

The week that Europe agrees on inhumane deal with Turkey, many die at sea

Alarm Phone Weekly Report 14-20 March 2016

On the 18th of March 2016, the EU and its 28 member states agreed on a deal with Turkey that would systematically put into practice collective expulsions of all those arriving in Greece in an 'irregular' manner. In return for future visa-free travel for Turkish citizens and 6 billion of Euros, the Turkish government agreed to accept the forceful return of survivors of sea crossings back to Turkish territory. In its desperate attempts to deter migration movements, the EU continues to further externalise its border and declares Turkey a 'safe country'. Turkey, whose government is waging war internally against the Kurdish population and political opponents, would thus become a de facto prison for millions of refugees (<http://w2eu.info/greece.en/articles/greece-turkey-deal.en.html>).

The 'one in, one out' deal, where the EU agreed to resettle one Syrian refugee from within Turkey for one refugee to be returned after surviving the sea crossing, is not merely cynical and in violation of international human rights conventions and European law, it seems also wholly unfeasible as past relocation programmes have clearly demonstrated. More than that, the Greek islands and the installed EU 'hotspots' that were once envisioned as registration and identification facilities have now turned into sites of closed detention and pre-removal facilities. As a result, the UNHCR has suspended some of their activities in the hotspots on Greek islands, stating that 'the UNHCR is not a party to the EU-Turkey deal, nor will we be involved in returns or detention' (<http://www.unhcr.org/56f10d049.html>).

The EU-Turkey deal came into effect on the 20th of March and we can already see direct consequences: On Saturday, Greek police forces began on Lesbos and Chios to coerce thousands of refugees onto ferries that would return them to Turkey. Refugees had to pay for the ferry tickets themselves and NGOs and organisations were told to leave the Greek islands. Through this deal, not only those who were deemed to be not in need of protection, including those from Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria and elsewhere, but also those considered in need, for example from Syria, are now forcefully returned (<http://bordermonitoring.eu/griechenland/2016/03/eu-tuerkei-deal-und-seine-folgen/#more-1478>). The right to asylum which, in any case, should not be determined by nationality but on an individual basis, becomes increasingly undermined.

As always, people will not cease to try to overcome border obstacles but these obstacles are now becoming even more violent and deadly. What this EU-Turkey deal means, in practice, was vividly captured in videos, showing vicious attacks of Turkish coastguards on refugee vessels. One incident was captured by the travellers themselves, who filmed how Turkish coastguards attacked them with a long pole at sea. On the 18th of March, a video showed a 40 minute long attack by two Turkish coastguard vessels, one trying to disable the engine with a pole while the other one seemed to be trying to flood and capsize the vessel (<http://migrantreport.org/turkish-coastguard-attack-fleeing-refugee-boat/>). These scenes are the result of this deal, the direct effect of EU governments trying to deter migrant mobilities. The travellers of the second boat struggled on, escaped and finally reached Greece. However, they could have easily been murdered in the attacks.

During the past week, our Alarm Phone members were alerted to 15 distress situations in the Aegean Sea. In two cases we had to directly witness the deadliness of Europe's borders. On the 19th of March, we were alerted to a boat east of Lesbos, still in Turkish waters. The travellers informed us that two people had fallen into the water. It took the Turkish coastguards more than an hour to arrive at the scene and even when they arrived they did not act immediately. The dead body of one of the refugees, an 8 year old boy, was found while the other person remains missing. Both Turkish and Greek authorities concluded their searches. How can it be that the coastguard's capacities are now deployed for forceful interceptions and attacks on refugee boats rather than rescue operations? How many people will drown as a direct consequence?

On the 20th of March, our shift teams were told about a group of 45 people who had reached the Greek island of Ro. Shortly before arriving, the boat capsized. While most of them were able to swim ashore, two young girls disappeared. In anxious exchanges with the group, they informed us that they were still searching the water for the girls. When the Greek coastguards arrived, they could recover only their dead bodies. Two other refugees died after suffering heart attacks when arriving on Lesbos (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/three-baby-syrian-refugee-girls-drown-between-turkey-greece.aspx?pageID=238&nid=96664>, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/03/20/two-refugee-baby-girls-drowned-on-first-day-of-eu-turkey-deal/>).

We cannot find words to express our anger, grief and disbelief about these current developments in the Aegean region. More forceful than ever, the EU deploys every means available to deter migration movements and, in the process, is responsible for the unabated dying at sea, and human rights violations within and beyond European territory on a mass scale. These new policies of deterrence will not remain unopposed. Calling for the opening of the Greek-Macedonian border, a refugee tried to self-immolate in Idomeni (<http://uk.reuters.com/news/picture/self-immolation-in-idomeni?articleId=UKRTSBNPM>). Protests have also spread on the islands against forceful deportations and for the right to the freedom of movement (<http://infomobile.w2eu.net/2016/03/22/detention-deportation-centre-vial-on-chios-island-hurria-means-freedom/>). We will continue to struggle against Europe's shameful actions in these dark times and we stand in solidarity with those who are directly affected by these murderous policies and fight to cross borders.

Our weekly report can also be found on our Alarm Phone website:

<http://alarmphone.org/en/2016/03/20/the-week-that-europe-agrees-on-inhumane-deal-with-turkey-many-die-at-sea/>

Summaries of Alarm Phone cases, 14-20 March 2016

On Monday the 14th of March 2016, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted to one distress situation in the Aegean region, near Chios Island. At 6.48am we received coordinates of a vessel in distress through our Syrian activist allies. We learned that there were 41 people on the vessel, including 17 children, and they had problems with reigniting their engine. They were still in Turkish waters, on their way to Chios. We established contact to the vessel at

7.20am but communication was difficult due to the noisy wind. Shortly afterwards we received the confirmation that they had been brought back to Turkey by the Turkish coastguards (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/476>).

On Thursday the 17th of March 2016, at 10.20pm, our shift team was alerted by activist Nawal Soufi to a vessel in distress. She forwarded coordinates of a vessel that was on its way to Chios but still in Turkish waters, as well as a phone number of passengers on that vessel. We immediately reached out to the boat-people but could not reach them. We then tried to contact them via WhatsApp which was also not possible. Due to the limited information we tried to retrieve more details from Nawal but she was unable to send us any further information. [...] At 11.52pm the activist group United Rescue informed us about a boat that was said to have capsized near Chios. The coordinates they had differed so that it is hard to tell whether this was the same boat in question. Shortly after midnight they told us that the boat they had heard about had safely reached Chios. At 00.33am, we finally heard back from the boat-people. They wrote 'thank god' and later 'I'm fine'. We asked whether they had all reached the island safely but we did not receive a response. We tried to call the number but it was not reachable. Then, at 00.45am, someone from the Nawal activist group informed us that the boat was safe. At 00.48am we again received WhatsApp messages from the boat-people, suggesting that they were fine. (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/480>).

On Friday the 18th of March 2016, our Alarm Phone shift teams were alerted to 5 distress cases in the Aegean region. One vessel on its way to Chios was able to reach the island independently while two vessels were rescued by coastguards. Two groups had stranded on Pasas Island and were later found and transferred to Chios (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/481>).

On Saturday the 19th of March 2016, our Alarm Phone shift teams were alerted to 5 emergency situations in the Aegean region. The travellers on two boats were brought to Greece while those on three other boats were returned to Turkey. In one distress case, following the account of the travellers, 2 people went missing and later we learned that the dead body of one person was found and identified. One group had stranded on Pasas Island and were later found and transferred off the island (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/482>).

On Sunday the 20th of March 2016, our Alarm Phone shift teams were alerted to 3 emergency situations in the Aegean region. One group had stranded on Pasas Island and needed support. They were presumably later transferred to Chios Island. One vessel in distress in Turkish waters was found and rescued by the Turkish coastguards. Another group had nearly reached Ro Island when their vessel flipped over and the group had to swim ashore. The Greek coastguards later found and transferred the group but two young girls could not be rescued, they had passed away already (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/483>).