

URGENT ACTION

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN GREECE AMID EU PARALYSIS

Thousands of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are trapped in Greece in dire conditions, with no access to protection due to arbitrary and discriminatory border closures on the Western Balkans route. As thousands are arriving, the humanitarian situation will deteriorate unless EU states urgently start accepting refugees from Greece.

An estimated 10,000 **refugees, asylum seekers and migrants**, including scores of families with small children, people with disabilities and pregnant women, are currently stranded at the Greek border with the “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (Macedonia). Intermittent border closures and discriminatory border practices introduced in order to slow down the flow and limit the number of people taking the Western Balkans route, is trapping people in dire conditions. Since 19 February Macedonia and Serbia have closed their borders to Afghan nationals, who represent 30 per cent of arrivals in Greece. People are left without regular access to sanitation and facing water and food shortages. Many are sleeping rough, exposed to hostile weather conditions. This situation is having a negative impact on their health and access to medical care is limited.

The humanitarian situation is also rapidly deteriorating in the rest of Greece as the authorities are trying to slow down people travelling to the border. Greece’s reception capacity in Athens and elsewhere is stretched to the limit. Amnesty International has witnessed women, men and children sleeping out in the open in central Athens and at the Piraeus port. On the Greek islands, as thousands arrive every week fleeing violence and conflict, reception conditions are critical. According to UNHCR around 1,900 arrived to the Greek islands on a daily basis in February and more than 2,700 during the first two days in March. Of those arrivals, 57 per cent are women and children.

According to Greek authorities, a total of 32,000 people are currently stranded in Greece, while UNHCR expects numbers to reach 70,000 in the coming days. This is dramatically increasing the number of people trapped in Greece and in need of international protection. As Greek authorities struggle with the extremely high number of arrivals, refugees’ current lack of viable options to access an effective asylum procedure in Greece, has been aggravated by a failing EU relocation scheme: out of 160,000 people that EU member states have committed to accept, only 295 have been able to leave Greece so far.

Please write immediately in English or your own language calling on the President of the European Council and the members of the EU Council (heads of state or government of the EU Member States) to:

- Use all available means to urgently accept asylum-seekers from Greece - including relocating a large number of persons without applying restrictive selection criteria, easing family reunification and allowing asylum-seekers to obtain visas from member states’ representations in Greece for onward legal travel;
- Support an effective relief programme to ease the pressure on Greece to respond to the humanitarian crisis;
- End discriminatory border practices and support countries along the Western Balkans route, to ensure refugees and asylum seekers can access asylum procedures and adequate reception conditions;
- Open up more safe and legal routes for people in need of international protection to ensure refugees do not need to embark on dangerous sea crossings to reach protection in Europe.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 15 APRIL 2016 TO:

President of the European Council
Donald Tusk
European Council
Rue de la Loi 175, 1048, Brussels
Fax: +32 22816934
Email: EC.President-Petitions@european-council.europa.eu

UK Immigration Minister
James Brokenshire
Home Office, 2 Marsham Street,
London, SW1P 4DF
Tel: 020 7035 4848
Email: privateoffice.external@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. HIS EXCELLENCY MR KONSTANTINOS BIKAS, Embassy of Greece, 1A Holland Park W11 3TP, 020 7229 3850, gremb.lon@mfa.gr.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

An extended cooperation agreement was put in place on 18 February between the heads of police services of Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and the “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” to implement unified registration procedures along the Western Balkans route, as well as restriction on the number of entries. Moreover, Austria announced in February it was going to limit asylum applications to 80 a day. These restrictions have triggered further border closures and discriminatory practices along the route. Discriminatory border practices in place since November 2015 became even worse on 19 February with the exclusion of Afghan nationals. Only Syrians and Iraqis are allowed through the border and even people of these nationalities are not being allowed if they do not have all travel documents.

A recent UNHCR survey found that 71 per cent of Afghans arriving in Greece in January 2016 fled violence and conflict.

The Greek authorities have announced the opening of new reception centres to accommodate more refugees. Even with additional places, reception capacity will be severely stretched if the number of arrivals continues following the closure of borders. Groups of volunteers, and NGOs strive to cover the basic needs of those already stranded in Greece.

In the meantime, the situation at the Greek border with Macedonia is often tense. On 29 February Amnesty International witnessed the use of teargas by Macedonian police forces to push refugees and asylum seekers back.

Name: Thousands of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants trapped in Greece.

Gender m/f: all

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