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ASYLUM SEEKERS IN GREECE: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Asylum system

At the end of 2010, the presidential decree 114 introduced the so-called transitional system, which will be valid till the new asylum system is enacted.

According to presidential decree 114:

-The police keep the responsibility for the submission and examination of the asylum applications in first instance. A representative of UNHCR can be present at the first instance interview and express UNHCR's opinion.

-Five new appeals committees are established for the examination of the pending cases. The Committees consist of a representative of the State and two independent experts, one from UNHCR and another from the National Committee of Human Rights.

This new legislation has led to some improvement of the asylum system. More specifically:

The quality of interviews in first instance has improved and there is a slight increase of the recognition rates.

The examination of the pending cases by the second instance committees constitutes a significant improvement in the Greek asylum system. The interviews are thorough and there is a remarkable increase of the recognition rates.

However, there are still some drawbacks in the asylum system:

The fact that the submission of asylum applications remains the responsibility of the police creates severe problems in accessing the asylum process. It is very characteristic that Attica police headquarters receive only a limited number of applications every week.

As far as the examination of the asylum applications in first instance is concerned, Greek Police, which is the responsible authority for this task is not well informed or trained and therefore inadequate to do so.

Finally, the progress of the examination of the pending cases by the second instance committees is very slow as there are only five committees for a backlog of 45.000 cases.

It should be noted that the government has announced that the new asylum system will be enacted in the beginning of 2012. Under this system the police will be disengaged from asylum and the asylum cases will be the responsibility of the New Asylum Service.

Moreover the government has announced that there will be screening centers all over the country so that the asylum seekers will be distinguished from immigrants.

Social rights

The situation in the field of social rights at times notes some progress but one can argue that it still remains problematic.

The situation in accommodation remains the same, since the existing places are very few compared to the needs. More specifically there are about 800 places, while there are thousands asylum seekers on the waiting list. As a result, the vast majority of asylum seekers –including those who belong to vulnerable groups- are either homeless or find poor quality accommodation.

As far as the medical care is concerned, the personnel of the hospitals often ignores the asylum seekers' right to free medical care. On top of that, most of the hospitals don't have interpreters.

As for the economic benefits Greece still doesn't grant any allowance for the daily expenses of asylum seekers.

In the field of employment the situation has deteriorated severely, since there has been an increase in unemployment, mostly due to the economical crisis. The most vulnerable groups are the ones that are affected first by the crisis, among them are asylum seekers. Since asylum seekers are unemployed and at the same time don't get economic benefits, they get impoverished.

The rise of racism

Since the obligations deriving from international refugee law and especially the ones related to the fast and fair examination of asylum claims and to decent reception conditions, are not adequately met by the government, cities where impoverished

asylum seekers gather (Athens and Patras) often face difficult situations mostly because of the social tension.

The Greek inhabitants of the areas where asylum seekers gather are annoyed by this situation. Extreme political groups of the far right which express racist views take advantage of this situation and accuse asylum seekers for the problems the Greek citizens face. Furthermore, they somehow demand the removal of asylum seekers from their neighbourhoods and generally from the country.

From the mid 2010 Greece faces for the first time racist attacks especially in the center of Athens. These attacks have increased during 2011. Although these attacks are reported to the authorities, the perpetrators keep on behaving violently and the victims cannot get protection. Thus asylum seekers live in fear and often have to change their residence in an effort to avoid these attacks and protect their lives.