

BLOCKED FROM THE SYSTEM

Voices of people excluded from the
asylum procedure on mainland
Greece, Crete and Rhodes



MOBILE
INFO TEAM

Mobile Info Team is a Greece-based organisation that provides advice and assistance throughout all stages of the asylum procedure. We raise awareness and advocate for changes to the asylum system in Greece, and work to end pushbacks as part of the Border Violence Monitoring Network.

We would like to thank Action for Women for their valuable contributions to this research. Action for Women is an Athens-based women's rights organisation supporting refugee and asylum-seeking women's recovery, resilience and re-integration. With their model, the Pomegranate Project, which is Greece's first holistic protection and empowerment model, women who are survivors or at risk of gender-based violence access essential services such as case management, childcare, shelter, mental health and psychosocial support, skills acquisition classes and livelihoods opportunities.

We are grateful to the MIT Caseworker Team for their assistance with this project and to the participants who shared their stories with us for this research.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on the experiences of people seeking asylum on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes since the policy changes in late November 2021. This major change saw the termination of the Skype pre-registration system for first instance claims, and introduced the intention for all arrivals to go through reception and identification centre procedures. However, six months after the issue of the Circular, and despite the promise of two new reception centres, only one remains operational on mainland Greece. As a result, there are just three narrow avenues into the asylum procedure: through Fylakio Reception and Identification Centre, by evidencing a vulnerability or registering a police note.

Our research highlights the multiple significant barriers that people face in attempting to register their asylum claims. Our conversations with people seeking asylum in Greece show that despite the termination of the flawed Skype system, people continue to be forced to remain undocumented for extensive periods of time, and are obstructed from accessing international protection in Greece. The lack of access to asylum on mainland Greece deprives people from support from social services, cash assistance, the labour market, healthcare systems or accommodation. This environment fosters exploitation, as people are forced to find other ways to survive. In addition, people live in constant fear of the police, particularly regarding pushbacks and detention. These conditions can have a devastating impact on people's mental and physical health.

We carried out research between January and April 2022 based on 18 interviewees and 144 case files concerning 185 people seeking asylum. Our research shows that:

- With space for 282 people, Fylakio Reception and Identification Centre does not have capacity to register all mainland Greece arrivals, and does not accept self-referred arrivals. Mobile Info Team did not find a single incident of someone successfully managing to present themselves at Fylakio.
- According to testimonies, 71% of pushback groups in 2021 on mainland Greece were apprehended in the Evros region, where Fylakio Reception and Identification Centre is located, making it an unsafe and unviable option.
- Vulnerabilities are extremely difficult to prove. According to our case register, people who were victims of torture, sexual and gender-based violence and an amputee could not register their asylum claims.
- The police are inconsistent with issuing police notes. 67% of people who reached out to Mobile Info Team to ask about police notes, were not issued with one.
- Regional Asylum Offices are inconsistent with registering people with police notes.
- 80% of interviewees have experienced homelessness or relied on others for shelter since being in Greece.
- Over 60% of interviewees were being exploited.
- 60% of interviewees suffered from medical or mental ill health and had not received support from services.
- Over 50% of interviewees discussed their debilitating concern of encountering the police describing well-founded fears of pushbacks, detention or deportation.

We recommend that Greece acts urgently to ensure fair and efficient access to the asylum procedure, by:

- Ensuring people have fast and fair access to the asylum procedure on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes, and are granted the legal protection and material reception conditions they need and deserve.
- Ensuring competent authorities, including the Greek police and Greek Asylum Service, have the knowledge and the capacity needed to provide people seeking asylum with easily accessible information in a language they can understand on how to claim asylum in Greece.

We recommend that the European Commission acts urgently to ensure fair and efficient access to the asylum procedure in Greece, by:

- Being ready to hold Greece accountable when it flouts protection standards including by considering pursuing legal action and launching an infringement procedure to ensure compliance with EU law.

INTRODUCTION

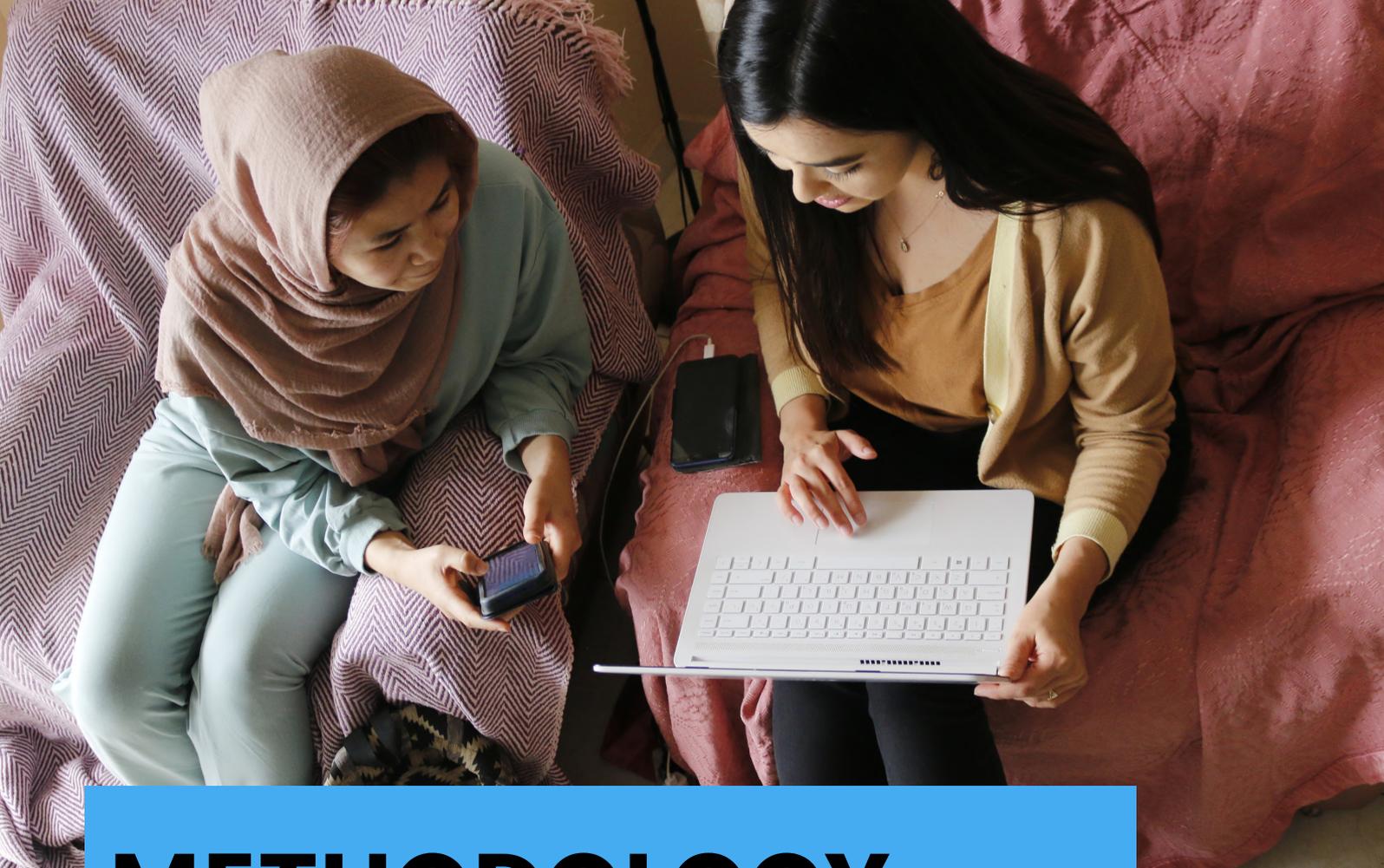
Everyone has the right to seek international protection, and have access to a fair and safe asylum procedure. This includes being granted a temporary legal status upon arrival which enables people to access essential services and protection from deportation. People seeking asylum in Greece have often been through long and distressing journeys to reach Europe. Yet, individuals seeking refuge confront numerous obstacles at every step of their journey.

On 22 November 2021, the Greek Government announced major changes in access to asylum for people seeking safety on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes. This primarily saw the termination of the Skype pre-registration system for first instance claims, and was closely followed by a re-issued Circular and Clarification on 24 November 2021, which indicated that all people who arrive irregularly to Greece and who have not had their identity verified by a Greek authority will be subjected to reception and identification procedures. However, on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes, only one Reception and Identification Centre (RIC), where people can undergo reception and identification procedures, is operational, yet with extremely limited capacity and does not accept people who present themselves. Alternatively, people can attempt the difficult process of evidencing a vulnerability, or try to get a police note and subsequently register it at a Regional Asylum Office. In practice, and considering the vast range of barriers and dangers people have to overcome to get through one of these routes, this means that the majority of people have no access to asylum on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes.

As well as facing the impossible task of registering their asylum claims, people seeking refuge have to do so without information or basic state support. In the same way that individuals were left waiting for extensive periods of time unregistered under the immensely flawed Skype system, the lack of routes to registering asylum claims in Greece leads to people being left in limbo and undocumented. This exposes them to several risks, including homelessness, destitution and deportation as well as taking a severe toll on people's physical and mental health.

This report details the recently changed legal framework for claiming asylum in Greece, before providing a summary of our findings from the research that we carried out on the impacts of the inadequate Skype system on people in need of safety. This establishes the base from which we explore the persistent and aggravated impacts that the current lack of access to asylum on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes has on people who are desperately seeking protection.





METHODOLOGY

This report is based on research conducted between January 2022 and April 2022. It includes first-hand interviews with people seeking asylum and in-depth analysis of our own case files.

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted via the phone in five languages with interpreters from the refugee community. Additionally, we spoke with one person who was accommodated in Fylakio RIC. We also received transcripts of an interview conducted with three women who are supported by Action for Women and wanted to share their stories. Our 18 interviewees were from six different countries, including Cameroon, Egypt, India, Kuwait, Pakistan and Syria. To protect the identity of the interviewees, all names have been changed and the displayed photographs are not of the interviewees themselves.

We analysed 144 case files concerning 185 people, including 25 minors from 13 different countries who have struggled to claim asylum since 22 November 2021. People within our case analysis were from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Cuba, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Syria. Additionally we used Border Violence Monitoring Network's (BVMN) database to analyse pushback apprehension points on mainland Greece in 2021 to generate statistics and visually present them on a map.

We also used two of BVMN's reports which were collected by Josoor. These reports tell the stories of a group of Syrian people seeking asylum and a Cuban couple, who were pushed back from Greece to Turkey in 2021.

BACKGROUND, LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

The Circular and Clarification issued on the 22 November 2021 saw the implementation of Article 39 of the IPA, which outlines that "all third country nationals and stateless persons entering the Greek territory or irregularly living in Greece without the legal formalities and who do not prove their citizenship and identify using any document issued by a public authority must go through reception and identification procedures."¹ The re-issued Circular and Clarification² on 24 November 2021 designated that all asylum seekers who enter via mainland Greece will only be registered in RICs on the mainland, rather than including the possibility of those on the islands. New arrivals to the Aegean (hotspot) islands have been subject to reception and identification procedures since 2015. Yet, the procedure on the mainland has been vastly different until this point.

Before November 2021, the procedure for arrivals to the mainland has been a self-registration process reliant on Regional Asylum Offices to register people's asylum claims. People who spoke one of the 18 languages available had to pre-register their claims and book an appointment to complete their registration at a Regional Asylum Office by connecting to the Greek Asylum Service on Skype. The Skype system was immensely flawed and caused people to be excluded from asylum for an average of 14 months. People who spoke a language which was not available on Skype were at the mercy of Regional Asylum Office staff and had no choice but to send an email or repeatedly appear in person in hope of getting an appointment to register their asylum claim.

Despite the promise of two new reception centres,³ the changes brought about in late November 2021 were brought into practice with just one centre on the mainland, Fylakio, being operational which does not accept self-referred arrivals.

People impacted by this policy are not just those who arrived after November 2021. Due to the immense difficulties to access to asylum system when the Skype process was in place, there are many people who have been trying to claim asylum, who are now faced with an even more restricted system. Despite UNHCR recording just 9,157⁴ new arrivals to Greece in 2021, the Asylum Service⁵ registered a total of 28,360 people, 22,040 of these were on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes. Whilst people are forced to remain outside of the asylum system, they are unprotected and at risk. As a result, many people experience homelessness, destitution, ill health and exploitation instead of the protection afforded to them by law.

Since 2015 there has been a steady increase in the number of people arriving to Greece via land borders. In 2015 just 1% of people arrived via the land. This rose to 18% in 2017 and up to 38% in 2020. 2021 was the first year that more people arrived to Greece via land routes than via the sea, with 53% of new arrivals reaching Greece via the mainland.

This continuous upward trajectory of land arrivals over the past six years would suggest that Greece can expect the majority of people seeking asylum to arrive via the mainland in the future. Fair and efficient access to the asylum system on the mainland must therefore be an urgent priority for the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.

RIGHT TO ASYLUM

The right to seek international protection at any point or place within a State is grounded in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights,⁶ as well as being enshrined in international, European and Greek law. It is primarily the State's responsibility to protect people seeking asylum in accordance with these laws. Although the 1951 Refugee Convention does not define a specific approach, it declares that all people seeking safety have a right to a fair and efficient procedure to access asylum.⁷ European law similarly outlines Member States' responsibility to ensure that people have an "effective opportunity" to lodge an application for international protection "as soon as possible."⁸ However, legislation fails to provide clarity on what these terms mean, leading to considerable divergence in practice across Europe. Compounded by the significant lack of information available, this makes for an incredibly confusing system that individuals have little support in navigating.

The International Protection Act (IPA) provides specific legislation on asylum in Greece.⁹ It states the right of any foreigner or stateless person to claim international protection in Greece, and that the time frame for an individual to make an application should happen "without delay."¹⁰ Whilst the Skype pre-registration system in Greece left people waiting for on average 14 months,¹¹ its termination on 22 November 2021¹² resulted in there being no access to asylum on the mainland, Crete and Rhodes for the majority of people. The current lack of access to asylum fundamentally violates international, European and Greek laws.



MATERIAL RECEPTION CONDITIONS

Importantly, EU regulation states that people seeking asylum have a right to an adequate standard of living,¹³ education¹⁴ and information regarding public relief and assistance.¹⁵ Individuals are also entitled by European and national law to receive support that allows them to live in dignity and that guarantees their physical and mental health.¹⁶ In Greece, people are able to apply to live in government overseen accommodation or camps and for cash assistance. This so-called "material reception condition" should, by law, be available to applicants as soon as they have expressed their willingness to apply for asylum.¹⁷ Additionally, in Greece, people can only apply to work after their asylum claim has been registered for at least six months,¹⁸ leaving individuals completely reliant on the state until this point. Whilst people are desperately trying to access the inaccessible asylum system, they are forced to remain undocumented, depriving them from any form of services or protection. Despite legal obligations, access to asylum and protection of asylum seeker rights has become exceedingly limited on mainland Greece.



PROHIBITION OF PUSHBACKS

Whilst people are forced to remain undocumented on mainland Greece, they are at greater risk of being apprehended by police and pushed back to Turkey. The term 'pushbacks' refers to the informal, illegal and forced cross-border expulsion of people, often through extremely violent means. Every pushback is illegal, regardless of whether an individual has suffered violence or ill-treatment. The very act of being expelled across a border without access to due process violates international and EU law. Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention prohibits states from expelling individuals to territories where their life or freedom would be in danger on account of an individual's race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social or political group. When an individual is pushed back without due process, they have not had the chance to have their asylum claim heard. This violates Article 18 of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights in accordance with the Geneva Convention, the Protocol of 1967 relating to the status of refugees, and the Treaty establishing the European Community. European legislation also dictates that no one can be removed, expelled or extradited to a state where they would be at risk of the death penalty, torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment.¹⁹

Pushback incidents increased significantly in March 2020 and have become a systematic practise at both Greece's land and sea borders ever since. BVMN has recorded 171 pushbacks from mainland Greece since January 2021.

DETENTION

Despite international law generally prohibiting penalising people who are in a state to seek asylum, in 2019 Greece expanded the grounds for administrative detention of people seeking asylum to include the determination of their identity, risk to national security and public order, and risk of absconding.²⁰ The need to examine alternative options to detention was also abolished in certain circumstances. Greek legislation outlines a 50-day detention period for asylum seekers, however there can be successive decisions which prolong this for a maximum of 18 months.²¹ Therefore, many people seeking asylum in Greece do and will continue to find themselves in detention for a period of time within their asylum journey.



CLAIMING ASYLUM BEFORE 22 NOVEMBER 2021

Until 22 November 2021, the majority of people seeking safety on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes were subject to a two-stage registration process. The first pre-registration stage, implemented in July 2014, required people speaking one of the 18 languages available to express their willingness to apply for asylum to the Greek Asylum Service via the telecommunications app, Skype. This system relied heavily on access to a smartphone with a working camera, access to Wi-Fi or money for data, strong signal and the technical knowledge to download and use the app. Most people had just one hour per week to try and reach the Asylum Service on Skype, and either could not get through, or were told to call back another time. Despite its shortcomings, the Skype system had benefits which if improved, could have added value to the asylum system in Greece. Most importantly, the Skype system had potential to pre-register claims remotely, overcoming the difficulties and costly journeys faced by people living far away from Asylum Offices.

Whilst registering an asylum claim should, according to Greek law, take place “without delay”,²² it was only after an applicant had successfully connected with the Greek Asylum Service via Skype that they then received an in-person appointment. People claiming asylum do not have any entitlements until they speak with the Asylum Service and receive an Asylum Seeker Card, proving their legal basis to stay in Greece and subsequent access to services such as shelter, financial support and healthcare. Without this documentation and protection, people seeking asylum are highly exposed to the risk of destitution, exploitation, detention and pushbacks.

THE SKYPE SYSTEM

Our previous *Lives on Hold* report carried out research into the experiences of people seeking asylum on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes before 22 November 2021, through the pre-registration Skype system. The report evidenced the incredibly long delays that people seeking asylum experienced, as well as the lack of information and support that was available. The report, based on an analysis of 1,132 Mobile Info Team case files and 25 interviews between May and August 2021, found that:



- **14 month average waiting time**



- **Homelessness rate was 74 times the national rate in Greece**



- **84% found out about Skype from other people seeking asylum**



- **1 in 6 people did not know how to claim asylum**

Despite the Skype system’s termination, our current research reveals that many of the issues that people experienced remain the same or have worsened. The Skype system forced people to remain undocumented for prolonged periods. Yet, we are faced with a system wherein access to asylum is so narrow it is now impossible for many.

CLAIMING ASYLUM IN GREECE AFTER 22 NOVEMBER 2021

Despite Greece's legal obligations and the intention to implement Article 39 of the IPA, six months have passed since the issue of the Circular with a lack of any implementation so far of the two new and promised RICs on mainland Greece.²³ As a result, there are only three narrow routes to access the asylum system which cater to the minority of people on mainland Greece.

FYLAKIO RECEPTION AND IDENTIFICATION CENTRE

Fylakio RIC, situated just 10km from the border with Turkey, is an unwelcoming, prison-like structure, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by police. The centre, which stands next to a pre-removal detention centre, was opened in 2013 with a capacity for 240 people. It has since been expanded and can now accommodate 282 people, yet has been known to house up to 350 when overcrowded.²⁴

Regardless of being the only RIC on mainland Greece, Fylakio RIC does allow people to present themselves to claim asylum. Mobile Info Team has not found a single incident of someone managing to successfully present themselves at Fylakio. This has also been confirmed by the Asylum Unit of Fylakio itself in an email to a lawyer, stating that "there will be an announcement in the near future regarding the offices of the Asylum Services that will be designated for registration of asylum seekers", implying that it is not currently possible to present at Fylakio RIC for registration. Instead, individuals who are accommodated in the centre have often been

brought there after being apprehended by Greek authorities to register their asylum claims. It is not uncommon that people are first detained in police stations or the next door pre-removal detention centre for a short number of days before being transferred to the RIC. Once in the centre, people are de facto detained for a period of 25 days for the purpose of establishing their identity and registering their asylum claim. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 there has also been a mandatory quarantine period added onto this timeframe meaning some people are de facto detained for more than a month.²⁵

Due to its prison-like demeanour and the lack of information provision, individuals are often confused as to whether they are in the Fylakio detention centre or the reception centre. The only key distinguishing feature is that people within the reception centre are permitted to use their phones and the internet for periods of the day whilst those within the detention centre are often not granted access to their phones at all.

The centre makes for a grave start to people's asylum journey in Europe. Those held in the centre report a lack of basic reception and identification services including interpretation, medical treatment and legal advice. There have also been reports of ill-treatment by staff within the centre.²⁶ Mobile Info Team has been in contact with people after their release from the centre who were unsure if their asylum claims had been registered and who were not aware that they had been charged with illegal entry for irregularly entering Greece. The lack of information and translation is concerning, given the purpose of this centre is to register people's asylum claims.

ADY'S STORY

Ady and his family were transferred to Fylakio RIC by Greek authorities after a harrowing journey to reach Greece. Instead of finding protection and dignified living conditions, Ady found himself in a prison-like building with ration-like portions of food and no information.

"The meals here are not enough even for a minor child. The staff are good but not everything is done as is right for refugees. I suffer from nervous outbursts due to imprisonment in Turkey. I submitted a report to be released due to my phobia of prisons and the conditions of detention."

Despite requesting a lawyer, Ady has not been able to receive any legal advice.

"I don't know what the need for detention is. All this time, I have been in detention for 13 days, and my interview is after eight days. And how long will I be in detention? I do not know."

Throughout his time in Fylakio RIC, Ady was not able to access any legal advice or information regarding the asylum procedure. He remains unclear on why he was being detained.

"We, the Syrian, especially Kurdish Syrians, have lived our whole lives in hardship and troubles. We only want to reach a stage where we can continue our lives well."



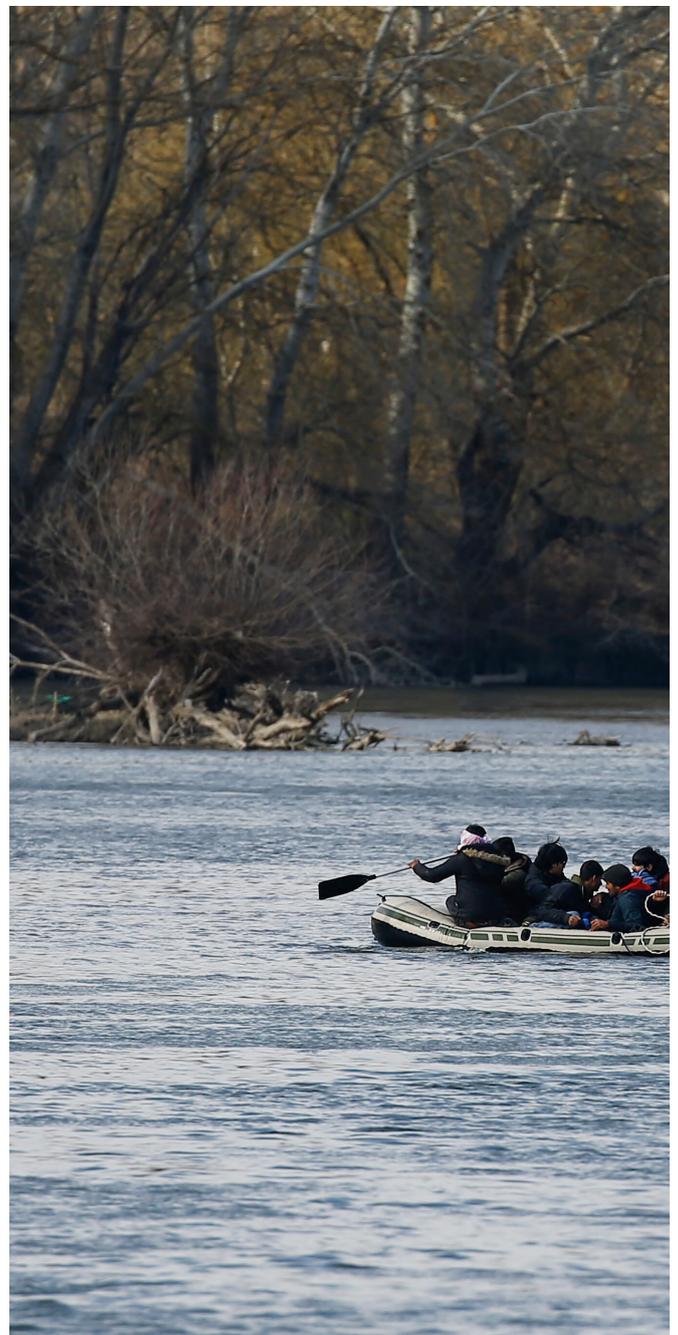
THE EVROS REGION AND PUSHBACKS

As part of BVMN, Mobile Info Team has been documenting pushbacks across the Evros river and into Turkey for many years.²⁷ Such pushbacks share a common narrative that begins with apprehension on Greek territory followed by an intense period of humiliation, intimidation, violence and detention. Subsequently, groups are either rowed across the river to Turkey, forced to swim - or even waded across the river when the water levels are low enough - or are abandoned on islets without food or water.

In its yearly torture report,²⁸ BVMN found that 89% of pushbacks carried out by Greek authorities contain at least one or more forms of violence, with 52% of pushback groups being subjected to such high levels of harm that the abuse amounts to torture or inhuman treatment. There are also systematic tactics of humiliation employed by the authorities, including the forced stripping of people and intrusive, naked body searches.

Numerous organisations²⁹ have reported identical practices by Greek authorities. Amnesty International detail 21 pushback incidents within a six month period which include arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and inhuman treatment. The organisation concludes that Greece is employing pushbacks as part of its border policy.³⁰ Human Rights Watch has similarly been reporting on Greece's pushback practises for many years. In its most recent report the organisation details 30 pushback incidents across the Evros river.³¹

"I was afraid to go to the police and be pushed back to Turkey."
- Charlotte, Cameroon



MAPPING PUSHBACK APPREHENSION POINTS ON MAINLAND GREECE

Greece has achieved notoriety for its use of violent and systematic pushbacks within the refugee and asylum seeking community. Many individuals that Mobile Info Team speak with note that the threat of being pushed back is their biggest fear whilst in Greece. Alarmingly, many individuals themselves have experienced pushbacks or have close family and friends who have been subjected to this illegal border policy.

Due to this knowledge of pushbacks, most individuals seek to stay far away from the border with Turkey. In 2021, 71% of pushback groups on mainland Greece were apprehended in the Evros region.³²

Since late November 2021 it has not been clear how people should register their asylum claims. Many people have reported to Mobile Info Team that Greek authorities such as the police or Greek Asylum Service staff have told them that to register an asylum claim, they must go to the RIC in Fylakio. Yet, due to the high number of pushbacks in this region this simply is not a safe nor viable option.

71% of pushback groups on mainland Greece were apprehended in the EVROS region in 2021

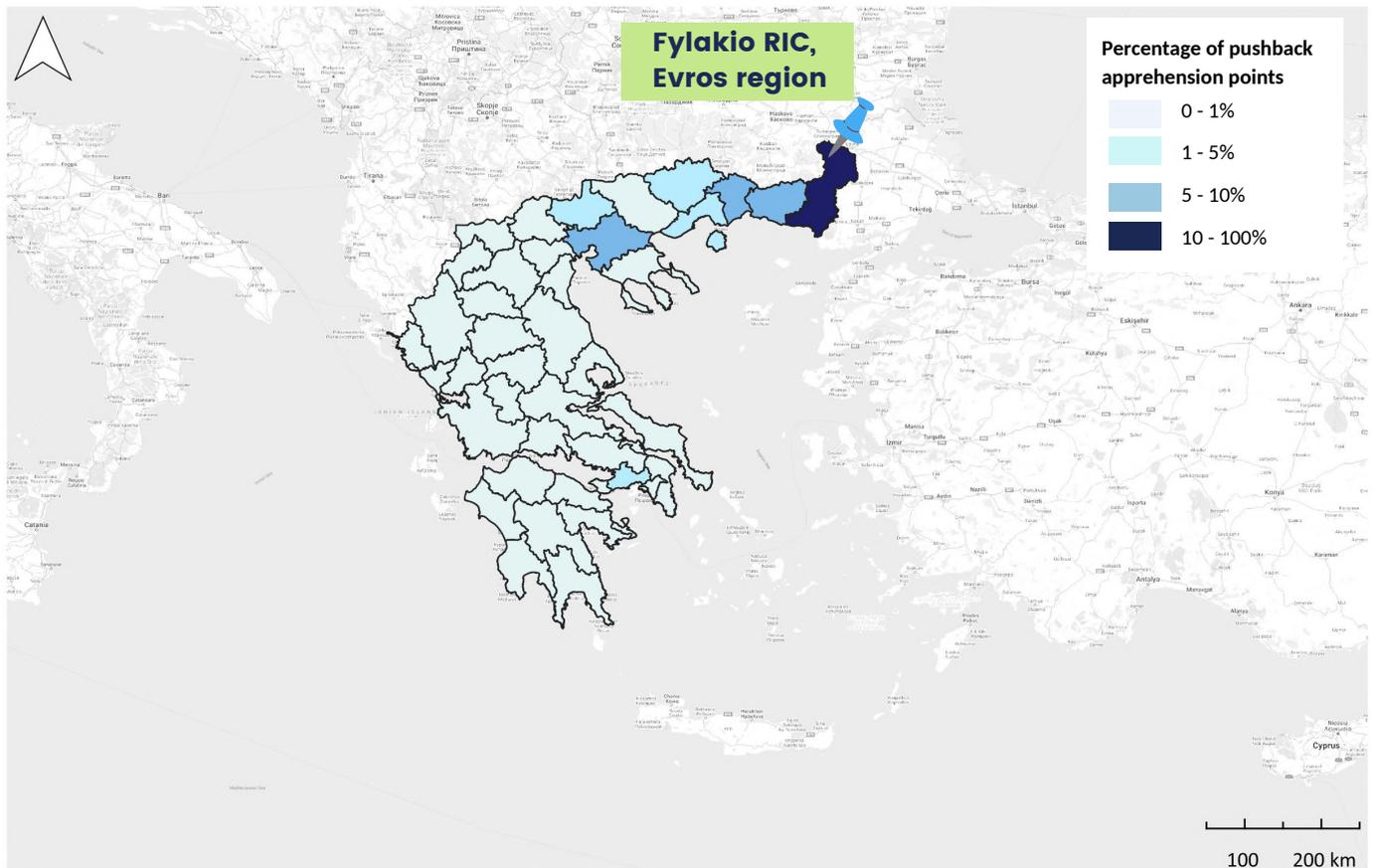


Figure 1: Map of mainland Greece showing regions with highest pushback apprehension points between January 2021 and January 2022³³

PUSHBACK NEAR FYLAKIO RIC³⁴

On the 1st of July 2021, a group of 11 people were on their way to present themselves at Fylakio RIC. Instead of being granted their wish to register their asylum claims, the group was subjected to a violent and humiliating pushback. Their ill-treatment lasted for more than 18 hours.

The group was made up of six men, two women and three children who were all from Syria. After crossing into Greece from Turkey via the Evros river they walked for nearly seven hours before approaching Fylakio RIC.

The group was no more than 500 metres away from the centre when they were surrounded by four cars. Ten men emerged from the cars and approached the group. They were dressed in military style uniforms and some were wearing intimidating black balaclavas.

When the group asked the officers to take them to Fylakio RIC they were beaten. The entire group, including the women and children, were slapped, kicked and attacked with batons for nearly 30 minutes before being ordered to lie face down on the ground.

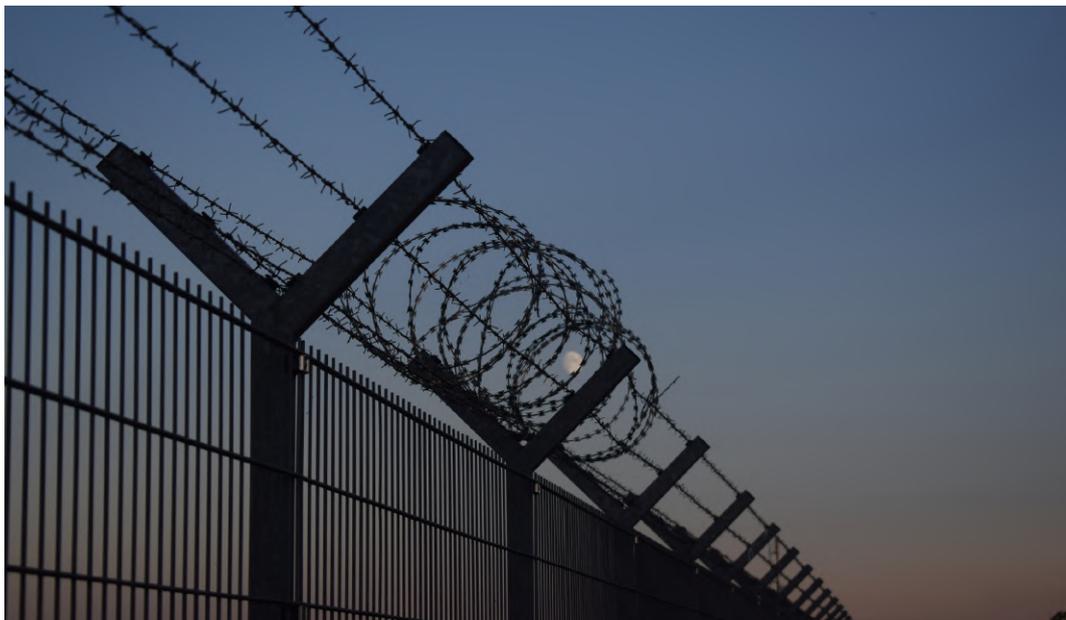
The group was then subjected to intrusive and inappropriate body searches with the women being made to remove their headscarves. The officers confiscated everything from the group including their jackets, phones, identification documents and food supplies before loading them into a large van.

The group were then held in two different informal detention sites. They were placed in crowded, filthy cells, forcibly strip-searched, beaten, and despite “begging”, denied both food and water.

The group were then taken to the Evros river alongside around 90 other individuals. They were placed in tiny boats and rowed into the middle of the river. They were forced to exit the boats onto a small abandoned islet without any food or water. They were then shouted at and threatened until they finally made the harrowing choice to cross the strong, high waters of the Evros river back to Turkey.

“They kept beating us and you can lose your life at any moment.”

PUSHBACK FROM INSIDE FYLAKIO RIC³⁵



A married Cuban couple in their 50s arrived in Greece in late October 2021. After following the advice of a Greek police officer they took themselves to Fylakio RIC to register their asylum claims. Yet instead of being granted the safety and security they sought, they were subjected to a humiliating pushback to Turkey - a country neither of them had ever stepped foot in.

The couple first reached Thessaloniki in October 2021, and immediately went to the court house to ask how to claim asylum. They were incorrectly advised by a police officer there to travel to Fylakio RIC in the Evros region which is close to the border with Turkey, to register their asylum claims.

The couple decided to seek legal advice, but the lawyer they spoke with did not correct this information.

They were simply advised to wait until January because the lawyer believed a new law impacting asylum would be announced then.

Following this advice, the couple waited until January 2022 to travel to Fylakio. They caught a bus and took a taxi directly to the RIC. When they arrived, they were surprised to find a centre surrounded by three barbed wire fences and guarded by two men in balaclavas.

Once inside the centre, the couple used a friend to help translate on the phone and explain that they wished to seek asylum in Greece. However, the officer in the centre told them that this was not the correct procedure.

Instead of providing support or advice to the couple, the officers proceeded to take their phones and backpacks.



Their backpacks contained everything that they thought they would need whilst their asylum claims were being registered - from phone chargers and toothbrushes to prescription medicine and money.

After being ordered to wait outside, the couple were verbally abused by men who appeared to be working in the centre. An unmarked van arrived to collect them, and men in black balaclavas drove them to a new location where they were subjected to further intimidation and degrading treatment.

Here they were mocked for carrying a Greek phrasebook, aggressively ordered about and forcibly searched. The couple were further humiliated by making them repeatedly pull up and down their shirts and open and close their mouths.

After this distressing experience, they were taken to a filthy cell containing bunk beds without any mattresses. The couple were refused medication, water and sanitary towels, and were given nothing but a dirty blanket, two boiled eggs and frozen bread.

Alongside around 30 other individuals, the couple were loaded into another van and driven to the Evros river where they were again brutally searched. The men in the group were ordered to discard their shoes, before they were all forced to kneel in front of two dinghies. Eventually, they were put into the rubber boats and rowed across to Turkey.

“We would understand that if we applied for asylum in Greece and we did not get it. But, we don’t understand why they would take everything from you and leave you in Turkey.”



VULNERABILITY PROCEDURES

According to the IPA, there are ten groups considered vulnerable under Greek asylum law.³⁶ Those who are deemed vulnerable, and who can evidence this, were normally not subjected to the lengthy Skype procedure before 22 November 2021, and instead were able to access referral pathways to ensure their asylum claims were registered more quickly. Even with the change in policy on 22 November 2021, the procedure for people who are deemed vulnerable remained unchanged and referral pathways remain open.

People who fall within any of the ten vulnerable categories are some of the only people on mainland Greece who still have access to the asylum procedure. However, substantial barriers exist for people who may be considered vulnerable in Greece, including a lack of access to legal information and a lack of access to the public health care system. Even people who should be able to register asylum claims via these referral pathways are often left outside of the asylum system due to not knowing about the referral pathways, not being able to evidence their vulnerability or not receiving any response from the asylum office.

VULNERABILITY CATEGORIES

- **Minors, unaccompanied or not**
- **Direct relatives of those killed in shipwrecks** (parents, siblings, children and spouses)
- **Disabled persons**
- **Elderly people**
- **Pregnant women**
- **Single parent families with minor children**
- **Victims of human trafficking**
- **Persons with serious illnesses**
- **Persons with mental disability**
- **Persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence or exploitation, such as victims of female genital mutilation**

According to the IPA, a vulnerable person must be identified by “medical practitioners of public hospitals or public mental health establishments or other private-sector medical professionals contracted with the Greek State or the Medical Screening and Psychosocial Support Unit of the Reception and Identification Centres.”³⁷ Yet, whilst people are forced to remain outside of the asylum system on mainland Greece, they are prohibited from accessing public healthcare, rarely have the money for private care, and have no access to RICs.

In practice, people seeking asylum on mainland Greece must first find an NGO that is able and willing to refer them to a medical practitioner. Such practitioners can then assess an individual’s vulnerability and provide medical evidence. This is then passed onto the Greek Asylum Service who decide whether an individual should be considered as vulnerable.

However, the majority of NGOs on mainland Greece with the authority to refer individuals to medical practitioners are based in Athens or Thessaloniki. As organisations must see individuals in person, anyone living outside of these two cities has incredibly limited access to referral pathways. In addition, even people located in these two cities can find the capacity of NGOs a barrier, as there are often much higher levels of need than services available.

Organisations working in Greece also struggle to understand the Greek Asylum Service’s vulnerability criteria as there is no threshold laid out in law. How ill must a person be to be considered as having a serious illness? Mobile Info Team has been in contact with many people who would appear to meet the criteria to be considered vulnerable, yet have been left outside of the system due to a lack of knowledge

of vulnerability procedures, an inability to evidence their vulnerability or due to their vulnerability being deemed to not meet the threshold required by the Greek Asylum Service.

According to our case register, heavily pregnant women, amputees, and people with illnesses such as tuberculosis have been unable to register their asylum claims. Despite Greek law outlining that minors should always be considered vulnerable, Mobile Info Team has only ever seen single parent families or families with more than five children listed as vulnerable. Additionally, although the IPA dictates that direct relatives of those killed in shipwrecks can be considered vulnerable, survivors of shipwrecks are not considered vulnerable in practice.

In one case, a family with two children under the age of seven were forced to remain outside of the asylum system for more than seven months. In another case, a man with a minor son and a severely infected leg needed urgent treatment to prevent it from being amputated yet was still not able to register his asylum claim. There are also many instances of people who have been raped, and are unable to evidence this exposing them to risk of further abuse. Finally, Mobile Info Team has witnessed several people with proven vulnerabilities asking for an appointment to register their asylum claim via email, yet these went largely unanswered.

Despite vulnerability procedures currently being one of the narrow routes to access the asylum system, a lack of access to information together with impractical requirements for evidencing vulnerabilities and a consistent lack of response from Regional Asylum Offices, means that many people who should be considered as vulnerable are also left outside of the asylum system in Greece.

CAROLYN'S STORY



Carolyn finally arrived in Athens at the start of October 2021, having been pushed back to Turkey several times.

Carolyn immediately set about trying to register her asylum claim. She was told to go to the Regional Asylum Office by people she met in Athens who were also seeking asylum. The Asylum Service simply told Carolyn to call Skype.

“It is really hard because every Wednesday and Friday you have hope. Every Wednesday and Friday you are disappointed.”

Alone and without any support or information in Greece, Carolyn went from organisation to organisation in search of help. All of the organisations Carolyn approached told her the same thing, that to access shelter she needed to register her asylum claim.

Carolyn was forced to turn to other people for help. Along with another woman from Cameroon, she is currently staying with a friend.

“Every day I need to figure out a solution for the night. We have to depend on other people. The two of us are currently staying with a friend who has papers. But this is not a good solution as we are completely dependent on her. She can also choose to leave any time.”

Carolyn fears once again having no other option but to sleep on the streets. In the past, she was forced to sleep in Victoria Square where she was sexually assaulted multiple times.

“I slept in the park in Victoria and people abused me. It would never have happened if I had a place to sleep and had food. I want to have peace of mind. Wherever you are on the street, there is always a man coming up to you. I know this is a country of rights and I want to be included in those rights.

The situation can really force people to do things they do not want to do. We need to sleep, eat, women are especially vulnerable, and are forced to prostitute themselves just to survive.

I want to say again, how vulnerable we are. When we are walking on the streets, men will call out to us. Show us €20 and say they want to sleep with us. They know we are homeless, hungry. We are exposed and vulnerable and they know it.”

Despite being a victim of multiple rapes, which Greek law dictates is a vulnerability, Carolyn has not managed to evidence her vulnerability and so is left outside of the system. Lack of access to the asylum system and basic protection means that Carolyn is put at extreme risk to sexual exploitation and abuse everyday.

POLICE NOTES

***“I am not going outside. Outside there are always problems with the police so I do not go outside.”
- Abdullah, Pakistan***

For individuals attempting to register asylum claims on mainland Greece who are not vulnerable, there is in practise, currently only one very limited option - a police note.

A police note, colloquially called a kharti, is a document issued by the police to third country nationals who have no legal basis for their stay in Greece. The note normally grants a third country national a standard timeframe of up to 25 days to voluntarily leave Greece. Police notes are given after the identity of an individual has been checked and their fingerprints have been taken. This procedure comes after a period of detention. Until the deadline to voluntarily leave the country has elapsed, the person can not be deported or arrested again for irregular entry.

Following the Circular of 22 November 2021, individuals who possess police notes can appear before Regional Asylum Offices and ask to book an appointment to register their asylum claims. Police notes have therefore never been more valuable on mainland Greece.



Whilst people are forced to remain undocumented in Greece they often live in constant fear of the police as they believe there is a high risk of being apprehended and pushed back, detained or deported to a country which is not safe for them. These beliefs are not unfounded. Under Greek law, an individual can be detained for up to 18 months.³⁸ In March this year, the police in Athens began an operation to identify people without legal documentation in Greece. During a week of police sweeps in just one area of the city, 530 people were apprehended and taken to Amygdaleza detention centre.³⁹

The Minister of Civil Protection, Takis Theodorikakos, also noted that more than 3,000 people without the correct paperwork were returned to their countries of origin last year.⁴⁰ The high numbers of pushbacks which often involve severe ill-treatment are also something that many people have experienced firsthand. For these reasons, many people are unwilling to go to the police and ask for a police note.

“I asked how to claim asylum in the camp and they told me that I have to go to a police station... I didn't do that because I was in contact with people who experienced the same thing and they were in a closed camp before being pushed back to Turkey. I also had experience with the Greek authorities when they caught us on the way. They threw us back to the river.”
- Amal, Kuwait

Both our conversations with people seeking asylum and our case analysis revealed that the practice for issuing police notes is inconsistent, with people at times being denied such documents even when they have directly requested them. Of the 69 cases who reached out to Mobile Info Team regarding police notes, 67% reported that they had not been issued with one, leaving them without any possibility of registering their asylum claims.

Additionally we found differential treatment towards

people who were apprehended within the same week and taken to Amygdaleza detention centre, with some individuals being released with police notes and some being released without.

We also found numerous instances of individuals asking police for help in registering their asylum claims, yet instead of providing assistance, it appears that people were given varied and incorrect information. This lies in stark contrast to European law which defines the authorities' task as “receiving and registering applications for international protection as well as informing applicants as to where and how to lodge an application for international protection.”⁴¹ Some people even reported being told that they must go to the Aegean islands to register their asylum claims whilst others were told it was simply not possible at all. Individuals who encounter police in Greece still struggle to obtain police notes, despite these being the only avenue to access the asylum procedure for most people.

Even when people have been issued with a police note, the process is not straightforward. Regional Asylum Offices throughout the country follow their own procedures which they fail to make publicly available. Some people trying to seek asylum were told by Regional Asylum Offices to simply refer to the homepage of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum's website, on which no updated information regarding registration can be found.⁴² The only other way for an individual to attempt to book a registration appointment is to email the relevant Regional Asylum Office with their police note, yet the majority of these emails go unanswered leaving people frustrated, unsupported and left outside of the asylum system.

SULTAN'S STORY

23-year-old Sultan from Pakistan arrived in Greece in June 2021.

After spending many months unaware of how to claim asylum in Greece, Sultan was advised by a friend. Sultan's friend informed him that the procedure changed in November and he now needed to obtain a paper from the police.

"I go to the police station. I went to the office and told them my problems. I told him I'm new here. The police arrested me and gave me this paper."

Sultan's police note should mean that he can register his asylum claim on Crete. But after weeks of trying to lodge his asylum claim with his police note at a Regional Asylum Office on Crete and awaiting their call, he heard nothing, and his police note expired, meaning he was again at risk of detention.

"You can come in two weeks after, we will give you an asylum card. The asylum office worker told me. When I came back home he told me we will call you, we will call you, you come here, we will give you an asylum card. Two week later he didn't call me. And I don't know, my papers are expired now."

Without access to lawyers or proper information, Sultan is confused, feeling hopeless, and despite his continued efforts, he has been forced to live undocumented for months.

"We can't live normal lives without documents. I have no security here. I am very very upset."

In order to provide for himself, Sultan has no other choice but to work illegally on a sheep farm.



He is paid incredibly low wages, and is forced to share a room with twenty other people as well as the farm animals.

"Sometimes I get €25, sometimes €30 per day. I work eight to nine hours a day."

"So twenty people are living in one room, where the sheep are also living. We make a small area to lie ourselves. We are sleeping in the same room where the animals are also present."

These are exploitative conditions, but Sultan is alone and receives no other support.

"I'm so upset about my problems. Because I have no one here. No relatives, no family, no friends. Just alone here. I have so many problems, because I don't have legal papers here."

"This life is very, very hard. The thing we need most is advice on how to proceed. I am feeling very tense, but I cannot ask anyone for help."

Despite having a police note, Sultan is unable to register his asylum claim leaving him exposed to exploitation.



LIFE OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM

Many of the precarious situations that people experienced due to the extensive delays in the previous Skype registration system have persisted or worsened for people seeking asylum on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes. The termination of the Skype pre-registration system in November 2021 without the implementation of any viable alternative has left people on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes blocked from the asylum system. This forces people to remain undocumented for prolonged periods of time, leading to a high prevalence homelessness, destitution, exploitation, ill-health and poor living conditions.

Despite the legal entitlements for people seeking asylum throughout Europe, people in Greece are being deprived of access to shelter, food, healthcare, all social services and protection.

HOMELESSNESS

Before people are eligible to apply for basic assistance of between just €2.76 and €4.93 a day (depending on household size) and accommodation, they must register their asylum claim and receive an asylum seeker card. In Greece, the only available accommodation for most registered asylum seekers is refugee camps as ESTIA apartments are reserved for those who qualify as vulnerable. Refugee camps will often turn people away who are unregistered, in line with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum's rules. Whilst people are unable to register their claims, due to no fault of their own, they are often forced to sleep on the streets, in parks or in abandoned buildings as there are simply no avenues of support available. Our conversations with people trying to register their asylum claims revealed that 80% had experienced homelessness or relied on others for shelter since being in Greece.



RELIANCE ON OTHERS FOR SHELTER

“I begged someone to let me stay with them. You are always begging people. It makes you look ridiculous. The worst thing is not having a place to sleep. When the night comes, you do not have a safe place to rest.”

- Aisha, Cameroon

Of the people we spoke to, more than 50% had relied on the support of friends, informal employees or others from the asylum seeking community to access shelter. Whilst these may be generous offers, they are not a long term solution. Not only do they put people in a precarious situation where they are constantly at risk of having to sleep on the streets, these situations can also lead to people being indebted to others. This can also lead to exploitative situations where people’s vulnerable circumstances and lack of bargaining power are used against them. Our case files revealed individuals who were extremely uncomfortable with the people who offered them shelter, but without documents, they did not feel they had any option but to stay. These situations are detrimental to people’s physical and mental health, as well as depriving people of dignity as they are forced to make sacrifices in order to survive.

Many individuals we spoke with were living in accommodation provided by informal employers. Although informal employers offer various forms of shelter including apartments or spaces on farms, the conditions that they provide are usually dirty, overcrowded and unsafe. In exploitative circumstances, this accommodation is often tied to the job, restricting the possibility of leaving and forcing people to remain in alarming living situations. One of the people we spoke with was working in agriculture, and described his living conditions that were shared with twenty other people as well as the sheep from the farm. Not only does appalling treatment have severe physical and mental health risks, it is utterly dehumanising. None of these environments provide people with adequate housing that meets the minimum requirements needed for living a dignified life.

“I’m living on a farm, my employer gave me a place to stay. The circumstances are not good. There is only one room and almost 12 people are living in that room.”

- Amandi, India



For those who cannot find support from others, they have no choice but to sleep in dangerous and insecure environments, often seeking shelter in parks or abandoned buildings where police are less likely to patrol. Our case files evidence countless stories of people who are forced to remain homeless and on the streets for extensive periods of time, including victims of torture, rape, pregnant women, families with young children and people suffering physical and mental trauma. Whilst remaining homeless, they have no access to food, warm clothing or basic hygiene. This is particularly dangerous through the winter months, when it has frequently snowed and dropped below five degrees at night. Having to choose between living in dismal conditions, unsafe accommodation or on the streets after having suffered trauma and loss is the reality for many people trying to seek asylum in Greece.

SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Upon arrival to “safe” countries, women seeking asylum are extremely vulnerable to gender-based violence, particularly when they are confronted with restrictive asylum policies.⁴³ Despite the legal requirements of material reception conditions for people seeking asylum in Europe, long waiting periods or a total lack of access to register their claims in Greece results in people being excluded from these rights. Waiting in limbo for long durations, destitution and homelessness dramatically increase the risk of SGBV.⁴⁴ Our research highlighted that women who could not register their asylum claims were particularly exposed to SGBV when sleeping on the streets. The women we spoke to recounted stories of sexual abuse and harassment, especially in parks where they were forced to spend the night. This violence takes a severe toll on both mental and physical health, adding layers of trauma to people who have already made long and difficult journeys. This is further compounded by the lack of access to medical or psychological support that people desperately need. The precarious situations women seeking asylum in Greece are forced into are directly tied to the policies which block them from accessing the asylum system.

“I slept in the park in Victoria and people abused me. It would never have happened if I had a place to sleep and had food. I want to have peace of mind. Wherever you are on the street, there is always a man coming up to you. I know this is a country of rights and I want to be included in those rights.”

- Carolyn, Cameroon



EXPLOITATION

The inability to access the asylum system in Greece pushes people into environments which foster exploitation. Whilst exploitative conditions are experienced by many people trying to register their asylum claims, they can take different forms. Without access to state services or welfare, and no way to gain legal employment, people find it increasingly difficult to meet their basic needs. After extensive periods of trying to access protection and with no meaningful alternatives, people are forced to find other ways to support themselves. Of the people we spoke to, over 60% were being exploited in some way.

INFORMAL ECONOMY

For some, this means seeking employment from people that are willing to provide opportunities illegally. However, this type of work deprives individuals of any labour rights, trapping people in poor conditions and terrible wages. Employment is often unreliable, with irregular work patterns and long hours. Our research revealed that people work in a variety of roles but the majority were involved with agricultural, construction or factory work.

Most of the people we spoke with who were working in informal economies were earning €1.50 to €2 an hour, and working around 12 hours per day. These exploitative conditions mean that people are physically and mentally exhausted, leaving little time to focus on other activities such as their attempts to register asylum claims, integrate or speak with family. This leads to further isolation and has a severe impact on people's wellbeing and mental health. Due to some people's accommodation being tied to their jobs, they felt unable to express their concerns or bargain for fair wages, fearing they would lose the little they had. As a result, people are forced to live in shocking conditions and on dismal wages. This level of exploitation violates basic human rights and comes as a direct consequence of the lack of access to claim asylum in Greece.

“Sometimes friends find me some jobs, but the jobs are illegal. I can work one day per week, one day per 10 days, just if someone needs a guy to help, for just €15 to €20 and 10 hours.”
- Mohammad, Egypt

The recent Human Rights Watch report⁴⁵ regarding pushbacks at the Evros border and the use of third country nationals in carrying out violent expulsions corresponds with a sporadic trend evidenced in BVMN's reports since 2020. Not only do these reports raise the grave and well established concern of pushbacks at the Greek border, but it also highlights a form of exploitation where people's inability to access the asylum procedure is used against them. In particular, the report found that individuals assisting in pushbacks were promised documents that would allow them to travel freely in Greece and to other countries in Europe. Manipulating people who are desperately seeking to register their asylum claims is a violation of the law and a form of severe exploitation.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Our research revealed that many women trying to register their asylum claims were subject to different forms of exploitation, predominantly being forced to have sex in exchange for money or goods to survive. Without access to protection, shelter or any financial assistance, they recounted stories of being approached in the streets at night. Sexual exploitation is a common survival tactic for women trying to seek asylum, exposing them to violence and sex trafficking crimes.⁴⁶ Migrant women are exposed to higher risks of sexual exploitation, but a lack of legal status dramatically increases this risk.⁴⁷ Being forced to remain undocumented for extensive periods of time pushes women into violent situations as they struggle to cover even basic needs for themselves. The constant danger and sense of desperation the women we spoke with described takes an indisputable psychological toll and deprives them of the security they need and deserve.

“And also that this situation pushes especially women, us women we are more exposed, it pushes her to do things that they should not do. Yes they can find themselves doing prostitution even without wanting to do it. Because if you don't have work you don't have something to eat. What are you gonna do in the end if a Greek offers you €20 you will be tempted one way or another. It is not right.”

- Charlotte, Cameroon

“The situation can really force people to do things they do not want to do. We need to sleep, eat, women are especially vulnerable, and are forced to prostitute themselves just to survive. I want to say again, how vulnerable we are. When we are walking on the streets, men will call out to us. Show us €20 and say they want to sleep with us. They know we are homeless, hungry. We are exposed and vulnerable and they know it.”

- Carolyn, Cameroon

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Many people seeking safety in Europe arrive with both physical and mental wounds. In Greece, people who are undocumented are prohibited from accessing state healthcare including doctors, vaccinations, hospitals and psychological support. Being blocked from registering their asylum claims means that people are left with untreated injuries, sickness and trauma for extensive periods of time. Our case register evidenced the extent and range of the health issues people suffered from, including severe injuries from their home countries or journeys to Europe, torture wounds, long term conditions such as diabetes and neurological conditions. Of the people that we spoke with, over 60% suffered from medical or mental ill health, and had not received support from services. This included young children, who were denied treatment on the grounds of being undocumented.

The majority of people were extremely concerned about their lack of access to register their asylum claims for medical reasons, as their conditions worsened rapidly without treatment. People explained stories where they were forced to ask others to help them get medicine, resulting in incorrect medication or doses. Others had multiple

“But the main thing is medical help. I left Cameroon with kidney problems, a spinal cord not in place and frankly with the time I spent here I could not even do an X-ray. For me it is not possible to stand up for long. And even lying down is painful.”

- Jacques, Cameroon

medical issues that built up as a result of being forced into living in poor conditions, but were systematically denied support without documents.

In the midst of a pandemic, people-on-the-move are particularly exposed to catching and spreading COVID-19,⁴⁸ yet without documents, it was nearly impossible to access tests or vaccinations. This was an issue that was consistently cited in our research, denying people disease protection and any subsequent healthcare if they experienced severe symptoms. The complex layers of inequality and inaccessibility to healthcare and other basic services are highlighted for people blocked from seeking asylum in Greece, as they encounter barrier after barrier.

People seeking asylum experience high levels of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders.⁴⁹ Living in constant states of fear, stress and insecurity has a significant mental and emotional impact, particularly over long periods of time. These communities need and deserve to have access to secure living environments and psychological support as well as networks of care that can provide stability for healing. Yet, people trying to access the asylum system in Greece are subject to dismal living conditions and a critical lack of mental health support systems. Despite being some of the most vulnerable, undocumented people experience the most difficulties in reaching the psychological support they need. Our conversations with people evidenced significant trauma including victims of torture, SGBV and extreme desperation, yet they were not able to prove these vulnerabilities and access the care that they needed. Instead, their mental health worsened in Greece as they were forced to live in fear.



FEAR OF POLICE

Our conversations with people seeking asylum signalled a constant return to the experience of living in fear of the police. Despite continued efforts to register their asylum claims, being forced to remain undocumented exposes people to negative interactions with the police, that could result in being detained or deported. This generates a fear of public spaces, and people feel obliged to stay hidden as much as possible, living on the fringes of society. Over 50% of the people we spoke with discussed their overwhelming concern of encountering the police which dramatically increased the longer they were unable to register their asylum claims. Some felt that they were utterly housebound, having witnessed police take other undocumented asylum seekers away before. Those who did not have secure access to shelter were forced to stay hyper-vigilant on the street to avoid the authorities, minimising the time they spent in busy spaces. As well as taking a significant psychological toll, living under this kind of stress and deliberate avoidance of society reduces the possibility of integrating in new communities in Greece, isolating people further. After long and potentially traumatic journeys, the additional stress of fearing the police is extremely harmful.

“I feel like I’m in prison, even if I’m outside. I’m scared all the time. I’m looking around me if the police are there or something will happen, because I don’t feel secure.”

- Mohammad, Egypt

DETENTION

The fear of being detained was another frequently raised concern in our conversations with people, particularly as there is a lack of information regarding the official procedures or timescales for detention. This was reiterated by our case analysis, and many individuals had personal experience of having been detained for months on end. Despite Article 46 of the IPA stating that “A third-country national or a stateless person may not be held in detention for the sole reason that he or she is an applicant for international protection or that he or she has entered the country illegally and/or stays in the country without proper documentation”,⁵⁰ since 22 November 2021, people seeking asylum are subject to de facto detention for 25 days.

PUSHBACKS

As well as the people we spoke with expressing a significant fear of being detained, the fear of deportation or being pushed back was also consistently raised. Our conversations revealed worrying occurrences of people that had already been pushed back from mainland Greece, or knew of others who had. The longer that people are unable to register their asylum claims, the longer that they are not registered on Greek systems, making it easier for them to be pushed back over the border without following proper asylum procedures. This illegal and often violent practice takes advantage of vulnerable people who cannot be monitored by any official system due to their lack of registration and documentation.

MOHAMMAD'S STORY



39-year-old Mohammad from Egypt arrived in Greece in July 2021.

When Mohammad got to Greece, he was advised by an NGO that to register his claim for asylum, he needed to get a police note. But when this did not work, the NGO referred him to the Skype system instead, in order to get an appointment at the Asylum Office.

“So it means that I need to go identify myself in the police station or have a police note. But the cops, they didn't want to do that for me. So I asked again, the organisation told me to do it through Skype.”

Mohammad tried to get an appointment through Skype for six months, but his calls were left unanswered.

“I never got any contact with the Asylum Office. I don't even know where they are. There is no one who tells me where to go or to orientate.”

Being forced to remain undocumented means that Mohammad is constantly living in fear of the police. Despite being regularly stopped by the police to ask for his documents, they refuse to give Mohammad a police note.

“The police stop me all the time. I give them a copy of my passport and they take me to the police station. Then they do investigations to see if I have problems back in Egypt, but they've never given me any paper. Until now I don't have any documents that prove I'm living in Greece.”

“I have proof that I have big problems in my country and I cannot go back. But they didn't give me the chance to speak about those problems and to explain why I'm here. I only wish for them to listen to me. After that, they have all the right to accept or reject me, but at least give me the chance to express myself.”

“I feel like I'm in prison, even if I'm outside. I'm scared all the time. I'm looking around me if the police are there or something will happen, because I don't feel secure. The problem is that I don't have any papers. So it feels like I'm in a prison.”

Mohammad tries to survive by working, but finding a job without paperwork is very difficult and the working conditions are exploitative.

“Sometimes friends find me some jobs, but the jobs are illegal. I can work one day per week, for just €15 to €20 and for ten hours.”

Due to remaining undocumented, Mohammad is entirely dependent on his friends, who let him live with them without paying.

“At least I am under a roof and I can work sometimes. But the biggest problem is the lack of papers and that I cannot walk freely because of that.”

Mohammed has serious health issues. Not having documents also prevents him from getting the medical assistance he urgently needs.

“I have a big problem with my muscles and I need to see a neurologist as soon as possible, but for the moment I cannot do anything, because of the papers. I also cannot get the vaccine.”

If his health issues are proved as severe, Mohammad could be considered as vulnerable for his asylum application. This would give him easier access to the asylum procedure. But since being in Greece, it has been impossible for Mohammad to get the proof he needs.

“They say to apply for asylum you need to prove that you are vulnerable, you have to prove you are sick. But as you didn't apply for asylum yet, you don't have any paper that allows you to go to a hospital. So I am wondering - how can I go to the hospital, how can I do all this proof?”

Mohammad feels trapped. He desperately wishes to be able to continue to register his claim.

“I have proof that I have big problems in my country and I cannot go back. But they didn't give me the chance to speak about those problems and to explain why I'm here. I only wish for them to listen to me. After that, they have all the right to accept or reject me, but at least give me the chance to express myself.”

Denying Mohammad access to the asylum system forces him to work in exploitative conditions and live without the urgent medical support he needs.

AMAL'S STORY



Amal is a 35-year-old single mother of four from Kuwait. She arrived in Greece with her children who are aged between five and 14 in December 2021. As a single mother, she is deemed vulnerable under Greek law and so should be able to register her asylum claim.

When Amal arrived in Greece, she believed that to claim asylum you must present yourself to a refugee camp.

“When I arrived, I didn't know how to claim asylum. The only thing I knew was that I can ask for asylum in a camp.”

However, when Amal reached Eleonas refugee camp and asked the authorities how to claim asylum, she was told she must go to the police. Amal was too scared to approach the police as she feared she would be pushed back to Turkey.

“I didn't do that because I was in contact with people who experienced the same thing and they were in a closed camp before being pushed back to Turkey. I also had experience with the Greek authorities when they caught us on the way. They threw us back to the river.”

In Greece, only people who are in the asylum procedure are officially allowed to reside in refugee camps. However, another family in the camp helped Amal and her children by letting the family stay with them in their caravan. Yet, the very next day they changed their mind and Amal and her children were asked to leave.

“When I asked them what we could do, they told me to take a tent and put it in front of the director, the administration of the camp. Then they would see us and they would help.”

Amal followed their advice and camped in front of the administration office. Amal was completely ignored.

Eventually, Amal noticed a family leaving the camp and moved into their caravan with her children. However, as Amal was not registered in the camp, she and her children were not eligible for food, forcing her to rely on support from other families.

“I was dependent on the help of others. Some other camp residents were giving me food and sometimes when the camp had excess food, they gave us the rest.”

When Amal asked for her children to be able to attend school, she was met with more disappointment.

“They told me that if you don't have an asylum seeker card or refugee status, you cannot do that.”

The camp was so strict on not allowing those who were unregistered to access services that even when her young child badly cut his leg, the medical staff in the camp refused to help.

“When I went to ask for help, they told me 'we cannot help and anyway we don't have materials to close the cut on your son's leg'.”

Amal continuously tried to seek legal advice or information from organisations working in the camp so that she could register her family's asylum claim. Yet, she was unable to receive support.

“They weren't helping with anything. They were telling me 'you came here illegally and you don't have any documents, so we cannot help you.’”

Finally, after more than two months destitute and dehumanised, a lawyer in the camp helped her to book an appointment to register her asylum claim. Amal and her children no longer have to survive on leftover food. Her children can finally go to school.

“I hope that the Greek authorities make it easier for people to register. I knew a lot of people that have money and they took private lawyers and got an appointment within one or two weeks. But when you don't have money, you need to ask. And you cannot trust the information they give.”

The lack of information on how to safely access asylum in Greece left Amal and her children extremely vulnerable and without basic food, shelter or medical care.

“I hope that the Greek authorities make it easier for people to register. I knew a lot of people that have money and they took private lawyers and got an appointment within one or two weeks. But when you don't have money, you need to ask. And you cannot trust the information they give.”

ABDULLAH'S STORY

Abdullah arrived from Pakistan to Greece two years ago without any knowledge of the asylum system. Despite trying to register at the Regional Asylum Office, he has been unable to claim asylum for more than a year.

“I did not know anything about the situation. I have tried to go many times but because of COVID-19 they do not let me. I have been trying for at least a year to apply for asylum.”

Because Abdullah is forced to remain undocumented, he is reliant on others for accommodation and financial support.

“My friends give me loans. They are working and I take money from them like a loan. When I am successful applying for asylum I want to pay them back.”

Abdullah is constantly afraid of being stopped by the police. He saw some of his friends being taken away by the police before, and now stays permanently inside the house to avoid the risk of detention or being pushed back to Turkey.

“I was going outside with some of my friends, and the police stopped them and took them away. They didn't see me, and I went home alone. I am not going outside. Outside there are always problems with the police so I do not go there.”

The inability to claim asylum restricts every area of Abdullah's life, taking a severe toll on his mental health.



“The whole situation is bad, just because of asylum. If I take asylum it would be so good for me. I can't do anything. I want to go outside and buy things for myself, but I can't because the police are outside and they will catch me and cause problems.”

Fortunately, Abdullah is healthy and has not yet needed to request medical assistance. However, having no papers also prevents him from receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, putting his health at risk.

“Definitely I can't take a rapid test, and I can't get a vaccine because I don't have asylum. People out there are taking two vaccines and I cannot even get one because of the asylum.”

Until Abdullah can safely claim asylum, he will continue to live in fear of the police and be confined indoors.

CHARLOTTE'S STORY



Charlotte from Cameroon is 32-years-old and arrived in Greece in November 2021.

When Charlotte arrived in Athens, she did not know how to register a claim for asylum. After a month, she was advised by a friend to go to the Regional Asylum Office in Athens. However, without a police note, they turned her away and told her to call through Skype instead.

“I entered there when it was my turn. The man at the reception desk asked for my papers, I told him I don't have any papers. I am new. He told me no, we don't deal with people who are not registered. If you don't have a police paper you need to call Skype. I did not know about Skype. He gave me the address to call Skype. I called Skype for 2 months without an answer.”

After wasting two months trying to get through on the Skype system, Charlotte travelled to Ritsona Camp in search of support, but received no answers.

“They told me they could not help me if I didn't have a police paper, because I wanted housing first because I was insecure. Then I went to a camp one hour outside of Athens. There they told me to go to the police. They said they could not take care of me because I need to be registered first. I was afraid to go to the police and be pushed back to Turkey.”

Charlotte is desperately trying to find a way to register her claim for asylum. But she lives in constant fear of the police and the risk of being deported or pushed back to Turkey.

“Yes I told her [IOM staff] I could not because I am afraid to be deported. She told me no nothing will happen to you. But I did not believe her.”

Whilst being forced to remain undocumented, Charlotte has no access to food support or shelter, leaving her no choice but to sleep in parks where she was subjected to sexual abuse.

“I don’t have any housing. I go here and there, I ask people for help with housing. I had many problems when I arrived, I knew no one. I started by sleeping in parks where I’ve been abused.”

As a single woman left outside of the system, Charlotte is exposed to the continuous threat of sexual abuse and exploitation.

“And also that this situation pushes especially women, us women we are more exposed, it pushes her to do things that they should not do. Yes they can find themselves doing prostitution even without wanting to do it. Because if you don’t have work, you don’t have something to eat. What are you gonna do in the end if a Greek offers you €20 you will be tempted one way or another. It is not right.”

Charlotte returned once more to the Asylum Office in January, where she was incorrectly advised that she should go to one of the islands to register her claim.

“That time they told us to leave Athens, that we should not ask asylum in Athens, that we should go to the islands. They told me that it was the Minister's decision. They said we take in minors and vulnerable persons, that's all.”

Despite being a victim of sexual abuse and therefore considered vulnerable under Greek law, vulnerabilities are incredibly hard to prove. Charlotte also suffers from medical conditions. Despite getting a medical assessment from MSF which could evidence her vulnerabilities and therefore enable her

to register her asylum claim, she has been waiting for three months with no answers.

“She says that she will see if the certificate is enough. But now it’s been more than two to three months there is nothing else, because recently I contacted her again and she told me she had no answer.”

Charlotte has tried desperately to find a way to register her asylum claim, but she is exhausted from living in constant danger.

“I don’t have any more hope. I am very stressed, I don’t even sleep. We are always in danger, until we have our own roof we are always in danger. That is why you will always see women outside late at night, because a lot don’t have anywhere to sleep.”

Whilst Charlotte is forced to remain undocumented, she is at extreme risk of destitution, exploitation and sexual abuse.

“I don’t have any housing. I go here and there, I ask people for help with housing. I had many problems when I arrived, I knew no one. I started by sleeping in parks where I’ve been abused.”

OSMAN'S STORY

Osman, a 27-year-old man from Pakistan, arrived in Greece in 2018. Despite having been in Greece for four years, he has still not managed to register his asylum claim.

Osman now lives in Athens, but first found out about the asylum procedure from a friend in Crete. He contacted Mobile Info Team for assistance in registering his claim, yet as he is not deemed vulnerable by law and does not have a police note, there is currently no way for him to claim asylum.

“When I arrived here, I didn’t know about the asylum claim. But when I went to Crete, some people told me about this and then I contacted you, Mobile Info Team.”

For around one-and-a-half years Osman has worked in agriculture.

“I’ve worked one and a half years in the agriculture field. There was no fixed pay. No fixed salary. They pay according to hours. There was €2.50 per hour.”

Osman was being exploited and forced to work long hours on an incredibly low wage as his employer knew he was undocumented. Osman understood his poor deal, but was in no position to negotiate and preferred to earn some money rather than none.

Osman now survives on odd jobs at the open air market.

“I’m jobless because every person asks for papers and I don’t have any papers. Now I go to the open air market.”



The unstable work and poor pay mean that Osman is not able to afford a room of his own, instead he shares with many people.

“It’s an apartment with two rooms and there are eight people living in that apartment.”

Luckily, Osman has not had any medical issues whilst he has been in Greece, but he struggled to receive a Covid-19 vaccination.

“I don’t have any medical issues but when I was in Crete, I got a vaccination on someone else’s name. So, that is the problem.”

Osman is incredibly frustrated with his situation in Greece and longs to register his asylum claim.

“It is difficult to claim asylum here in Greece. I feel bad, because I cannot do it.”

Until Osman is able to access the asylum system, he is forced to remain undocumented and at risk of exploitation and poor living conditions.

JACQUES' STORY



Jacques is a 28-year-old victim of torture from Cameroon. He arrived in Rhodes in September 2021, but finding no way to claim asylum there, was forced to take himself to Athens.

Jacques had no knowledge of asylum procedures and so relied on advice from other people who told him to go to Ritsona camp.

“I did not know where to sleep, I did not know anyone and people I met talked to me about this camp Ritsona. So I took the decision to come here.”

When Jacques reached Ritsona camp, he was told that he could not apply for asylum there.

“At the beginning we were several people who arrived and the camp manager did not want us there. He told us about the new law that all newcomers in Greece had to go register in the place they arrived.”

“Claiming asylum in Greece is very tough. In five months I did not meet a lawyer, in five months I did not get a police note. It is like you are not on Greek territory, but still you are there. Can you imagine how it feels to wake up every morning, going to the social worker office, ask to meet the social worker just to have some time and be explained the same thing?”

Jacques decided to stay in the camp, as he had no means of travelling elsewhere and was scared about what would happen to him should he be stopped by authorities. The camp manager made it clear that if Jacques chose to stay, he would be offered no support.

Jacques tried to register his asylum claim on Skype multiple times, but no one ever answered his calls.

“I called numerous times. But they never, never answered.”

Jacques is victim of torture and so should be able to access the asylum procedure as he is deemed as vulnerable by Greek law. He met with multiple organisations in an attempt to evidence his vulnerability, yet to date he has had no luck proving his vulnerability.

After five months of desperately trying to claim asylum, Jacques feels frustrated and let down.

“Claiming asylum in Greece is very tough. In five months I did not meet a lawyer, in five months I did not get a police note. It is like you are not on Greek territory, but still you are there. Can you imagine how it feels to wake up every morning, going to the social worker office, ask to meet the social worker just to have some time and be explained the same thing?”

Jacques has faced extreme hardships because of not being able to lodge his asylum claim and therefore not being eligible for any form of support.

“I face difficulties on a daily basis. Especially the end of December and January were really difficult, because I didn't have clothes for the cold. Also the food I receive is not good - not even a dog would manage to eat it. But the main thing is medical help. I left Cameroon with kidney problems, a spinal cord not in place and frankly with the time I spent here I could not even do an X ray. For me it is not possible to stand up for long. And even lying down is painful.”

The social worker in the camp told Jacques that she could not organise medical assistance for him, but that he could just go to the hospital and try to receive treatment.

“When you go to the hospital, they cannot take proper care of you because you are not identified, not registered. You have nothing, so they say that they cannot help you.”

After a long time not being able to register his asylum claim and being forced to survive undocumented, Jacques feels isolated and dehumanized.

“For me it is about taking refugees more seriously; consider us like humans. It is not for nothing that someone fled his country to come here. I don't think that someone would do it like that. Of course, there is a reason. They should take the trouble to listen to people. Even when you don't want to do something, to give some hope to people.”

As a victim of torture, being denied access to the asylum system puts Jacques in severe danger of physical and mental ill-health.

FAHMI'S STORY

Fahmi is 32-years-old and arrived in Greece alone from Pakistan in 2018. Despite being in Greece for four years, Fahmi has not managed to register his asylum claim.

“For three years I didn't realise how to make an asylum claim, because nobody gave me any guidance about the papers, how to do it. After some time I realised that without papers there is no life.”

Due to a lack of clear information, Fahmi only learnt how to pre-register an asylum claim via Skype from his own research on social media. Despite trying to connect with the Greek Asylum Service on Skype for more than a year, Fahmi's calls were never answered.



Fahmi has been forced to live in constant fear of the police as he knows there is a possibility that instead of helping him to register his asylum claim, they will detain him.

“I am mostly worried about the police, because if I'm caught by the police, they will put me behind bars for six to nine months.”

Being forced to remain undocumented in Greece means Fahmi is excluded from the healthcare system and all social welfare. Without any other means to support himself, Fahmi has been forced to find employment illegally. The conditions are exploitative, but he sees no alternative for his situation.

“I am working in the fields, but they don't pay us as we should be paid. We work ten to twelve hours per day, but they pay us only €20 to €22. If you don't have documents, people say, we cannot pay you more than this.”

The challenges Fahmi faces makes him constantly worry about his situation and his future. His inability to change his situation makes him anxious and takes a severe toll on his mental health.

“Every second we are in depression. What will happen tomorrow? We don't have documents, so we can't do anything further. Our only issue is for the documents and nothing else, there is not any other issue beside this document.”

Fahmi's inability to claim asylum has left him feeling trapped and hopeless.

“We don't have any other choice to accept it all.”

AMANDI'S STORY

23-year-old Amandi arrived in Greece alone in October 2021, from his home country of India.

Amandi's only information on the asylum service came from a friend. The Skype pre-registration system was terminated for first time applicants in November 2021. However, due to a lack of clear information regarding the changes, Amandi spent many months trying to register his claim via Skype.

"I tried to call Skype daily. It means six months I have been calling. There was no response from them and the call was ringing but they didn't pick it up."

Amandi considered hiring a lawyer to assist him in registering his asylum claim, but he simply couldn't afford to pay the high fees.

"I also tried to contact a lawyer here, but he was asking for a lot of money so that was the problem."

After being unable to access the asylum system and therefore forced to remain undocumented, Amandi began to work in agriculture close to Athens.

"My life has been very difficult in these six months, I have been working in a field, so it was very difficult in winter."

Amandi works long hours but earns just €22 per day, forcing him to depend on the overcrowded accommodation provided by his employer.

"I'm living on a farm, my employer gave me a place to stay. The circumstances are not good. There is only one room and almost 12 people are living in that room."



Whilst Amandi is forced to remain undocumented, he is not eligible for public healthcare. When he needed medical treatment, he was turned away, forcing him to rely on inaccurate prescriptions.

"I had two, three times medical issues, but I didn't get any assistance. Because when people go to the clinic, they are asked for legal papers to receive treatment. They don't even give medicine without papers. So, if someone has papers, we send that person to bring medicine."

Amandi feels hopeless and trapped by his situation. He has lived in a state of fear and uncertainty for more than six months.

"The circumstances here in Greece are very difficult. We are illegal here, we don't have any papers. That's why we are working in a field with a low salary."

Until Amandi can register his asylum claim he will continue to be exploited, living in poor conditions and without access to basic medical care.

AISHA'S STORY

Aisha arrived in Greece alone in October 2021 after fleeing her home country of Cameroon.

"I arrived in Greece in October via Thessaloniki and it was difficult for me considering my disability - I have a sick foot."

Shortly after arriving in Greece, Aisha was told about the Skype pre-registration system and began calling every Monday and Wednesday with hopes of registering her claim and entering the asylum system.

"I kept hoping that someone would pick up on Skype. In the first month, it did not even ring. I kept my hopes up. After a month and a half, it started ringing but no one picked up. I kept insisting on trying to call Skype. I kept crying."

Aisha could not find any organisations that could offer her support. She has been forced to sleep on the streets or rely on strangers for shelter.

"I begged someone to let me stay with them. You are always begging people. It makes you look ridiculous. The worst thing is not having a place to sleep. When the night comes, you do not have a safe place to rest."

Aisha feels stigmatised and struggles with her leg which is the result of an injury she sustained as a child.



"Even walking on the street when people look at you, it was really hard. Also I struggle walking."

Despite Aisha's long-term injury, she is not considered vulnerable under Greek law and is excluded from the healthcare system.

"It is really hard for us to leave our countries. All we ask for is acceptance amongst them [Greek people] now that we are here. I had heard that Greece accepted people. I realised that this wasn't the case."

I wish that they [Greek Asylum Service] would pick up our call and just listen to us, why we are here and what is in our heart."

Until Aisha is able to access the asylum system, she will remain homeless, reliant on others for shelter and assistance and at immense risk of exploitation.

"The worst thing is not having a place to sleep. When the night comes, you do not have a safe place to rest."

EKA'S STORY



24 year old Eka arrived in Greece at the beginning of November 2021, from India.

When Eka arrived in Greece, he asked a lawyer to help him claim asylum. Despite trying to register his asylum claim before the changes were made to the Skype system on the 21st November 2021, his calls were continuously unanswered.

“I asked a lawyer, he said you have to call on Skype and you can get asylum by calling on Skype. I called several times on Skype, but they didn't receive the call.”

Being forced to remain undocumented means that Eka relies on a friend to support him with accommodation and basic living costs.

Eka desperately wants to register his asylum claim so he can begin to work and rebuild his life without depending on others.

“I just need a paper on which I can work freely in Greece, because I don't have work. It's very hard to work here without documents or any papers. So I just need one paper, anything I can work properly or can work freely.”

Eka likes Greece, but feels trapped and frustrated by the impossibility to claim asylum.

“When I came to Greece, I realised that it's way harder to live here without documents. Overall Greece is a good country, but the problem is - we are facing only one problem, that is for documents. Otherwise we don't have any issue with this country. Because they're not giving us documents, so we are facing different types of difficulties here. Otherwise we like Greece.”

Until Eka can claim asylum, he will continue to be restricted across all areas of his life, putting him at risk of exploitation.

RAM'S STORY

Ram is 32-years-old and from India. He arrived in Greece in 2021.

Ram tried to make sense of the asylum procedure by researching on the internet, but could not find the correct way to register an asylum application.

“I searched on Google for the Asylum Service, I sent so many emails there, but they didn't respond.”

Ram has spent many months trying to contact the Greek Asylum Service. However, the Greek Asylum Service has not responded to his requests. Ram got no reply informing him the correct way to issue a claim for asylum, so he kept on trying month by month.

“I submitted an application for asylum but they didn't answer me yet. I called them, I sent emails, but they didn't respond to me. For three months, I've tried every day. I look at my email every time, but I didn't get a proper response.”



Without documents, Ram is not eligible for state support, leaving him no option but to work illegally where his employers exploit him.

“I work in construction somewhere, but one day I go there and two or three days I don't, because they don't ask me to come help at work. I cannot work properly because I don't have documents.”

“Sometimes they will give us €20 per day, sometimes €25, but once in a blue moon.”

Ram is reliant on his partner who pays their rent. Yet, he wishes to contribute and help support himself and his partner.

“I'm trying to pay her some of the rentals and for everyday life expenses, so that she doesn't have to pay everything alone.”

Ram came to Greece to find safety, yet has been met with immense obstacles caused by his inability to register his asylum claim.

“How can we spend life here? We cannot work properly, we cannot fulfil our needs properly, shelter, food. We cannot live properly. I want to live my life by myself, earn money, and fulfil my dream. This is all about the documents, the legal documents. Without documents we cannot live our lives.”

Whilst Ram remains undocumented, he is forced to depend on others for basic access to food and shelter, leaving him at risk of exploitation and destitution.

ANN'S STORY



Ann arrived in Greece in October 2021. Having fled her home country of Cameroon, she arrived alone to Thessaloniki and then made her way to Athens.

Ann found out about the Skype pre-registration and began calling in October to try and register her asylum claim, but the Asylum Service never answered her calls.

“We thought we would be safe in the EU and our rights will be respected. We were both calling skype constantly but understood that it is now only for second rejections. It took us two months to realise that it wasn't working. Before that we were happy to arrive. Greece is a beautiful country and we want to stay and work, and have a life. We were hopeful.”

Ann was not provided with any information about the changes in the asylum process, and despite her best efforts to try and claim asylum, she is forced to live in constant fear of the police as she remains undocumented.

“We are constantly afraid of being arrested by the police... Our hearts beat so fast and we usually turn to the other street if there is an alternative.”

Ann has been forced to survive by relying on others. She is exhausted by the insecurity of her situation and wants to provide for herself.

“We don't want to have to come every day asking for stuff. We want things to do with our days and invest in our future. Our wish was to be integrated in this country which we hope will welcome us. I would ask to be registered and integrated into the population, to feel at ease.”

Ann is desperate to find a way to register her asylum claim, so that she can stop living in fear and start to rebuild her life again.

Until Ann is able to access the asylum system, she will continue to remain extremely exposed to destitution and exploitation.

RAMEESH'S STORY

Rameesh is 22-years-old and came to Greece in 2019 from Pakistan.

When Rameesh arrived, he did not know how to claim asylum, his only information came from the refugee community. Rameesh's friend advised him to use the Skype system. Despite this being the correct way to register an asylum claim at the time, Rameesh's calls were left unanswered.

"I have no idea what is going on with Skype. I didn't receive any response on Skype."

Whilst Rameesh is forced to remain undocumented, he has no choice but to rely on other people for accommodation and food.

"I'm living with my friends, because it's very difficult as a Pakistani to find a shelter in Greece."

Two years ago, Rameesh was stopped by the police. Luckily, he was released, but he did not receive any information or documents to help him register his asylum claim.

"Two years ago, the police called me, first time, so I gave my ID card and passport. The police just said, okay, you can go now."

If the police had given Rameesh a police note, it would have enabled him to register his asylum claim. Left without documents, Rameesh continues to live in constant fear of the police and the risk of detention.

"The laws are very difficult and detention is a big problem, it is very hard. It's very difficult to live in fear of the police."



"It's getting harder and harder every day. Because we don't have papers, we cannot walk freely. People are caught by police every single day because of the lack of documentation. That's the main problem we are facing."

Rameesh wishes he could register his asylum claim so that he could rebuild his life. Whilst he waits, he is forced to work in exploitative conditions to survive.

"And now I am working in the factory. They pay me €25 per day. I need to have documents and get asylum as soon as possible, so we can live our life properly."

Unable to claim asylum, Rameesh continues to be excluded from society and exposed to exploitation.



CONCLUSION

Since 22 November 2021, the asylum procedure on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes presents three narrow avenues into the asylum system: by proving a vulnerability, registering through a police note or through a RIC. Within these restricted avenues, there are multiple and significant obstacles which deny the majority of people from accessing the asylum system. In practice, registering a vulnerability is extremely challenging without support from state healthcare systems, police notes are not distributed or processed uniformly, and the only RIC on mainland Greece, Fylakio, does not accept self-referred arrivals for registration, nor does it have capacity for registering high numbers of asylum claims.

With a fundamental lack of information and uniformity, this system is not compatible with the requirements of a fair and efficient system. Instead, it creates a hostile environment that forces people to live in dangerous and undignified conditions, exposing them to exploitation, homelessness and destitution. This puts people who are in desperate need of safety at further risk of severe physical and psychological harm.

In addition, the current system generates a well-founded fear of the police that deters people from seeking support from the authorities who should be protecting them. This corresponds with the ongoing occurrence of illegal pushbacks, the use of prolonged detention and violent treatment of people seeking asylum in Greece.

Whilst the previous Skype system had significant issues, current asylum practices continue to hinder access to international protection for the majority of people on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes. As a result, people are blocked from the asylum system and are forced to live in a situation which continues to worsen.

People seeking protection in Europe must have access to a safe and dignified asylum process that enables them to rebuild their lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS



We recommend that Greece acts urgently to ensure fair and efficient access to the asylum procedure, by:

- Ensuring people in need of safety have fast and fair access to the asylum procedure on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes, and are granted the legal protection and material reception conditions they need and deserve.
- Ensuring competent authorities, including the police and Greek Asylum Service, have the knowledge and the capacity needed to provide people seeking asylum with information on how to claim asylum in Greece.
- Providing interim measures to ensure people have viable options to register asylum applications on mainland Greece, Crete and Rhodes.
- Finding alternative long-term solutions to register asylum applications without mandatory detention of individuals.

We recommend that the European Commission acts urgently to ensure fair and efficient access to the asylum procedure in Greece, by:

- Working towards a common European asylum system which ensures individuals have the same practical ability to enter the asylum system as soon as possible.
- Being ready to hold Greece accountable when it flouts protection standards including by considering pursuing legal action and launching an infringement procedure to ensure compliance with EU law.

END NOTES

1 See Article 39 of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

2 See migration.gov.gr, see Διαδικασία Υποβολής Αιτημάτων Ασύλου, available at: <https://bit.ly/3zMvyjg>

3 See 'Refugees forced to claim asylum in 'jaillike' camps as Greece tightens system' on theguardian.com, available at: <https://bit.ly/3thMVYg>

4 See UNHCR Operational Data Portal, available at: <https://bit.ly/3KeyMQr>

5 See Refugee Support Aegean's, The asylum procedure in figures: most asylum seekers continue to qualify for international protection in 2021, available at: <https://bit.ly/3vElibf>

6 See Article 14(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

7 See Information Note on Article 1 of 1951 Convention (UNHCR) 1995, available at: <https://bit.ly/3vcUfVw>

8 See Article 6(2) of Directive 2013/32/EU

9 See Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

10 See Article 78 of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

11 See Mobile Info Team's Lives on Hold report, 2021, p.13, available at: <https://bit.ly/3zJ6hGU>

12 See Mobile Info Team's Control and Containment report, 2022, p.5, available at: <https://bit.ly/3F2truh>

13 See Article 17 of of Directive 2013/33/EU

14 See Article 14 of of Directive 2013/33/EU

15 See Article 5 of of Directive 2013/33/EU

16 See Article 55(1) of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019 and Article 17 of of Directive 2013/33/EU

17 According to Filzwieser and Thiem (2016) Second Edition, EU Immigration and Asylum Law, Second edition, p.1,390

18 See Article 53 of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

19 See Charter of Fundamental Rights of The European Union

20 See Article 46(2) of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

21 See Article 46(5)(b) of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

22 See Article 78 of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

23 See 'Refugees forced to claim asylum in 'jaillike' camps as Greece tightens system' on theguardian.com, available at: <https://bit.ly/3thMVYg>

24 See 'Legal and psychosocial support in the reception and identification center of Fylakio, Orestiadas/pre-removal center/border police stations' on humanrights360.org, available at: <https://bit.ly/3r7RH7R>

25 See Asylum Information Database country report for Greece 2020, p. 49, available at: <https://bit.ly/30996Dk>

26 See European Council of Refugees, Greece: CPT Repeats Condemnation of Inhuman Detention Conditions in Latest Report available at: <https://bit.ly/3xQFfOR>

27 See Mobile Info Team's Illegal pushbacks at the border report, available at: <https://bit.ly/38nqmbW>

28 See BVMN's Annual Torture report 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3MFFbka>

29 See HumanRights 360 report, The doctrine of the instrumentalisation of refugees, 2021, available at: <https://bit.ly/3OHPcUO>

30 See Amnesty International report, Greece: Pushbacks and violence against refugees and migrants are de facto border policy, 2021, available at: <https://bit.ly/37IFPnd>

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31 See Human Rights Watch report, “Their Faces Were Covered”, 2022, available at:

<https://bit.ly/3MyMbEB>

32 Calculated by analysing BVMN’s pushback database, where 51 of 72 known apprehension points on mainland Greece since the beginning of 2021 were in the Evros region, see BVMN database, available at: <https://bit.ly/37Lud2Z>

33 Ibid.

34 This testimony was collected by BVMN partner, Josoor, available on BVMN’s database at:

<https://bit.ly/3kkNxqp>

35 This testimony was collected by BVMN partner, Josoor, available on BVMN’s database at:

<https://bit.ly/37Qteyl>

36 See Article 58 of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

37 See Article 72(1) of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019

38 See Article 46(5) of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019 as well as Article 30(5),(6), of Hellenic Republic Law 3907/2011

39 See ‘Θεοδωρικάκος: 3.000 παράτυποι μετανάστες επέστρεψαν στις χώρες τους’, on powergame.gr available at:

<https://bit.ly/3OLzaZV>

40 Ibid.

41 See Article 6(1) of Directive 2013/32/EU

42 <https://bit.ly/3KKVKyW>

43 See ‘The Gender-Based Violence and Precarity Nexus: Asylum-Seeking Women in the Eastern Mediterranean’, available at:

<https://bit.ly/3s2nDfk>

44 Ibid.

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<https://bit.ly/36XCIHw>

46 See Council of Europe report, Protecting the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls, 2017, available at:

<https://bit.ly/3kqAGTn>

47 Ibid.

48 See Doctors of the World report, Barriers to Wellbeing 2021, available at:

<https://bit.ly/3kmEQM6>

49 See ‘Mental health and forced displacement’ on who.int, available at: <https://bit.ly/3kHhjG5>

50 See Article 46 of Hellenic Republic Law No. 4636/2019 and Articles 8 and 9 of Directive 2013/33/EU

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