

Report on the activities of Legal Centre Lesbos - May 2017



Context of our work in the first quarter of the year

The first quarter of the year has seen the Legal Centre having to adapt to a rapidly changing situation on the Island. The central problems relating to human and asylum rights breaches remain the same but the procedural and legal situation continues to be unpredictable.

The awful conditions refugees are subjected to on the islands and the mainland have not improved despite the EU's insistence that Greece is now safe for Member States to return asylum applicants to. This is borne out most directly in the daily testimonies of refugees who attend the legal centre.

Furthermore, the spectre of returns to Turkey on the basis of 'admissibility' (A process which aims to return asylum applicants to Turkey regardless of the merits of their application) continues to loom large over the refugee population which remains on the Island, with the Greek State Council currently deliberating the validity of Turkey's designation as a Safe Third Country.

Current Status of the project

Our Legal Centre is currently staffed in Lesbos by 1 paid Greek lawyer, two volunteer lawyers from the US (who is also responsible for general coordination of the project in the field) and Poland, and 3 jurists from Italy, France and the US.

We operate a daily drop in service within the Mosaik Support Centre, a centre which provides language and artistic lessons and activities for asylum seekers on the Island of Lesbos.

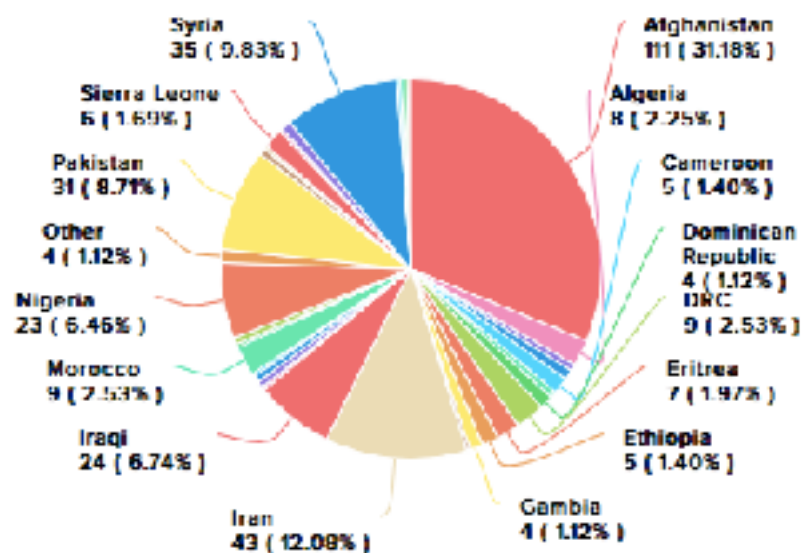
The Legal Centre is also supported by a volunteer coordinator based in London, along with a fundraiser, accountant and web designer all of whom are also based in London.

Alongside legal information, assistance, advice and representation provided by the Centre, we are also involved in various forms of advocacy work which aims to challenge the human rights abuses taking place on the island.

Case work



Since the beginning of the year the Legal centre has taken on an additional 172 cases, bringing the total number of cases on our database to 363.



You will note that the legal centre is assisting beneficiaries from many different countries. This is in contrast to some of the other organisations on the Island who specifically assist nationals from specific countries due to the nature of their mandate or restrictions placed upon them by their donors.

The legal centre's open and non-discriminatory approach has required us to make available interpreting services in various languages, primarily including farsi, urdu, french and arabic.

Procedure

In the first 5 months of operation, the vast majority of beneficiaries attending the Legal Centre were still awaiting registration of their application, having waited often for almost a year on the Island.

Since late December however, the situation has altered and seen refugees being registered and then given dates for their admissibility interviews with only a few days notice.

Increasingly, the Legal Centre is receiving beneficiaries who require urgent assistance in preparing for their interviews. Often these requests will be made 1 day prior to the interview, which is far from ideal considering that many of these cases are long and complicated, involving refugees who more often than not are still suffering from some form of psychological trauma arising from the experiences in their home countries or from their dangerous journeys to Greece.

Consequently, the vast majority of our volunteers' time and efforts are being absorbed in preparing individuals as best they can for their interviews in the short space of time that they have.

Advocacy

A central part of the legal centre's human rights approach is to identify and challenge human rights abuses committed against refugees on the island of Lesbos.

This has involved various initiatives, which have included the following:

Organising of the community leaders to strengthen legal advocacy

Through our work in Lesbos we have established a strong relationship with the community leaders of Moria refugee camp. Rather than simply speak on behalf of refugees about the problems they face, we have striven to help provide a platform from which refugees can speak for themselves.

This has been important in empowering the refugee community in Lesbos, an approach which prior to our involvement had been largely ignored. The Legal Centre believes that refugees must be actively involved in forming any solution to this problem. This approach included a joint letter to European Commission leaders, an international press conference held on 15 March to focus on the EU Turkey deal 1 year on from its implementation, and continued organising to advocate for refugee rights are respected at both local and international level. The 15 March conference saw refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh amongst others, give speeches directly addressing the human rights issues in the camps and their fears of being unlawfully deported. At the same conference, we also arranged for a Turkish lawyer to give a presentation on the dangerously inadequate system of international protection currently in place in Turkey.

The statement produced following the conference can be found here <https://peoplesassemblylesvos.wordpress.com>. Live videos of the speeches made can be located on our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/LesvosLegal/>



(Press conference panel including Afghan community leader Sayed Hashmatullah, Lesbos trade union leader Aristidis Sgatzos and Turkish human rights lawyer Deman Guler - Lesbos, 15 March 2017)



(Domestic and international press present at conference - Lesbos, 15 March 2017)

The Legal Centre was also fully involved in mobilising for the pro refugee demonstration marking the 1 year anniversary of the EU Turkey deal on 18 March 2017.





Legal Centre Website

With the help of volunteers we have strived to create a website which provides the legal centre with a further platform to advocate our human rights approach. This can be found at www.legal-centrelesbos.org

Inadmissible

The Legal Centre collaborated with a social enterprise called Thraedable to produce a documentary on the human rights situation in Lesbos. Members of the Legal Centre were interviewed along with beneficiaries who had benefitted from the services of the Centre. The premiere of the documentary took place in Science Po, Paris on 10 April with the legal centre's co-ordinator and one of its volunteers taking part in the question and answer session. The documentary can be seen here: <https://thraedable.com/en/inadmissible/>



How we are looking to develop

Our intention is to increase the number of Greek lawyers assisting the legal centre to two. The Greek lawyers would supervise the work of volunteers, make legal applications on behalf of beneficiaries of the centre, represent at asylum appeals and advise on strategic litigation efforts. Two Greek lawyers working full time in the centre would have a transformative effect on its work, allowing it to be more responsive in the field.

In order to secure the long term viability of the project and its continued development, a full time paid coordinator based in Lesbos is essential.

Any remaining funding would be spent on expenses incurred by the office in its day to day work, which includes legal application fees, printing, photocopying, the online case management system and computers for the work.