

Council of Europe accuses Greece of mistreating refugees

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The anti-torture committee of the Council of Europe has recently published its report on conditions in Greek detention centres and prisons. The report raises serious allegations against the police and border authorities, documenting numerous cases of abuse and in some cases raises the allegation of torture.

Between 17 and 29 September 2009, a delegation from the anti-torture committee visited numerous police stations, prisons and detention centres in Greece. Its report makes warnings similar to those by the Refugee Council of the United Nations and refugee organizations such as Pro Asyl, drawing attention to the disgraceful conditions in which thousands of asylum seekers and prisoners live in Greece. Requests to change these conditions have so far been largely unsuccessful.

The anti-torture committee reports on “kicks, punches, shoves and blows with batons and other objects, including on the soles of the feet and fingers, which were carried out mainly during interrogation by security police, but also during the arrest.” In some cases the alleged ill treatment was so severe that it resembled torture.

In one case in Serres, security police officers had slipped a plastic bag over the head of a suspect during questioning. In another case in Thessaloniki police threatened a prisoner with rape. Reports of mistreatment of prisoners were partially corroborated by examinations carried out by doctors accompanying the delegation.

During the last five years, the anti-torture committee has visited Greek prisons and detention centres four times. Each time it found that the Greek authorities had made no serious efforts to address failures to prevent abuse and to improve miserable living conditions.

The recent report notes that “for the committee, the massive overcrowding in a number of prisons combined with serious staff shortages, poor health care, a lack of a meaningful organization and inadequate material conditions give rise to even greater grounds for concern today than in the past.”

In its latest report, the anti-torture committee refers to numerous conditions it had already taken up and criticized on previous visits. For example, the use of metal containers for holding refugees in the port of Patras, and the fact that refugees are often detained for weeks and months in police stations in run-down cells with inadequate sanitation due to overcrowded prisons.

Given the drastic austerity measures that the European Union and the Greek government are currently imposing on the population, things are more likely to get worse than improve.

The high number of refugees and asylum seekers who try to get into Europe via Greece is a consequence of the strict isolationist policy of the EU. For those seeking protection escaping from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia, the route via Turkey to Greece is one of the only chances to come to Europe.

Since the sea-lanes of the Aegean are now largely sealed off, the number of attempted entries by the land border between Greece and Turkey in the Evros region has increased significantly. According to police, so far this year some 34,000 refugees and migrants have already been apprehended and detained; in 2009, it was only 9,000.

Even refugees able to continue their journey to Italy or Germany are usually immediately returned to Greece. In

2003, the EU adopted the Dublin II agreement requiring that the acceptance of a refugee and the asylum process had to be conducted in the EU country that was entered first.

In Germany, the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Free Democrats all agreed to enshrine the so-called “Safe Third State” regulations in the constitution in 1993. These specified that a refugee arriving via a “safe third country” could not apply for political asylum in Germany. Given that Greece, like all other EU members, was categorised as a “safe third country”, refugees who arrived via Greece were immediately deported back there. As a result, the number of asylum applications in Germany plummeted from a record of 440,000 in 1992 to 28,000 in 2009, while it has risen sharply in Greece and other countries on the southern EU border.

The catastrophic conditions in Greece meant that in more than 300 cases the deportation of refugees to there from Germany was halted, at least temporarily, by lawsuits before the administrative courts. The Supreme Court will soon be dealing with the question whether asylum seekers may be deported to other EU countries without any test of their circumstances.

The German government has responded by tightening up the hurdles faced by refugees at the EU’s external borders. It has sent officials from the German Federal Police to the Greek-Turkish border as part of the Frontex operation. The Frontex agency, funded by the EU, seals off Europe’s external borders. Until now its main area of operation has been the Mediterranean, where it directs the various national forces in coastal surveillance to stop the arrival of refugee boats. Since November, Frontex forces also have been helping to monitor the Turkish-Greek border at the river Evros in order to close off the overland route to refugees.



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