

Protect the most vulnerable to ensure protection for everyone!
'Restore legality to protect refugees and the society at large amidst the pandemic'

Open letter signed by 60 organisations

To

The President of Greece, Katerina Sakellariopoulou
The President of the Hellenic Parliament, Constantine An. Tassoula
The Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis
The President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli
The President of the European Council, Charles Michel
The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen
The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi
The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet
The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Dunja Mijatović
The Director General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom

Athens, 25 March 2020 – Recalling the letter issued 6 March 2020, signed by more than 200 organizations throughout Europe, the undersigned organizations reiterate the dangers stemming from persisting in current arrangements on the management of the reception of asylum seekers and the respect for their right to seek asylum in Greece. Apart from violating national, EU and international laws, amid the pandemic, these arrangements also pose a major public health danger, arising from overcrowding in Greece's Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) and in the country's detention centers.

Asylum seekers, amongst them many children, who entered Greece with the aim of seeking protection are being detained for the purposes of return, as a result of the Emergency Legislative Decree (E.L.D) issued on 1 March 2020. The E.L.D. suspended the registration of asylum applications and allows the immediate deportation of those entering the Greek territory to their countries of origin or Turkey. A large number of refugees and migrants are now being held in prisons and in formal and informal detention centers that keep springing up throughout Greece. **This is happening without ensuring minimum standards of hygiene or protection, even during this public health emergency.** They are deprived of the right to apply for asylum and detained under the threat of deportation. In a breach of all international Conventions that protect the right to asylum, Greek Courts have imposed severe penalties on them.

We stress that the suspension of the right to seek asylum and the violation of the principle of non-refoulement is an unprecedented abrogation of international obligations in post-war Europe. At the same time, following the Greek Asylum Service's suspension of operations, in the context of social distancing to curb the spread of the coronavirus, the backlog of asylum applications and the uncertainty of asylum seekers who arrived in Greece before the 1st of March are growing daily, as no interim procedures have been defined.

More importantly, the coronavirus pandemic is threatening to affect refugee accommodation sites and camps. The camps, especially on the Aegean islands, suffer from **severe overcrowding and lack of adequate sanitary facilities, making it impossible to ensure social distancing and hygiene conditions for both residents and employees. This poses a major threat to public health for both asylum seekers and for society as large.** Similarly, the significant increase in the number of third-country nationals placed in

administrative detention, in the weeks preceding and especially those following the E.L.D., notwithstanding issues of legality, puts the health of detainees and employees alike at grave risk.

We address all competent Greek authorities, requesting:

- **To take immediate public health steps, designed to protect those residing in camps, camp employees and society at large. The first step should be to urgently decongest the islands,** by prioritizing the transfer of those asylum seekers who are most at risk to the Greek mainland or to other EU Member States, in a manner that will protect the health of all involved, as well as public health.
- **To rescind the E.L.D,** which is due to expire on 2 April 2020; **to clarify that refugees who have entered Greece after 1 March 2020 will be granted protection and to suspend deportation decisions that, especially during the pandemic, jeopardize the lives, health, freedom and basic rights of returnees.** Reinstating access to asylum, and in particular respecting the principle of *non-refoulement*, will restore the state of legality.
- **To implement alternatives to detention for all administrative detainees throughout Greece,** and to prevent police authorities from ongoing arrests on account of the lack of legal documents for the duration of the pandemic.
- **To take all necessary measures to ensure that, even under these emergency conditions, everyone wishing to apply for asylum will be able to do so before the Greek Asylum Service,** in a way that safeguards the health of asylum seekers and employees alike.

We once more address the Institutions of the European Union and all member states, requesting:

- **To safeguard the right to seek asylum,** one of the core rights underlying the fabric of post-war Europe, by exercising their responsibility to ensure all EU member states comply with their international obligations.
- **To establish timely and fair relocation mechanisms that will, at minimum, take the most vulnerable, such as children and people with disabilities, away from the Greek islands and into appropriate accommodation within the reach of health services.** As this is a health emergency, relocation should be facilitated, keeping only necessary checks to avoid spread of Covid-19.
- **To support the Greek Government in its effort to safeguard public health,** which can only be achieved through the extensive decongestion of the RICs, the adoption of protective measures that include the population of refugees and migrants, and particularly through avoiding “ghettoization” or generalized detention.

We address the bodies of the Council of Europe and the United Nations, requesting:

- **To provide Greece with all possible assistance to avoid the public health crisis that could result, particularly, from the situation in the camps.**
- **To strengthen the monitoring procedures and oversight for the European Union’s and its member states’ compliance with International Conventions and International Human Rights Standards.**

In closing, we call on everyone to restore legality and be mindful of not neglecting refugees and other vulnerable groups in times of crisis. Prevailing conditions in the camps, coupled with the inadvertent effects of suspending access to asylum, not only undermine

our laws, but can undermine public health in its entirety. These considerations only act to amplify our original plea to restore legality and safeguard our common European system of values.

LIST OF SIGNATORIES

ACTIONAID HELLAS
AITIMA (Greece)
ANASA CULTURAL CENTER (Greece)
ASSOCIAZIONE RICREATIVA CULTURALE ITALIANA (ARCI) (Italy)
ARSIS – ASSOCIATION FOR THE SOCIAL SUPPORT OF YOUTH
ASYLOS (UK)
BABEL DAY CETNRE (Greece)
BRIGHTON MIGRANT SOLIDARITY (UK)
CARITAS HELLAS
CENTRE DIOTIMA (GREECE)
DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL GREECE
DUTCH COUNCIL FOR REFUGEES
END FGM EUROPEAN NETWORK (Belgium)
EQUAL SOCIETY (Greece)
EUROMED RIGHTS / EUROMED DROITS
EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON REFUGEES AND EXILES (ECRE)
GENERATION 2.0 RED (Greece)
CHURCHES' COMMISSION FOR MIGRANTS IN EUROPE (CCME)
GCAP GREECE
GREATER MANCHESTER IMMIGRATION AID UNIT (GMIAU) (UK)
GREEK COUNCIL FOR REFUGEES (GCR)
GREEK FORUM OF MIGRANTS
HELLENIC LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (HLHR)
HELLENIC PLATFORM FOR DEVELOPMENT
HELP REFUGEES / CHOOSE LOVE
HIAS GREECE
HUMANRIGHTS360 (Greece)
HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (HRW)
INITIATIVE FOR THE DETAINEES' RIGHTS (Greece)
INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (UK)
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR ERITREAN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS (ICERAS)
INTERSOS HELLAS
INTERSOS ORGANIZZAZIONE UMANITARIA ONLUS (Italy)
ITALIAN COUNCIL FOR REFUGEES
JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE GREECE (JRS GREECE)
JRS – PORTUGAL
LAW CENTRES NETWORK (UK)
LEEDS NO BORDERS (UK)
LEGAL CENTRE LESVOS (Greece)
MEDECINS DU MONDE – GREECE (MDM - GREECE)
MIGRANT VOICE (UK)
NETWORK FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS (Greece)
ODYSSEA (Greece)
OMANIAE VZW (Belgium)

ORGANIZATION EARTH (Greece)
OXFAM
PAR - PLATAFORMA DE APOIO AOS REFUGIADOS (Portugal)
PLATFORM FOR INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION ON UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS (PICUM)
PHYSICIANS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (Finland)
QUAKER ASYLUM AND REFUGEE NETWORK (QARN) (UK)
REFUGEE LEGAL SUPPORT (RLS) (Greece)
REFUGEE RIGHTS EUROPE (RRE)
REFUGEE SUPPORT AEGEAN (RSA) (Greece)
SAFE PASSAGE INTERNATIONAL
SAVE A GIRL SAVE A GENERATION (Spain)
SUSSEX REFUGEE AND MIGRANT SELF SUPPORT GROUP (UK)
SWEDISH NETWORK OF REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUPS (FARR)
THE ROUTES OF THE OLIVE TREE (Greece)
THOUSAND 4 1000 (UK)
UNAF (Spain)
UNITED AGAINST INHUMANITY (UAI)