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PRESS RELEASE

“A Pandemic of Abuses”

New report by the Legal Centre Lesvos and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research documents how Greece dismantled the right to asylum and normalised the violation of migrants’ rights throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Lesvos.

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Over the past three years, Greek authorities have carried out unprecedented attacks on the right to asylum and the fundamental rights of migrants on the island of Lesvos and throughout the country. The perpetual lockdown and mandatory quarantine measures imposed on migrants in camps for nearly three years was perhaps the most stark example of the discriminatory and differential treatment to which migrants were subject during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“A Pandemic of Abuses”, the new report published today by the Legal Centre Lesvos (LCL) and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC) details how throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the Greek authorities engaged in illegal practices targeting migrants in Lesvos.

Putting the health and lives of thousands at risk, these practices also paved the way for a policy of further segregation of migrants in closed camps and of drastic restriction of their fundamental rights and freedoms. All of these measures reflect the normalisation and intensification of repression at Europe's borders.

As EU talks on the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum are about to resume in September, EU institutions and Member States should comply with their human rights obligations under EU and international law to respect and protect human rights and end inhumane, discriminatory, and repressive border policies and practices that violate migrants’ rights.

Attacks on the right to seek asylum

Since the beginning of 2020, the Greek authorities have engaged in a series of reforms and illegal practices to obstruct the right to seek asylum, from the unilateral suspension of asylum in March 2020, followed by the implementation of a systemic policy of “pushbacks” in the Aegean Sea,¹ in direct contravention of their obligations under EU and international law, and in particular in violation of the principle of non-refoulement and the Geneva Convention. In parallel, increasingly restrictive measures in the asylum procedure adopted between 2020 and 2021 resulted in a growing number of people being excluded from the right to asylum on the basis that Türkiye is deemed a safe country for them, leaving thousands of people in legal limbo, without access to services, healthcare, and trapped on the island of Lesbos. Throughout the pandemic the LCL had to resort to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) to ensure access to vital medical services for over fifteen residents of Lesbos RIC (mostly Syrian nationals) who were denied both asylum and, on this basis, access to healthcare.

“We had to bring a petition for interim measures before the ECtHR for a four year old girl with severe epilepsy as a result of head trauma who needed a treatment that was not available on the island. Leaving her untreated put her at risk to suffer irreparable harm. We went through the same procedure for a man who suffered several chronic conditions as a result of an airstrike, and several people with undiagnosed conditions that needed specialised examination in Athens and whose health deteriorated as healthcare was denied and delayed. Thankfully, the ECtHR recognised that the right to health is universal, and not dependent on one’s legal status,” states Lorraine Leete, from the Legal Centre Lesbos.

A policy of systemic discrimination

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants were continuously held under strict movement restrictions in overcrowded unsanitary camps and systematically detained in quarantine sites which were in no way adapted for medical isolation. When, in September 2020, Moria camp burnt,² 13,000 former residents of the camp who were displaced by the fires, were kept behind police barricades on the highway without adequate assistance, before being transferred to a temporary Reception and identification Centre (RIC) that was still under construction. For over a year, they were forced to live there without the necessary infrastructure and basic services, putting their health and lives at risk. In the meantime, alternative accommodation for asylum seekers outside the RICs was gradually eliminated, with the forced closure of both the independent PIKPA camp (run by Lesbos Solidarity) in October 2020, and the camp in Kara Tepe (run by the municipality) in April 2021.

While the entire population in Greece was subject to strict lockdowns, the movement restrictions imposed on people living in refugee camps were far stricter and remained in force without pause for nearly three years: these included blanket bans on exit; curfews;

¹ A systematic and clandestine policy of illegal and violent operations of mass expulsion of migrants by the Greek authorities towards Türkiye (i.e. “pushbacks”) escalated throughout the Aegean Sea precisely since March 2020, a time when there were limited possibilities for individuals and organisations to monitor the practice, due to movement restrictions of civil society during the pandemic. Nevertheless, pushbacks have widely been documented by, amongst others, Border Violence Monitoring Network, [Black Book of Pushbacks](#), 7 December 2022; Forensic Architecture, [Drift-backs in the Aegean Sea platform](#), 15 July 2022; Legal Centre Lesbos, [Crimes against Humanity in the Aegean](#), 1 February 2021 and [Collective Expulsions Documented in the Aegean Sea](#), 13 July 2020.

² The camp of Moria in Lesbos was destroyed by several fires on 8 and 9 September 2020, displacing nearly 13,000 asylum seekers residing there, following the Greek government’s placement of its residents under full lockdown (prohibiting any entrance or exits from the camp for 14 days) as the sole response to first confirmed COVID-19 case in the camp. See Border Monitoring Violence Network, [Interactive Timeline on the Moria fire](#), 15 October 2020.

mandatory quarantine upon arrival regardless of infection status; and restrictive entrance and exits from the camps, regulated by “exit lists.” When the two consecutive lockdowns imposed on the general population in Greece (i.e., people not living in camps) were lifted during the summers of 2020 and 2021, cafes, restaurants and bars and international borders reopened, allowing international tourists with the required health certificates to travel freely to the country, mobility restrictions remained mostly unchanged for people living in Lesvos’ refugee camps up until June 2022.

“The arbitrary and ever-changing mobility restrictions and controlled exits from the RIC severely affected the RIC’s residents’ daily lives, from their ability to access basic and vital services to their ability to engage in social activities outside of the camp. In September 2021, migrants who were in some cases victims of gender based violence inside the camp, were prevented from leaving the RIC for psycho-social counselling or doctor and psychologist appointments, due to mobility restrictions at the Lesvos RIC in Kara Tepe, leaving them trapped inside the camp with their abusers. This increased confinement constituted a restriction of liberty that amounted to de facto detention. Migrants have been progressively marginalised through measures of de jure and de facto spatial segregation.” explains Dr Aila Spathopoulou, Research Coordinator at FAC.

Systematic detention of migrants

Similarly, the mandatory quarantine policy implemented against all migrants newly arriving on Lesvos irrespective of their infection status, from March 2020 to December 2022, allowed for the systematic detention of thousands in unacceptable conditions unfit for medical isolation, while incoming tourists and the rest of the population in Greece were subjected to self-regulated quarantine measures. “A Pandemic of Abuses” documents the multiple violations of rights to which migrants were exposed while detained in the different quarantine sites in Lesvos, from the absolute lack of access to any adequate hygiene, sanitation, distancing and other means of protection from the COVID-virus, to the detention of unaccompanied minors with adults not related to them; and even to the exposure of COVID-negative migrants to the virus.

Discriminatory and differential treatment was also in evidence in the vaccination campaign, which was over five months delayed for people living in refugee camps, and, to this day, remains inaccessible to hundreds.

“The pandemic restrictions were used as a pretext by the Greek authorities to increasingly control and segregate migrants living in RICs, without consideration for any public health imperatives. Throughout the pandemic, migrants were treated as potential carriers and spreaders of the virus, rather than people in need of additional protection due to their multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities and the higher risk of infection to COVID-19 they were exposed to while held in camps and quarantine sites.” says Marion Bouchetel from the Legal Centre Lesvos.

The report also documents that migrants have also suffered more repression during the pandemic: official statistics from the Greek police show that in Lesvos ‘foreigners’ were twelve times more likely to receive COVID-related fines than the ‘local’ population.

“We were reported cases of fines issued to migrants without first verifying if they had the requisite permission to be outside, but also absurd cases of fines for not wearing protective masks during activities that require the removal of masks, such as smoking or drinking water” recalls Ms. Bouchetel.

EU must shift back to policies that respect fundamental rights and people's dignity

“A Pandemic of Abuses” demonstrates that the Greek government and authorities used the COVID-19 as a pretext and justification to accelerate and intensify harsher and more repressive migration policies, which have had a lasting impact on migrants' lives. Specifically, the increased surveillance and policing in and around the RICs, the discriminatory and perpetual restriction of movement of migrants, and *de facto* detention in camps and quarantine sites, allowed for the smooth transition of RICs into ‘Closed and Controlled Access Centres’ (CCACs), which eventually came into effect in November 2022. A new CCAC is being built on the island of Lesbos with over 76 million in funds from the European Union and the capacity to detain up to 5,000 migrants in a Pre-Removal Detention Centre inside the camp.

“While Greece is struggling with fires devastating the country and requesting support from firefighters all around Europe, a massive CCAC is announced to open in Lesbos in 2024 in the middle of a pine forest with high risk of fires. It is as dangerous for the environment as it is inhumane: it's nothing more than a detention centre, which perpetuates the logic of confinement, segregation, and exclusion that we have documented over the past three years” states Dr Aila Spathopoulou, Research Coordinator at FAC.

Press contacts

Marion Bouchetel, Legal Centre Lesbos (English, French, Spanish)

Telephone number +30 6977619003

Email: marion@legalcentrelesvos.org

Aila Spathopoulou, Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (Greek, English)

Telephone number +44 7546819338

Email: maila.spath@gmail.com