they would not have to pre-register and apply for family reunification through Dublin III, as they had already applied for the family reunification procedure at the German embassy, trying to get a visa to join their underage son.

Despite the family's medical history with a high child mortality rate and the four small children they were not transferred to better accommodation until November 2016, when their then 11-month-old baby had to be transferred first to Ioannina hospital and then to the children's hospital in Athens with an air ambulance. Until then they were staying in a tent – for a total duration of eight months. According to

the family, they were not included in the UNHCR accommodation scheme as they were neither relocation applicants nor asylum applicants.

*„When we asked the organisations to give us a house, they told us: ‘You are not relocation!’ We only had a white paper and not an asylum seekers’ card. Our paper [suspension of deportation order] was valid until September 2016. We thought we would surely travel together with our children to Germany. We never imagined that their visa wouldn’t be accepted. The procedure before the embassy was not easy for us. In the beginning of the procedure, we didn’t know how sick our children were. When we found out and brought the medical certificates it was already too late.“*

On November 18<sup>th</sup> the family received shocking news. Only one week before the child had to be transferred as a case of emergency to the hospital, the family’s visa application had been answered – in part positively but in part also negatively: The parents received visas, but the children did not. One week later, the baby had to be transferred to Ioannena hospital, where she had already been treated twice before and from where she had always been sent back to the camp after treatment without any further notice of a severe heart defect. On November 26<sup>th</sup>, she and her father were transported to Athens and she was hospitalised in the children’s hospital.

At the beginning of December, the mother who was pregnant again, and the remaining three children also arrived in Athens, where the family was accommodated in a hotel funded by the UNHCR accommodation scheme. While the mother herself sent a letter of appeal against the rejection of the visa application of the children, on November 29<sup>th</sup> the parents’ visas were issued at the German embassy in Athens; however, the mother’s appeal was rejected in mid-January 2017.

The mother left Greece and entered Germany in mid-January 2017, where she applied for asylum at the end of March and was granted refugee status in May. The father remained in Greece with the four children, two of whom were sick. The baby was released from the hospital, and a few days later the father, trying to find a solution to join his wife and son in Germany and to find adequate medical help for the sick baby, finally went to the Greek Asylum Service and asked for an appointment to apply for family reunification. On March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017 the father and the four children finally applied for family reunification.

In a medical certificate dated March 28<sup>th</sup>, the director of the cardiological Children’s Clinic Aghia Sofia stated that the baby was hospitalised due to “non-compaction cardiomyopathy”. He further recommended that for the necessary medical care of their child the parents would have to undergo training, and explained that the strict observance of a sterile environment and constant alertness would be necessary. The child would need both parents’ 24-hour care. Furthermore, according to the doctor, the baby was in urgent need of a heart transplant, a medical intervention that is not carried out in Greece, and for which she would have to be moved to another country.

After the baby’s emergency transfer to the children’s hospital in Athens at the end

of November 2016, the baby was hospitalised repeatedly, and – for a total period of five months – was at the hotel with her family only for a few days. Her father was at her side in the hospital while the other three children remained in the hotel with family friends. „I already lost four children. I cannot lose another one. I want my children to be healthy and to live. S. needs to be transferred to Germany quickly so she can survive. I don't know what to do to help her. Please help me to get her there fast,“ the desperate father said on March 28<sup>th</sup>.

Within only a few days of receiving the medical certificate from the doctor, the Greek Asylum Service sent a request for transfer to Germany, to which Germany replied positively on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. Sadly, however, one day after that happy news was received, the baby passed away at the children's hospital, to where she had been transferred again.

After S. was buried in Athens, the Greek Asylum Service informed the applicants that the German authorities had suddenly reduced the number of transfers of family reunification applicants from Greece to 70 persons per month. About 2,400 persons are currently estimated to be waiting for a transfer to Germany – among them Abdalas family. The father and the three children applied again for family reunification before the German embassy on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in the hope of being able to rejoin their family faster through this way. “My wife has given birth to another child two months ago. We need each other”, he says.

### **In urgent need for therapy; longing for family reunification**

*“I need my children and my husband so I can stand my pain.”*

*Fatema H. (28 years old)*

Fatema's family arrived on Chios Island, Greece, on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016 – only shortly after the closure of the Balkan Route and before the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement. Along with hundreds of other refugees they were evacuated from the islands. The people newly arriving from then on would have to stay on the islands and go through the new border procedure, including admissibility examinations.

The young Afghan woman and her husband had escaped from Iran, together with their two sons aged three and nine years respectively. They are from Sar-e-Pul in Afghanistan, but for most of their lives had lived in Iran, where Fatema was never able to obtain a residence permit and as an illegal refugee was in constant danger of deportation. They both come from a family of shepherds, and had



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lived for years near Natanz, one of the major secret nuclear power plants in Iran that were discovered after 2002. Following the death of Fatema's parents and her husband's father from cancer, she also fell ill but could not be treated due to her lack of legal status. After one year of pain the family decided to escape to Europe in order to save the mother's life.

Upon arrival at the port of Piraeus, they were transferred directly to the Malakasa emergency accommodation site in buses. The mother, who suffers from breast cancer, stayed there for three months with her small children, living in a tent, sleeping on the floor, and without any access to legal information and, most importantly, without access to adequate medical aid. The army-led camp only had military doctors and no interpreters. As a result, Fatema was never identified by the authorities as highly vulnerable and seriously ill, neither was she ever referred to a hospital for health examinations and treatment of her illness. Only upon intervention by some activists was alternate housing found for her, and she finally was given medical attention and therapy, while the family received legal advice and help from RSA / PRO ASYL.

*"We arrived in the middle of the night in Malakasa. It was dark and raining. We saw soldiers with guns and a fenced area with barbed wire. They brought us to a tent. When we woke up, it was full of water inside and we were all wet. I asked the soldiers for a doctor, but they couldn't understand me. I found some other refugees to translate. They told me to wait. During our stay in the camp my pain doubled," Fatema says.*

On September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 Fatema's cancer treatment started at the Aghios Savvas Hospital in Athens with chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Her medical condition seemed to have worsened. Unable to find adequate help and decent living conditions for her entire family by the state during these hard times, she got so desperate that she escaped Greece in March 2017, in the hope of finding better medical treatment in Germany and support by her sister who lives there. As soon as she arrived there, her husband applied for family reunification. The take-charge request was sent by the Greek Dublin Office on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

It is unclear to what extent the time spent waiting for proper medical treatment in Greece worsened the young mother's condition, but her breast cancer has spread. *"I feel that I became sicker in Greece. I am afraid about our future. I am worried about my husband and my children."* According to her Greek psychologist, her mental state deteriorated mainly due to the inadequate reception conditions she encountered in Greece, in combination with her illness. After her departure from Greece, her sons and her husband continued psychological therapy as the separation from the sick mother had severe effects on their mental health.

Germany approved the family reunification on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017, after almost four months of separation. Ever since, the family has been waiting to be reunited. Fatema is in urgent need to be with her family: *"I need medical help, and I need my children and my husband so I can stand my pain."* Meanwhile her 9-year-old son is telling her



on the phone that she has to stay alive for the sake of her family and that she has to wait for them to come. On August 7<sup>th</sup> 2017 Fatemas husband and children will finally fly to Germany and the family will be together again.

### **A family father lost his life while waiting**

*“We could have left to Germany before my husband died!”*

Fatima M. (41 years old)

Fatima’s family escaped Afrin in Syria four years ago. For a while, they found refuge in Arbil, Iraq, but conditions there deteriorated, and in July 2015 Fatima’s underage son left and headed towards Northern Europe. He reached Germany during the opening of the West Balkan Route and applied for asylum, where, after some time, he was granted subsidiary protection.



Meanwhile, the parents, one underage daughter and one adult son reached Lesbos, Greece on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016 – shortly before the EU-Turkey Statement. On March 20<sup>th</sup> they were evacuated from the island via Kavala to the Filippiada emergency accommodation site on the mainland. There they were living under harsh conditions, while the father suffered from high blood pressure.

©F. Kormesto / “Our home in Aleppo was destroyed”

*“When we arrived in Filippiada there was only the army. We shared one tent with another family. The area was covered with gravel. There was no electricity. We had to sleep on the floor. Around the camp was nothing except for trees. No individuals were allowed to enter and offer help. There were many fights between refugees, as our mental state was very bad, due to the bad living conditions and due to the EU’s decision to close the borders,”* says the adult son who has been relocated to Germany in the meanwhile.

On July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016 the family pre-registered in Filippiada camp. The adult son applied for relocation, while the rest of the family, with the legal help from the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), applied for family reunification two months later based on the Dublin III Regulation. On December



©Moving Europe / Filippiada in April 2016

14<sup>th</sup> the application was sent to Germany and on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017 it got accepted.

While waiting for the decision to be issued by the Greek authorities and in hope of a rapid transfer to Germany, Fatimas husband (aged 57) tragically passed away on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017 after he suffered a heart attack in Filippiada Camp. Exactly another eight days later, the family in Greece was served the decision from the Greek Asylum Service, stating that Germany was responsible to examine their applications. *“We could have left to Germany before my husband died,” Fatima says.*

For one year the family had stayed in the temporary accommodation site, ten months of which in a tent. *“The camp was very bad, because it was far from everything,”* says Fatima. *“There was a doctor every day from 9.15am until the early afternoon, but not in the evenings and during the nights, and neither at the weekends. More than that, the hospital was one hour’s drive away. When my husband passed away, the ambulance could not reach him in time.”*

On April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017 the family applied for a prioritised transfer to Germany, due to the entire family’s severe psychological distress after the sudden loss of their beloved father and husband and the lack of opportunity to mourn together. They still have no news from the Greek Asylum Service on the date of their flight even though more than six months have passed since the German decision.

*“We need each other now more than ever,” says Fatima.*

### **No separation of families**

There are still an unknown number of refugees in Greece who had arrived shortly before the closure of the West Balkan Route and the EU-Turkey Deal. Many of them have applied for family reunification to Germany and await their transfer without knowing when they will finally be able to join their loved ones. They endure months in tents, far from local society and established refugee support structures. Desperate suffering and, in some cases, even deaths during their waiting time in Greece could have been prevented.

### **Therefore, PRO ASYL and RSA**

- demand the immediate transfer of these families and all others waiting for their family reunification from Greece to Germany. There are lives at risk in Greece and in Germany, while other lives already were lost in Greece. We ask for the immediate reunification of families where members are especially vulnerable or even suffer from life-threatening conditions. Families should have access to appropriate medical care in a country that is able to provide such care. The right to family unity has to be respected. Families should be able to care for each other in times of illness and to be together in times of grief;
- call for the immediate end of the limitation of Dublin transfers in the case of family reunifications from Greece to Germany;

- call for the respect of the best interest of the child during family reunion, and the possibility for underage siblings of minors living in Germany to join their parents and to be transferred together.