



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

## “Their Faces Were Covered”

Greece’s Use of Migrants as Police Auxiliaries in Pushbacks



## **“Their Faces Were Covered”**

**Greece’s Use of Migrants as Police Auxiliaries in Pushbacks**

Copyright © 2022 Human Rights Watch

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-62313-976-6

Cover design by Rafael Jimenez

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people worldwide. We scrupulously investigate abuses, expose the facts widely, and pressure those with power to respect rights and secure justice. Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization that works as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights for all.

Human Rights Watch is an international organization with staff in more than 40 countries, and offices in Amsterdam, Beirut, Berlin, Brussels, Chicago, Geneva, Goma, Johannesburg, London, Los Angeles, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Paris, San Francisco, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto, Tunis, Washington DC, and Zurich.

For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.hrw.org>



APRIL 2022

ISBN: 978-1-62313-976-6

# “Their Faces Were Covered”

## Greece’s Use of Migrants as Police Auxiliaries in Pushbacks

**Summary.....1**

**Methodology..... 4**

**Background: A Pattern of Pushbacks ..... 6**  
 Turkey Is Not a Safe Third Country, and Pushbacks Would Violate Any Safe Third Agreement .....9

**Violence and Abuse by Greek Authorities..... 11**  
 Violence and Abuse at the Time of Detention.....11  
 Inhuman and Degrading Conditions and Ill-Treatment in Detention Facilities ..... 13  
 No Effort to Determine Age of People Who Might be Children; Detaining Children Naked ..... 15  
 Failure to Do Health Screenings or Provide Masks..... 17  
 Ignoring Requests for Asylum; Blocking Access to Asylum..... 18  
 Greek Police Abuses during Pushbacks..... 19

**Using Migrants as Police Auxiliaries to Perpetrate Pushbacks..... 20**

**Frontex Looks Away, Fails to Prevent Abuses ..... 24**

**Recommendations .....27**  
 To the Greek Government and Judicial Authorities ..... 27  
 To the European Commission ..... 27  
 To Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.....28

**Acknowledgments..... 29**

**Annex: Response from Hellenic Police Headquarters ..... 30**



## Summary

Greek authorities, including through proxies they use, are assaulting, robbing, and stripping Afghan asylum and other seekers and migrants, including children, before summarily pushing them back to Turkey via the Evros River. They are employing men who appear to be of Middle Eastern or South Asian origin, to force stripped or barely-clothed migrants onto small boats, take them to the middle of the Evros River, which marks the land border between Greece and Turkey, and force them into the frigid water, making them wade to the riverbank on the Turkish side. These men often wear balaclava masks to conceal their faces and black or commando-like clothing.

This report is based on interviews with 26 Afghans, 23 of whom were pushed back between September 2021 and February 2022 at Greece's land border with Turkey. The 23 men, two women, and one boy described their crossing from Turkey to Greece, detention by Greek authorities or men they believed to be Greek authorities, their time in custody – usually no more than 24 hours – with little to no access to food or drinking water, and pushback to Turkey over the Evros River.

The men and the boy interviewed by Human Rights Watch said Greek authorities beat them at various times: when they were detained; while they were in custody; or as they were being forced into the Evros River. Twenty-two of the 26 people interviewed said that at some point, Greek authorities forced them to strip down to their undershorts or totally naked. All said Greek authorities stole their money, mobile phones, or other belongings.

Greek authorities detained 20 of the people interviewed by Human Rights Watch. None of them was properly registered – none had their fingerprints or photographs taken or a formal interview of any kind – and at no point from the moment of detention to removal were any of them given a chance to lodge asylum claims.

At the land border with Turkey, 16 people reported that the boats taking them back to Turkey were piloted by non-Greek men who spoke Arabic or South Asian languages common among migrants. They all reported that Greek police were close by when the men loaded the migrants onto small boats. These non-Greek men often wore black or commando-like uniforms in addition to balaclavas to obscure their identities. All but

five of the interviewees said the men ferrying the boats forced them to disembark in the middle of the Evros River, where they were then made to wade to the riverbank on the Turkish side, sometimes in chest- to chin-high water under freezing temperatures.

Several of the interviewees said that while they were in the custody of Greek law enforcement, they saw other police wearing uniforms with either a German or Austrian flag patch, but that these police did not interact with them or make efforts to intervene in the situation. Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, has its largest operation in Greece with more than 650 guest officers.

The findings in this report add to growing evidence of abuses collected by nongovernmental groups (NGOs) and media, involving hundreds of people of various nationalities, including Syrians, intercepted and pushed back from Evros by Greek law enforcement officers since March 2020 – the time of a standoff between Greece and Turkey at the land border. NGOs and the media are also reporting persistent allegations that Greek Coast Guard personnel unlawfully abandon migrants – including those who have reached Greek islands – at sea, on inflatable vessels without motors; tow migrant boats to Turkish waters; or intercept, attack, and disable boats carrying migrants. Human Rights Watch published a report with such findings in July 2020.<sup>1</sup>

In response to the findings of this report, Major General Dimitrios Mallios, chief of the Aliens & Border Protection Branch in Hellenic Police Headquarters wrote a detailed letter, appended at the end of this report, refuting the findings and allegations of misconduct, and asserting that “police agencies and their staff will continue to operate in a continuous, professional, lawful and prompt way, taking all necessary measures to effectively manage the refugees/migration flows, in a manner that safeguards on the one hand the rights of the aliens and on the other hand the protection of citizens especially in the first line border regions.”

Greece’s government should immediately halt all pushbacks from its territory, ensure fair treatment to people seeking safety in Greece and provide access to asylum procedures for all who request it. Greek judicial authorities, particularly the Supreme Court Prosecutor,

---

<sup>1</sup> “Greece: Investigate Pushbacks, Collective Expulsions,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 16, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/16/greece-investigate-pushbacks-collective-expulsions#>.

should conduct a transparent, thorough, and impartial investigation into allegations that Greek law enforcement personnel are involved in acts that put the lives and safety of migrants and asylum seekers at risk. Any officer engaged in illegal acts, as well as their commanding officers, should be subject to disciplinary sanctions and, if applicable, criminal prosecution.

Greek lawmakers should urgently establish an inquiry into all allegations of collective expulsions and violence at the borders, and determine whether any government officials have given orders leading to acts that not only violate the law but put the lives and safety of displaced people at risk.

The European Commission, which provides financial support to the Greek government for migration control, including in the Evros region and the Aegean Sea, should urge Greece immediately to end all summary returns of migrants and asylum seekers to Turkey, press the authorities to establish an independent border monitoring mechanism that would investigate allegations of violence at borders, and ensure that none of its funding contributes to violations of fundamental rights and European Union (EU) laws, including by withholding such funding until abuses cease. The European Commission should also open legal proceedings against Greece for violating EU laws prohibiting collective expulsions.

Frontex should monitor and publicly report on Greek security force compliance with European and international human rights and refugee law, as well as compliance by its own officers and those contributed by member states. Frontex should also inform the Management Board and the Greek authorities of its intention to trigger article 46 of its regulation, under which the agency has a duty to suspend or terminate operations in case of serious abuses, if no concrete improvements are made by Greece to end these abuses within three months. It has triggered article 46 only once, in Hungary in early 2021, after a European court ruling. The European Parliament should continue scrutinizing Frontex on its failures to monitor and intervene to prevent collective expulsions and other abuses in the area of its operation on the Greece-Turkey border.



## Methodology

This report is based on interviews with 26 Afghans (23 men, two women, and one boy) who described 30 pushback incidents between September 2021 and February 2022. Three of the men interviewed also described four more pushbacks from March or April 2020, May or June 2021, and July 2021. Both women interviewed described pushbacks in May 2021. These are not necessarily all unique pushbacks as we are unable to identify which subjects may have been subjected to the same expulsion as others who were interviewed. Although we cannot estimate total numbers of people pushed back in these incidents, they were all collective expulsions, sometimes involving large groups who had been gathered in Greek detention sites, sometimes informal, from smaller groups that had been detained crossing into Greece.

These 26 interviews were conducted by telephone between November 2021 and March 2022. All but one of the interviews were conducted in Dari with the use of a translator, and one interview was conducted in English with the translator standing by.

Interviews were conducted in private settings – either completely alone or with the interviewee’s immediate family members present – with assurances of confidentiality. The researchers informed all interviewees about the purpose and voluntary nature of the interviews, and the ways in which Human Rights Watch would use the information. All were told they could decline to answer questions or could end the interview at any time. The researchers told interview subjects they would receive no payment, service, or other personal benefit for the interviews. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all Afghan interviewees.

Human Rights Watch also spoke with two local nongovernmental organizations based in Turkey and Greece documenting border abuses and reviewed reports, including media articles, on such practices.

On February 7, 2022, Human Rights Watch wrote to the Hellenic Police Headquarters, the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, and the Greek Ministry of Public Order & Citizen Protection presenting authorities with a summary of findings. The Hellenic Police

Headquarters responded to Human Rights Watch's letter on March 1, 2022, and their response letter is included at the end of this report as an annex.

On March 15, 2022, Human Rights Watch wrote to Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, presenting authorities with a summary of findings. At the time of publication, we had yet to receive a response.

## Background: A Pattern of Pushbacks

Human Rights Watch has been documenting Greek authorities pushing back migrants and asylum seekers via the land and sea borders with Turkey since 2008.<sup>2</sup> Our reports are corroborated by other reports from nongovernmental groups (NGOs), media outlets, the Council of Europe, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) on Greek abuses of migrants and asylum seekers during pushbacks at the Evros River and on the Aegean Sea.<sup>3</sup> While the number of recorded land and sea arrivals in Greece from Turkey has been declining since 2018,<sup>4</sup> there is no official data on the number of pushbacks in 2021 and 2022.<sup>5</sup>

Pushbacks violate multiple human rights norms, including the prohibition of collective expulsion under the European Convention on Human Rights, the right to due process in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the right to seek asylum under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the principle of nonrefoulement under the 1951 Refugee Convention.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> “Greece: Violence Against Asylum Seekers at Border,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 17, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/17/greece-violence-against-asylum-seekers-border>; “Greece: Violent Pushbacks at Turkey Border,” December 18, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/18/greece-violent-pushbacks-turkey-border>; “Greece: Investigate Pushbacks, Collective Expulsions,” July 16, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/16/greece-investigate-pushbacks-collective-expulsions>; *Stuck in a Revolving Door: Iraqis and Other Asylum Seekers and Migrants at the Greece/Turkey Entrance to the European Union*, November 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/11/26/stuck-revolving-door/iraqis-and-other-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-greece/turkey>.

<sup>3</sup> See Amnesty International, “Greece: Violence, Lies, and Pushbacks,” July 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EUR2543072021ENGLISH.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2022); Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), “Violence within State Borders: Greece,” October 27, 2020, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/internal-violence-greece/> (accessed March 17, 2022); Nektaria Stamouli, “Violence at Greek border as migrants head for Europe,” Politico, February 29, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/syria-migration-turkey/> (accessed March 17, 2022); “Greek authorities should investigate allegations of pushbacks and ill-treatment of migrants, ensure an enabling environment for NGOs and improve reception conditions,” letter from Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe, May 12, 2021, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/greek-authorities-should-investigate-allegations-of-pushbacks-and-ill-treatment-of-migrants-ensure-an-enabling-environment-for-ngos-and-improve-recept> (accessed March 17, 2022); Anthee Carassava, “UNHCR, EU Slam Greece Over Migrant Pushbacks, Abuse,” VOA, November 21, 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/europe\\_unhcr-eu-slam-greece-over-migrant-pushbacks-abuse/6198674.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_unhcr-eu-slam-greece-over-migrant-pushbacks-abuse/6198674.html) (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), “Operational Data Portal, Refugee Situations, Greece,” last updated March 13, 2022, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Lauren Markham, “How Greece Secretly Adopted the World’s Most Brazen—and Brutal—Way of Keeping Out Refugees,” Mother Jones, March-April 2022, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2022/03/pushback-greece-lesbos-refugees-asylum-seekers-ukraine/> (accessed March 23, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> See “Term: push-back,” European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, undated, <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/glossary/push-back/> (accessed March 17, 2022); European Court of Human Rights, “Factsheet: Collective expulsion of aliens,” December 2021, [https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS\\_Collective\\_expulsions\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Collective_expulsions_ENG.pdf) (accessed March 17, 2022); European Court of Human Rights, “European Convention on Human Rights, as amended by Protocols Nos. 11, 14 and 15,

The Greek government routinely denies involvement in pushbacks, labelling such claims as “fake news” or “Turkish propaganda” and cracking down, including through the threat of criminal sanctions, against those reporting on such incidents.<sup>7</sup>

On August 20, 2021, while touring recently completed fencing along a 25-mile stretch of the land border with Turkey, Greece’s then Citizens’ Protection Minister Michalis Chrisochoidis said, “The Afghan crisis...is creating possibilities for migrant flows.”<sup>8</sup> On October 1, 2021, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said Greece “will not accept uncontrolled migratory flows similar to the ones we saw in 2015.”<sup>9</sup>

On February 21, Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi issued a statement saying, “Greece protects the external borders of the European Union, in total compliance with international law and in full respect of the charter of fundamental rights. Our national independent authorities investigate all claims of alleged breaches, and we proactively call for evidence to be provided.”<sup>10</sup>

His statement came in response to a statement earlier that same day from Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, who said, “We are alarmed by recurrent and

---

supplemented by Protocols Nos. 1, 4, 6, 7, 12, 13 and 16,” October 2, 2013, [https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf) (accessed March 17, 2022); BVMN, “Pushbacks and Police Violence – Legal Framework,” undated, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/legal-framework/> (accessed March 17, 2022); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx> (accessed March 17, 2022); Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2012/C 326/02, October 26, 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT&from=EN> (accessed March 17, 2022); Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 189 U.N.T.S. 150, entered into force April 22, 1954 and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, 606 U.N.T.S. 267, entered into force October 4, 1967, <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Kingsley and Karam Shoumali, “Taking Hard Line, Greece Turns Back Migrants by Abandoning Them at Sea,” *New York Times*, published Aug. 14, 2020, updated Oct. 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/europe/greece-migrants-abandoning-sea.html> (accessed March 17, 2022); Eva Cossé, “Greece Activists Face Intimidation, Threats, Attacks,” commentary, Human Rights Watch dispatch, October 8, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/08/greece-activists-face-intimidation-threats-attacks>.

<sup>8</sup> Rob Picheta and Chris Liakos, “Greece finishes wall on border with Turkey, amid fears of Afghan migrant crisis,” *CNN*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/21/europe/greece-turkey-border-wall-completed-scli-intl/index.html> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Karolina Tagaris, “Greece says will not allow ‘uncontrolled’ migrant flows from Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greece-says-will-not-allow-uncontrolled-migrant-flows-afghanistan-2021-10-01/> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> “Statement by the Minister of Migration and Asylum, Mr. Notis Mitarachi,” Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Migration and Asylum press release, February 21, 2022, <https://migration.gov.gr/en/deltio-typoy-dilosi-toy-ypoygoy-metanasteysis-kai-asyloy-k-noti-mitaraki/> (accessed March 17, 2022).

consistent reports coming from Greece’s land and sea borders with Turkey, where UNHCR has recorded almost 540 reported incidents of informal returns by Greece since the beginning of 2020.”<sup>11</sup>

In December 2021, the Greek Ombudsman launched an investigation into the case of an EU citizen – employed by the EU border agency Frontex, that is operating in Evros alongside the Greek authorities – alleging that in September 2021, Greek border guards mistook him for an asylum seeker, assaulted him, and then forced him across the Evros border into Turkey alongside dozens of migrants.<sup>12</sup> According to the *New York Times* quoting his story, he said that he and many of the migrants he was detained with were beaten and stripped, and that the police seized their phones, money, and documents.<sup>13</sup> His attempts to tell the police who he was were met with laughter and beatings, he said.<sup>14</sup> He said he was taken to a remote warehouse where he was kept with at least 100 others, including women and children.<sup>15</sup> They were then put on dinghies and pushed across the Evros River into Turkish territory.<sup>16</sup> Greek authorities have said they have tasked the Greek National Transparency Authority, which lacks expertise in the area, to conduct an investigation on the issue despite the Greek Ombudsman being the official National Mechanism for the investigation of arbitrary behavior by law enforcement agencies, including the Police and the Hellenic Coast Guard.<sup>17</sup>

Another incident involving an EU citizen was reported on February 21 by the *Associated Press* (AP). A woman who has French as well as Turkish citizenship and who said she was fleeing Turkey along with her husband to escape prison sentences that were politically motivated, alleges that Greek authorities forced her and the migrants she was traveling

---

<sup>11</sup> “News Comment: UNHCR warns of increasing violence and human rights violations at European borders,” UNHCR news release, February 21, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2022/02/21/news-comment-unhcr-warns-of-increasing-violence-and-human-rights-violations-at-european-borders/> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Matina Stevis-Gridneff, “E.U. Interpreter Says Greece Expelled Him to Turkey in Migrant Roundup,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/01/world/europe/greece-migrants-interpreter-expelled.html> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

with back across the Evros River into Turkey.<sup>18</sup> She said Greek officials mistreated her and turned her back; she is now in prison in Turkey according to the AP article.<sup>19</sup> From her cell, according to the article, the woman filed a lawsuit against Greece at the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>20</sup>

On December 20, 2021, the European Court of Human Rights communicated to Greece 32 cases brought by 47 asylum seekers and migrants who were violently pushed back to Turkey from Evros, the islands of Crete, Kos, Kalymnos, Lesbos, Samos or at sea before they managed to reach an island.<sup>21</sup>

## Turkey Is Not a Safe Third Country, and Pushbacks Would Violate Any Safe Third Agreement

In June 2021, the Greek government declared Turkey to be a safe third country for asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia in addition to Syria, which has been on that list since 2016.<sup>22</sup> People from countries for which Turkey is considered a “safe third country,” go through an accelerated admissibility procedure when lodging asylum claims upon entry on Greek territory to determine if they can be returned to Turkey to have the merits of their asylum claims examined there. In June 2021, the government expanded the triggering of admissibility procedures throughout the territory.<sup>23</sup> But Turkey does not meet the EU criteria for a safe third country to which an asylum seeker can be returned,

---

<sup>18</sup> Renata Brito, “From Turkish jail, French woman accuses Greece of ‘pushback,’” AP, February 18, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-france-prisons-greece-europe-1c58212ff10310deebae2b769d31e386> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Panayote Dimitras, “32 Eurotrials against Greece for pushbacks started - Deafening silence by the media” (“Ξεκίνησαν 32 Ευρωδίκες Ελλάδας για επαναπροωθήσεις – Εκκωφαντική αποσιώπηση από ΜΜΕ”), Racist Crimes Watch, December 23, 2021, <https://racistcrimeswatch.wordpress.com/2021/12/23/1-1283/> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> “Greek legislation designates Turkey as a safe third country, for the first time. This decision is for asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Somalia,” Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Migration and Asylum press release, June 7, 2021, <https://migration.gov.gr/en/asfali-triti-chora-charaktirizei-gia-proti-fora-i-elliniki-nomothesia-tin-toyrkia-afora-aitoyntes-asylo-apo-syria-afganistan-pakistan-mpagklantes-kai-somalia/> (accessed March 17, 2022). See also Advocacy Letter: Implementation of the Safe Third Country Concept in Greece,” Refugees International advocacy letter, March 8, 2022, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/3/8/implementation-of-the-safe-third-country-concept-in-greece> (accessed March 23, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> “Joint Ministerial Decision 42799/2021” (“Κοινή Υπουργική Απόφαση 42799/2021”), Government Gazette 2425 / Β / 7-6-2021, <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-allodapoi/prosphuges-politiko-asulo/koine-upourgike-apophase-42799-2021.html> (accessed March 23, 2022).

which include respect for the principle of nonrefoulement.<sup>24</sup> Since July 2019, Turkey has deported hundreds of Syrians from its cities, exposing those forcibly returned from Greece to the risk of onward refoulement to Syria.<sup>25</sup> In February 2022, Turkey was reported to have deported at least 150 Syrians to Syria despite having protected status.<sup>26</sup> In any case, people summarily returned to Turkey through Evros are not returned pursuant to an agreement but rather unofficially without due process and without guarantees that Turkey will examine their claims.

---

<sup>24</sup> “Greece deems Turkey ‘safe,’ but refugees are not,” Action for education ARSIS, Danish Refugee Council, et al. press release, ReliefWeb, June 14, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greece-deems-turkey-safe-refugees-are-not-substantive-examination-asylum-applications> (accessed March 17, 2022); “EU: Don’t Send Syrians Back to Turkey,” Human Rights Watch news release, June 20, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/20/eu-dont-send-syrians-back-turkey#>.

<sup>25</sup> “Turkey: Syrians Being Deported to Danger,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 24, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/24/turkey-syrians-being-deported-danger>.

<sup>26</sup> Harun al-Aswad, “Turkey accused of sending scores of refugees back to Syria,” Middle East Eye, February 2, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-syria-refugees-deported-scores> (accessed March 17, 2022).

## Violence and Abuse by Greek Authorities

All of the men Human Rights Watch interviewed provided first-hand victim or witness accounts of Greek police or men they believed to be Greek police beating or otherwise abusing them and others who were with them at at least one of three points: (1) the time of their detention on Greek territory; (2) in custody, usually for periods of no more than a day in facilities near the border; (3) and/or in the course of being forcibly returned to Turkey.

Both women interviewed by Human Rights Watch were traveling with their children and husbands. Neither of the two women were beaten at any point or forced to remove their clothes, but Greek police stole their phones and other belongings. At the detention center, one of the women was held with her daughter separate from her husband, and the other woman was held with her family and the other migrants in their group in one room.

### Violence and Abuse at the Time of Detention

Greek authorities began abusing most of the men we interviewed immediately upon detaining them, often starting with taking their mobile phones and other possessions and stripping them of their outer clothes. “After crossing the river, we walked four hours and then we were caught by police,” said Karim, a 22-year-old man from Baghlan Province, Afghanistan, who crossed the Evros River in early September 2021. “At the point they arrested us, they [searched] us and took our [clothes], belongings, and phones. They set our clothes on fire...I was left only in undershorts.”<sup>27</sup>

These first encounters also often involved kicking and hitting, according to victims and witnesses. Najji, a 37-year-old former Afghan Special Forces soldier also from Baghlan, who fled Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021, told Human Rights Watch about his arrest after crossing the river into Greece and walking for seven hours through forests and fields:

We were 25 people when we were arrested near the railway. [Greek police] beat us at that point. They kicked me and whoever was not looking [at] the

---

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Karim, November 15, 2021.



ground. If you looked up, they beat you more. Their behavior was totally inhumane. They searched us, and they took our mobiles and belongings and took off our clothes. Those people who had undershorts with them, they were left with underwear...We tried to cover ourselves with leaves.<sup>28</sup>

In some cases, the police acted even more violently, beatings migrants with truncheons and menacing them with guns. “When I was arrested, I tried to run from the police,” said Afsar, a 23-year-old man from Kapisa Province, Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> The Greek police caught him at a railroad station near the Turkish border in March 2021. “They hit me with a baton and I fell down. I got up and started running and again they beat me three times. Then a policeman pointed a gun on my head and told me to sit down or otherwise he would fire.”<sup>30</sup>

Abusive treatment occurred not only for those who attempted to flee but also for those who presented themselves voluntarily to the authorities. In October 2021, Fathullah, a 29-year-old man from Herat Province, Afghanistan, presented himself to Greek police asking for help after becoming separated from his group. They not only refused his pleas for help, but also beat him and stole the documents he said would have supported his asylum claim:

After crossing the [Evros] river, we walked 12 hours... [At some point] I was alone, I lost my friends in the forest, I didn’t know where they were or what happened to them. I went to [the police to] ask help...They beat me and told me to take off my clothes. They took my mobile phone and passport and money... They didn’t give me a chance to talk, they wouldn’t listen to me... They never gave me my passport back. I was carrying important documents that I needed for asylum seeking and family documents but they took them all. I tried not to give the documents to them but they beat me, so I gave them over. While beating they hit my teeth, [they were] broken and bleeding.... Physically I am ok but mentally I can never forget these moments...<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Naji, November 29, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Afsar, November 24, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Fathullah, December 16, 2021.

## Inhuman and Degrading Conditions and Ill-Treatment in Detention Facilities

Twenty people interviewed by Human Rights Watch were held at detention facilities, usually for less than 24 hours or overnight, before being pushed back into the Evros River to Turkey. They described cramped conditions, sometimes insufficient space even to lie down, no blankets or sources of warmth, and little or no food and drinking water. They also described beatings, being stripped of their clothing – in some cases being left totally naked – and other abuses. Waiz, an 18-year-old Afghan from Maidan Wardak Province, who was held at a detention facility for seven hours before being pushed back to Turkey, said of his experience:

The police inside the detention center were aggressive...Two police beat me a lot with a police baton...They were beating us everywhere [on our bodies] and we were just protecting our heads...After they took our clothes they put us in a room more like a prison, almost full of migrants and kept us from 3 a.m. to 10 a.m.<sup>32</sup>

Niamat, a 26-year-old man from Paktia Province, who fled Afghanistan in June 2021, was left totally naked during his time in detention:

Inside the detention center, they took our belongings and told us to take off our clothes; they told me to take everything off... Since I didn't take them off, [an officer] kicked me twice. I was totally naked... There were 250 people in that room that I was kept in...[there were] two boys in my group, they were both 16. The police told them to take off their clothes, and there was no age determination. They didn't give us food or water. They took us to [the detention] center at 4 a.m. and at 1 p.m. they took us to the border.<sup>33</sup>

The accounts of former detainees suggest that the Greek authorities intentionally acted to humiliate the people in their custody. Samad, a 27-year-old man from Panjshir Province, Afghanistan described gratuitously humiliating and degrading treatment during the two days he was detained after crossing into Greece on December 5, 2021:

---

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Waiz, November 30, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Niamat, November 23, 2021.

For these two days, those who had undershorts had them, but those who didn't were totally naked. I had undershorts on. The weather was very cold and there was nothing to make the rooms warmer...When we asked for food, they gave us biscuits. For 28 people, they threw four or five biscuits towards us and we were trying to catch them. They laughed at us and made fun of us.<sup>34</sup>

In March 2020, the *New York Times* published an extensive report documenting, through a combination of on-the-ground reporting and forensic analysis of satellite imagery, the Greek government's use of a secret extrajudicial location – a “black site” – where they were detaining migrants incommunicado before expelling them to Turkey without due process.<sup>35</sup> The Greek government denied the existence of such site.<sup>36</sup>

In response to this report, Major General Dimitrios Mallios, chief of the Aliens & Border Protection Branch in Hellenic Police Headquarters, sent a letter (attached in full as an annex to this report) to Human Rights Watch, which said, in part:

Following their arrest, third country nationals are transferred to the Fylakio Reception and Identification Center at Orestiada for further management in accordance with the Greek Law. The standard procedures followed at operational level after their detection, include first reception services (identification of vulnerabilities, nationality determination, registration, photo and fingerprinting etc.), during which people are informed about their rights (including their right to apply for asylum) and receive information material in a language they can understand. They are also given the right to contact over the phone their family members, Consulates or other Authorities of their countries or other humanitarian organisations.

---

<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Samad, February 17, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Matina Stevis-Gridneff, Patrick Kingsley, et al., “‘We Are Like Animals’: Inside Greece’s Secret Site for Migrants,” *New York Times*, published March 10, 2020, updated July 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/world/europe/greece-migrants-secret-site.html> (accessed March 17, 2022). For conditions of pushbacks via the Aegean Sea, see Carlotta Gall, “‘They Just Left Us’: Greece Is Accused of Setting Migrants Adrift at Sea,” *New York Times*, published July 18, 2021, updated Oct. 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/18/world/europe/greece-migrants.html> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>36</sup> “Greece denies report of secret ‘black site’ for migrants near Turkish border,” *Reuters*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-greece-border-idUSKBN2oY1VF> (accessed March 17, 2022).

## No Effort to Determine Age of People Who Might be Children; Detaining Children Naked

None of the youths we interviewed reported any age determination procedures before they were sent back to Turkey. One of them was a child at the time of his interview, and six others who were 18 years old at the time of their interviews described pushbacks that had occurred when they were under 18. Others we interviewed said their groups included children who were detained together with adults in humiliating conditions and then pushed back to Turkey without any effort to determine their age.

Hamid, an 18-year-old from Kapisa Province, Afghanistan, who crossed into Greece on February 11 and was arrested by police with his 15-year-old brother, told Human Rights Watch police ordered them to strip and left them naked during their six hours in a detention center before pushing them back to Turkey. At no point did authorities try to determine if any of those detained were children. He said:

Once they took us to the center...they told us to put our bags aside, and they told us to take off all our clothes. I was too shy because my brother is young and I never saw him without clothes, but there we had to take everything off, even undershorts. Then they told us to put our hands on the wall and we were standing naked...they never asked us any questions, even my brother, so we couldn't tell them we are refugees... They didn't give us food or water, but there was a toilet [in the room] and we could use it...there were around 150-160 people in that room sitting close to each other. They took us to the center at 5 a.m. and kept us until 11 a.m. without clothes. When we left the center they gave us undershorts and t-shirt.<sup>37</sup>

Ebadullah, another 18-year-old from Ghazni Province who fled from Afghanistan in July 2021 and was arrested in Greece in September 2021 with his 12-year-old nephew, said:

The center where they took us was almost like a prison. The rooms had walls, but the doors were made of bars. Once we arrived in the room, they asked for our money and our belongings. Inside the room were one

---

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Hamid, February 16, 2022.

policewoman and four policemen...Three of them watched, one checked our belongings, and one beat us... with a plastic hose used for watering things. Mostly beating on our backs. I was left only with my shirt and pants. They did not beat my 12-year-old nephew, but they took his clothes. They didn't give us a chance to say anything. I was 18 at the time but they did not ask me anything about my age or why I came to Greece.<sup>38</sup>

Morad, a third 18-year-old from Paktia Province, who fled Afghanistan in September 2021, said he was arrested along with 40 others in mid-November 2021 and taken to a detention center where he was held with around 200 people in a six meter room that had a flimsy partition to separate the men and the women:

The police made us take off all our clothes and without clothes they started beating us with hoses and sticks. They beat me on my leg and on the back of my head. We were very scared because they beat us a lot. We were too scared to ask any questions...we were supposed to look down so we never had chance to talk with them. Once they beat you, they gave you clothes to wear. They didn't separate us from older people. I had friends and people in my group age 12 or 14 years old and they didn't ask anything from them and they took their clothes off and beat them. The only group separated was women, but the rest, if you were male, they were beating you. We were arrested at 9 a.m. and we stayed in the detention center for one night. On the second morning around 8 a.m., they took us to the border.<sup>39</sup>

Rostam, a 14-year-old boy from Kapisa Province, Afghanistan, who said he had made multiple unsuccessful attempts to cross from Turkey to Greece said the Greek authorities never made any effort to determine his age or to treat him as an unaccompanied child. He recounted his experience during one of his failed attempts:

I couldn't run fast enough [so] I was arrested. With me were 50 people. They beat all of us. They took us to a center... They did not ask anything. They did not take photos or our fingerprints... They took the clothes of the men but

---

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Ebadullah, December 3, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Morad, December 6, 2021.

not of the women. They took all our clothes. I was naked. No clothes. They behave like this with all the migrants.... They beat me with a police baton on my leg. I had trouble walking for the next month. They kept us in the center for one night. They took us to the border the next day at 10 a.m.<sup>40</sup>

In response to our findings, police Major General Mallios said:

In the case of underage irregular migrants, the competent Public Prosecutor's office is immediately alerted once they are identified and then they are transferred to the Orestiada Reception and Identification Center in order for all formal procedures to be completed. Then they are sent to a relevant Unaccompanied Minors Accommodation Facility. In particular, the RIC at Orestiada managed 410 unaccompanied minor cases in 2019, 112 in 2020 and 362 in 2021.

## **Failure to Do Health Screenings or Provide Masks**

According to the migrants interviewed, Greek authorities did not conduct health screenings or test for the virus that causes Covid-19 before detaining them in overcrowded conditions at heightened risk of infection. Migrants said that the authorities did not provide them with masks or any form of personal protective equipment to lower the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Interviewees said that they were denied access to soap and clean water to practice safe hygiene. "I asked for masks, soap, but they didn't provide us anything, not even water," said Waiz.<sup>41</sup>

Mahmood, a 24-year-old Afghan man traveling with two young women, one of whom became sick after walking for four days in rainy, cold weather conditions, said the young woman, "was sick, but they did not test her for Covid or anything. She had a fever and was shaking, but they didn't even provide [her] a blanket."<sup>42</sup> He also said that they were all held together along with two other families from Morocco and Syria.

---

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Rostam, November 20, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Waiz, November 30, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Mahmood, November 12, 2021.

In response to our findings, police Major General Mallios, said, “In case a third country national needs medical care, this is immediately provided and they are transferred to the appropriate local healthcare unit. The above-described management process is carried out ensuring full respect of their rights and protection of their life and dignity.”

## **Ignoring Requests for Asylum; Blocking Access to Asylum**

At no point from being detained, in custody, or prior to being pushed back at the border were any of the Afghans interviewed by Human Rights Watch given the opportunity to lodge asylum claims, and their attempts to seek protection were ignored. In some cases, as illustrated by the experience of Fathullah, described above,<sup>43</sup> police destroyed documents asylum seekers were carrying to support their asylum claims.

Karim, a 22-year-old former commander in the Afghan army who fled Afghanistan in August 2021, told Human Rights Watch that he first presented himself at an official border crossing point between Greece and Turkey. He said that he told the Greek border authorities, “‘We are asylum seekers,’ but they didn’t hear us. They just kept saying, ‘Go back.’”<sup>44</sup> When he persisted, he said that the Greek authorities became threatening, “‘They pointed their guns at us, just telling us to go back.’”<sup>45</sup> He subsequently crossed into Greece irregularly and was violently pushed back.

Amena, a 36-year-old woman from Maidan Wardak Province who crossed into Greece with her husband and two daughters in May 2021, said, “‘When we were arrested, we told those two police, ‘We are refugees and we want you to take us to refugee office,’ and they told us okay, but they lied to us and brought us to this detention center.’”<sup>46</sup> Once in the detention center, she said, “‘the police did not allow us to talk to them.’”<sup>47</sup>

Police Major General Mallios said that “‘in the case of people asking for international protection, the relevant request is immediately recorded upon their arrest and entered into the relevant electronic application.’”

---

<sup>43</sup> More on Fathullah’s experience, see section, “Violence and Abuse at the Time of Detention,” p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Karim, November 15, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Amena, February 20, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

## Greek Police Abuses during Pushbacks

Direct abuses by Greek authorities continued not only from the point of detention and in custody, but also in the course of being pushed back to Turkey. Mahmood, a 24-year-old man from Maidan Wardak Province spoke about the direct abuses Greek authorities committed against him when he was pushed back in October 2021. Their commanding officers were present as these abuses were being perpetrated:

At the departing point on the border, the police said, “If you have money with you, you should leave it.” They beat me because I tried to hide my money from them. I gave them my 600 Turkish lira (US\$40) but they also discovered that I had 100 euros (US\$111). They beat me when they found the money. Two of the men were high-ranking officers because they had stripes on their arms. The other one beat me with a police baton, hard plastic. We were about 50 migrants, about 20 of us were Afghans. Me and four other Afghans were found with hidden money. They took us into a forest, separated us from the rest, and beat us. They beat me five or six times. They hit me on my legs, arms, neck, and head. They didn’t care where they beat me. My nose was bleeding, but none of my bones were broken. I had bruises on my legs.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Mahmood, November 12, 2021.



## Using Migrants as Police Auxiliaries to Perpetrate Pushbacks

Human Rights Watch heard consistent accounts about Arab and/or South Asian men, often dressed in paramilitary-looking uniforms and wearing full balaclava face coverings, who piloted the boats to the middle of the Evros River, which marks the border between Greece and Turkey.

Afsar, a 23-year-old man from Kapisa Province, Afghanistan said that the non-Greek men working with the Greek police who ferried his group into the Evros River also beat the migrants in the process of pushing them back. Afsar was one of the few people we interviewed who was able to have a conversation with one of these men, who told him of the arrangement they have with the Greek authorities to work for them for a period of time in return for travel documents:

The Greek police had the word POLICE written on their clothes. These people on the border had a black uniform, nothing was written on their arms, and their faces were covered. Two Pakistanis took us across the river to the Turkish side in the boat. We asked them where they were from and they said Pakistan. They spoke Pashto. They said they were fingerprinted and asked by Greek police to work for three months and after that they would provide them documents. I was beaten by the Greek police inside the center three times with a baton when they asked me to take off my clothes, but on the border these people with black uniforms and covered faces they were beating people if they moved. They said the Turkish police were watching us and we shouldn't move from our place or speak; if someone moved, they beat them.<sup>49</sup>

Morad, an 18-year-old from Paktia Province, who was arrested in mid-November 2021 and taken to a detention center, also spoke with one of the men who piloted his boat back to

---

<sup>49</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Afsar, November 24, 2021.

the Turkish side of the Evros River; he identified himself as an Afghan, and said he was working for the Greek police:

These men had black hats [balaclava] covering their faces... These four people who were already there were not Greek. They were 20-25 years old, two Pakistanis and two Afghans. The two Afghans took our boat across, and I had a conversation with one of them. He said he works for the Greek police. He said the police picked him and the others up from among the migrants and use them to take the migrants across the river because they don't want to be directly involved in sending the people back to Turkey.<sup>50</sup>

Zayan, a 28-year-old former commander in the Afghan army who was pushed back from Greece to Turkey in late December, said that he had a lengthy conversation in Pashto with the Pakistani man driving the boat from Greece to Turkey:

The boat driver [told me], “we are...here doing this work for 3 months and then they give us...a three-page document. With this [document], we can move freely inside Greece and then we can get a ticket for... another country.”<sup>51</sup>

Bedar, a 25-year-old man from Paktia Province, Afghanistan, who left the country on August 18 in fear of the Taliban because he was a journalist, said when the Greek authorities brought his group from the detention center to the river, they were made to stand in a line while men he believed were Syrian put them into small boats:

It was Syrians driving these boats...They were speaking Arabic...When we reached the middle [of the river], the Syrian [driving our boat] told us to get out of the boat. Since I can't swim, I begged him not to drop me...He took the boat close to a tree so I could catch the tree and get to the Turkish side.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Morad, December 6, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Zayan, March 16, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Bedar, January 28-29, 2022.

Waiz, an 18-year-old from Maidan Wardak Province described being beaten and refouled by masked, uniformed non-Greek men after the Greek police transported him from the detention center to the river:

At the border, there were other people waiting for us... They had different uniforms than the [Greek] police. They had military-looking uniforms and their faces were covered. From their language, we could recognize they were Pakistanis and Arabs. These men took our money and beat us. They beat me with sticks. They dropped us in the middle of the river. The water was to my chest and we waded the rest of the way [to Turkey].<sup>53</sup>

In March and July 2020, Human Rights Watch documented how Greek security forces were working in tandem with unidentified armed men at the Greece-Turkey land border to detain, assault, rob, and strip asylum seekers and migrants, and then forced them back to Turkey.<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch documented similar situations in 2018.<sup>55</sup> These findings are in line with reports and findings of other NGOs who work in coordination with the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), which monitors human rights violations at the external borders of the EU.<sup>56</sup> One such report from the BVMN published in September 2021 stated:

Testimonies this month from survivors of pushbacks over the Evros/Meriç river from Greece to Turkey again mentioned third country nationals (TCNs) working with Greek authorities in violently expelling people from the country.... This trend has been observed sporadically in reports since 2020, and it is often mentioned that TCNs who assist in perpetrating pushbacks

---

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Waiz, November 30, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> See “Greece: Investigate Pushbacks, Collective Expulsions,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 16, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/16/greece-investigate-pushbacks-collective-expulsions#>; “Greece: Violence Against Asylum Seekers at Border,” March 17, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/17/greece-violence-against-asylum-seekers-border#>.

<sup>55</sup> “Greece: Violent Pushbacks at Turkey Border,” Human Rights Watch news release, December 18, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/18/greece-violent-pushbacks-turkey-border>.

<sup>56</sup> See “About Us – Who We Are, BVMN History,” Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), undated, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/about/> (accessed March 17, 2022).

are promised legal documentation in Greece or other compensation for their actions.<sup>57</sup>

Since 2020, organizations within the BVMN began collecting testimony referencing third-country nationals as carrying out the physical pushbacks from Greece to Turkey via the Evros River. Josoor, an independent organization that monitors human rights violations at the EU external borders and is focused on supporting victims of pushbacks and other refugees in Turkey, has collected testimony of third-country nationals carrying out pushbacks since September 2020.<sup>58</sup>

One testimony that Josoor collected in April 2021 described an incident at the border immediately before the pushback to Greece:

There were another two officers with the boat on the river side...One of these officers was identified as Syrian and spoke in Arabic and wore black unmarked clothes. This officer who spoke Syrian-Arabic, very clearly, announced to the group that “if anyone can speak English, you can come work for them [Greek police] for six months and then you will be given papers for asylum.”<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> BVMN, “Illegal Push-Backs and Border Violence Reports, Balkan Region” September 2021, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/wp-content/uploads/BVMN-Monthly-Report-September-2021.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2022), p. 5. For other reports published by the Border Violence Monitoring Network that include details and/or accounts of third-country nationals carrying out pushbacks, see BVMN, “Illegal Push-Backs and Border Violence Reports, Balkan Region,” June 2021, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/wp-content/uploads/BVMN-Monthly-Report-June-2021.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2022); BVMN, “Illegal Push-Backs and Border Violence Reports, Balkan Region” April 2021, [https://www.borderviolence.eu/wp-content/uploads/BVMN\\_Monthly-Report\\_April\\_21.pdf](https://www.borderviolence.eu/wp-content/uploads/BVMN_Monthly-Report_April_21.pdf) (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch call with two staff members of Josoor, February 25, 2022. For more about Josoor, see “About Josoor,” Josoor, undated, <https://www.josoor.net/en/about-josoor> (accessed March 17, 2022). For select testimonies collected by Josoor that describe third-country nationals as carrying out pushbacks of migrants from Greece to Turkey, see Josoor, “You Are Muslim and We Are Christian Why Come to Us Go to a Muslim Country,” Josoor, BVMN, September 3, 2021, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/violence-reports/september-3-2021-1100-dilofos-3-4km-from-yenikadin/> (accessed March 17, 2022); “Nearly 100 People Held Overnight in a Cell of 5 X 4 Meters Size For 6 – 7 Hours. Including Women and Children. One Was Badly Beaten and Kicked in the Chest Because He Had a Phone and They Thought He Was a Smuggler, He Fainted,” Josoor, BVMN, September 12, 2021, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/violence-reports/september-12-2021-0000-uyuklutatar/> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>59</sup> “If Anyone Can Speak English, You Can Come Work For Them [Greek Police] For Six Months and Then You Will Be Given Papers For Asylum,” Josoor, BVMN, April 8, 2021, <https://www.borderviolence.eu/violence-reports/april-8-2021-0600-island-near-karayusflu/> (accessed March 17, 2022).

## Frontex Looks Away, Fails to Prevent Abuses

Several of the interviewees said that while they were in the custody of Greek law enforcement, they saw other police wearing uniforms with either a German or Austrian flag patch, but that these police did not interact with them or make efforts to intervene in the situation. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, deploys border guards from other EU member states along with Greek patrols along Greece's land border with Turkey.<sup>60</sup> Those who identified other European police said that the beatings stopped when the other European police were present, but as soon as they left the scene, the Greek police would continue to abuse them. It seems that while Frontex presence was a temporary deterrent, it did nothing to ensure proper treatment at all times, respect for due process or access to asylum, or to prevent collective expulsion.

Iqbal, a 20-year-old man from Paktia Province, Afghanistan, spoke about an incident that happened on or around January 10, 2022:

We were arrested at 11 a.m. by border police. I think their uniform was dark blue, they had a Greek flag on their arms, and their faces were uncovered. A second group of police came, they stopped these [Greek] police from beating us. We were all coming from Afghanistan so we couldn't understand anything [they were saying], but the second group had a German flag on their arms... No one dared to talk with the first group of police. My English-speaking friend told the second group of police in English that we are coming from Afghanistan, there is war in our country, we can't go back, but they didn't hear us... They didn't say anything to us... The second group of police who stopped the first group of police from beating us left. And it was first group of police who took us to the border.<sup>61</sup>

Hakem, a 25-year-old man from Balkh Province, Afghanistan, described an incident that took place in May or June 2021 involving non-Greek police. He believed that these police

---

<sup>60</sup> "Greek Prime Minister meets Frontex Executive Director during his visit to Athens," Frontex news release, May 21, 2021, <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/greek-prime-minister-meets-frontex-executive-director-during-his-visit-to-athens-gbljrS> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Iqbal, January 30, 2022.

were Austrian based on the insignia he saw on their uniforms that included an Austrian flag. He said that “seven or eight Greek police and two Austrian police” woke him and about 17 others up.<sup>62</sup> Hakem said the Austrian police did not communicate with his group and that they left once a bus from the Greek police came to take them to the detention center.<sup>63</sup> While the Austrian police were present, Hakem said the Greek police did not beat him or members of his group, but once they left, the beatings began.<sup>64</sup>

A Human Rights Watch report published in June 2021 found that Frontex’s oversight mechanisms have failed to safeguard people against serious human rights violations at the EU’s external borders.<sup>65</sup> An analysis of the actions of Frontex in the context of its operations, shows a pattern of failure to credibly investigate or take steps to mitigate abuses against migrants at EU external borders, including Greece, even in the face of clear evidence of rights violations.

In only one case – Hungary – has Frontex exercised its duty to halt funding or operations or to cancel a planned operation based on serious and persistent violations of fundamental rights related to its activities. However, this suspension came late after years of warnings and only after an EU court ruling.

In Greece, evidence has come to light since October 2020 that Frontex played an active role in concealing and supporting pushbacks of migrants at the land and maritime borders with Turkey. Frontex went ahead with a rapid border operation (RABIT) in Evros, in March 2020, although the Greek authorities had openly put abusive measures in place. These included temporarily suspending access to asylum, prosecuting asylum seekers for irregular entry, and violently forcing them back across the border.

A European Parliament investigation that concluded in July 2021 highlighted how Frontex – in particular its executive director, Fabrice Leggeri – failed to take action to address reports of migrant pushbacks from Greece. The report found that Frontex management ignored reports, including video evidence, about human rights violations taking place where

---

<sup>62</sup> Human Rights Watch telephone interview with Hakem, February 10, 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> “Frontex Failing to Protect People at EU Borders,” Human Rights Watch news release, June 23, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/23/frontex-failing-protect-people-eu-borders#>.

Frontex operates, and charged that its executive director deliberately delayed hiring people whose job it would be to monitor rights.

In addition, a year-long European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) investigation into Frontex for involvement in pushback operations in the Aegean Sea and allegedly covering up of illegal acts, including “leaving of migrants adrift in engineless life rafts...” concluded in February 2022.<sup>66</sup> Three members of Frontex’s senior management deliberately did not classify pushback cases as human rights violations, according to a report by the *Spiegel*, in March, Members of European Parliament called for these findings to be made public.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> “Frontex: MEPs Urge Release of EU Anti-Fraud Investigation, Frontex to Increase Manpower at Ukrainian Border, Green Light for Talks on Senegal Deployment,” European Council on Refugees and Exiles news release, March 11, 2022, <https://ecre.org/frontex-meps-urge-release-of-eu-anti-fraud-investigation-frontex-to-increase-manpower-at-ukrainian-border-green-light-for-talks-on-senegal-deployment/> (accessed March 17, 2022); Mara Bierbach, “Frontex leaders concealed pushbacks, watchdog reports,” Info Migrants, March 2, 2022, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/38907/frontex-leaders-concealed-pushbacks-watchdog-reports> (accessed March 17, 2022).

<sup>67</sup> Giorgos Christides, Steffen Lüdke, et al., “Pressure Growing on Frontex Chief from Pushbacks Investigation,” *Spiegel*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/we-have-a-lot-of-evidence-pressure-growing-on-frontex-chief-from-pushbacks-investigation-a-047934ed-5f94-44c8-8474-df974644fo02> (accessed March 25, 2022).

# Recommendations

## To the Greek Government and Judicial Authorities

- Immediately halt all pushbacks from Greek territory, ensure fair, humane, and dignified treatment to people seeking safety in Greece, and provide access to asylum procedures for all who request it.
- Direct border police to accept an individual's declared age if there is a reasonable possibility that the person is a child. In such cases, border police should expeditiously transfer those individuals to the care of child protection authorities.
- Immediately stop employing third country nationals in collective expulsions.
- Conduct a transparent, thorough, and impartial investigation into allegations that Greek law enforcement personnel are involved in acts that put the lives and safety of migrants and asylum seekers at risk, including collective expulsions and violence at the borders.
- Subject any officer engaged in illegal acts, as well as their commanding officers, to disciplinary sanctions and, if applicable, criminal prosecution.
- Stop the practice of stripping migrants held in custody, and ensure that conditions are humane, safe, and dignified.
- Ensure that any migrants held in custody are given access to regular Covid-19 testing, personal protective equipment, soap, water, adequate facilities to practice safe hygiene, and access to adequate medical care.

## To the European Commission

- Require Greece ends all summary returns and collective expulsions of asylum seekers to Turkey.
- Press the authorities to establish an independent and effective border monitoring mechanism that would investigate allegations of violence at borders in collaboration with civil society.
- Withhold migration management funding until abuses cease in and around Greece's land and maritime borders.
- Open legal proceedings against Greece for violating EU laws prohibiting collective expulsions.



## **To Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency**

- Monitor and publicly report on Greek security force compliance with European and international human rights and refugee law, as well as compliance by its own officers and those contributed by member states.
- Inform the Management Board and the Greek authorities of Frontex's intention to trigger article 46 of its regulation, under which the agency has a duty to suspend or terminate operations in case of serious abuses, if no concrete improvements are made by Greece to end these abuses within three months.

## Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Bill Frelick, director of the Refugee and Migrant Rights Division at Human Rights Watch, and Michelle Randhawa, officer in the Refugee and Migrant Rights Division. Specialist reviews were provided by Eva Cossé, researcher in the Europe and Central Asia Division, Michael Bochenek in the Children’s Rights Division, Julia Bleckner in the Health and Human Rights Division, and Heather Barr in the Women’s Rights Division.

Aisling Reidy, senior legal advisor, and Tom Porteous, deputy program director, provided legal and program review. Production assistance was provided by Travis Carr, senior publications coordinator.

We would like to thank Mariam Danishjo for her invaluable work as our consultant and interpreter. Without her, this report would not have been possible.

We are grateful to all the Afghan migrants and asylum seekers who willingly shared their experiences with us. Their hope, and ours, is that in sharing their experiences, the world can extend compassion to all people fleeing violence, war, and hardships.

## **Annex: Response from Hellenic Police Headquarters**

Unofficial translation from Greek by Human Rights Watch

Athens, 01 March 2022

[Emblem of the Hellenic Republic]  
Hellenic Police Headquarters  
Aliens & Border Protection Branch

Subject: “Letter from Human Rights Watch NGO, reporting cases of alleged refoulement of asylum seekers”

- RE:    A)       The document under no. 1005/22/293248 dated 09/02/2022 of the Chief of the Hellenic Police Staff Office.  
      B)       The document under no. 1024/22/293682 dated 09/02/2022 of the Chief of Staff/Hellenic Police Headquarters.  
      C)       The order no. 9709-κΕ dated 09/02/2022 of the Chief of the Aliens & Border Protection Branch/Hellenic Police Headquarters.  
      D)       The letter from Human Rights Watch dated 09/02/2022.

Dear Mr. Frelick,

First of all I would like to thank you for your letter sent in the framework of your mandate to protect and promote fundamental rights.

Further to what is mentioned in the aforementioned letter, I would like to hereby inform you that the Hellenic Police, with Frontex’s support, protects the external borders of the EU, exercising its sovereign right and constitutional obligation to protect both its borders and social cohesion. The Hellenic Authorities, with the assistance of the European Union, have managed to effectively safeguard the external borders of the EU not only against illegal border crossing, but also against organised cross-border crime in the form of migrant smuggling and other hybrid threats where migrants have been instrumentalised by third countries, such as Turkey, which obviously manifest an aggressive disposition

against the European Union. Recently, Belarus displayed a similar behavior at its borders with Poland and Lithuania.

Specialised border agencies are in place in order to tackle illegal migration along the Greek-Turkish land border. Their mission mainly consists of the following: (a) border protection and (b) migration flows management.

Border protection and surveillance operations, which are carried out with the involvement of Frontex officers (European Border and Coast Guard Agency), are determined on the basis of specific and dedicated operational plans that focus on the following:

- a) border surveillance and control at Evros through sea and coastal patrols, using patrol vessels and modern technical equipment, with a view to timely locating attempted illegal border crossings by third country nationals and;
- b) prompt notification of the Turkish Authorities in order to locate attempted illegal border crossings before entering Greek territory.

Following their arrest, third country nationals are transferred to the Fylakio Reception and Identification Center at Orestiada, for further management in accordance with the Greek Law. The standard procedures followed at operational level after their detection, include first reception services (identification of vulnerabilities, nationality determination, registration, photo and fingerprinting etc.), during which people are informed about their rights (including their right to apply for asylum) and receive information material in a language they can understand. They are also given the right to contact over the phone their family members, Consulates or other Authorities of their countries or other humanitarian organisations.

In particular, in the case of people asking for international protection, the relevant request is immediately recorded upon their arrest and entered into the relevant electronic application, in order to be subsequently formalised at the Orestiada Reception and Identification Center and then be examined by the Regional Asylum Office inside the Orestiada RIC or other Asylum Offices operating in the region.

In case a third country national needs medical care, this is immediately provided and they are transferred to the appropriate local healthcare unit. The above-described management

process is carried out ensuring full respect of their rights and protection of their life and dignity.

In the case of underage irregular migrants, the competent Public Prosecutor's office is immediately alerted once they are identified and then they are transferred to the Orestiada Reception and Identification Center in order for all formal procedures to be completed. Then they are sent to a relevant Unaccompanied Minors Accommodation Facility. In particular, the RIC at Orestiada managed 410 unaccompanied minor cases in 2019, 112 in 2020 and 362 in 2021.

According to the available statistics, the period from September 2021 to January 2022 saw a total of 1,028 arrests of irregular migrants at Evros who entered Greece illegally crossing the Evros river. The respective number for April 2020-February 2021 was 3,344 people. The criminal and administrative procedures provided for in the institutional framework were followed for all arrested people arrested.

Apart from these procedures, it is worth mentioning the ethos and respect to the fundamental rights of third country nationals shown by all Hellenic Police officers who take part in the operations.

The police staff involved in the border control and surveillance operations abides by the strict internal disciplinary regulation and Code of Ethics (P.D. 254/2004, A 238), in accordance with international and European standards. In particular, in the framework of internal staff audit, all allegations and complaints related to fundamental rights' violations at the borders are investigated and any staff members involved face the respective sanctions.

In order to ensure top police staff training level, staff members continuously receive special training (in the form of both undergraduate education and re-training) on the legal framework and developments in human rights protection, the identification of racist violence motives and the approach and management of vulnerable social groups.

I would like to indicatively mention that in 2021, the UNHCR trained a total of 399 newly recruited border guards on the "Main principles of internal protection and handling of population groups at the border". In the same year we received approval to carry out an

online training on integrated external borders management, addressing various topics, including the following: “Vulnerable groups management”, presented by trainers from the Office of the Greek Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for the Rights of Children, “Hygiene and safety in the workplace” presented by KEELPNO (Hellenic Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention) and “Protective measures against COVID-19” presented by trainers from the Health Directorate of the Hellenic Police Headquarters. Last but not least, a 1-day online seminar on “Cultural awareness” was presented by a police officer from the Police Directorate of Orestiada, who debriefed both the Hellenic Police and Frontex on issues related to more effective communication and, thus, upgraded management of alien detainees at Evros.

It should be noted that for every police violence-related complaint, the Hellenic Police Headquarters and its Agencies order a disciplinary investigation. This investigation is carried out by an Officer who does not have any administrative relation to the Agencies or police officers concerned and the conclusions report as well as any sanctions imposed are not published, in accordance with the applicable law provisions.

Furthermore, the Greek Ombudsman, an Independent Administrative Authority, has been appointed internally as the National Mechanism for the investigation of arbitrary incidents by police officers or other members of the security forces, with the main mandate to collect, record, assess, investigate and promote complaints falling under four (4) major categories of misconducts (between third parties and Hellenic Police officers), which may occur during the fulfillment of their duties or by way of abuse of their position and concern tortures and other violations of human dignity, unlawful intentional attack against life, physical integrity, health or personal or sexual freedom, illicit use of a firearm and unlawful behaviour with a racist motive.

The Greek Ombudsman, as national mechanism, addresses a case either once a formal complaint is filed or ex-officio or once the relevant Minister or Secretary General has referred the case. Moreover, when the Greek Ombudsman refers a complaint or incident to the competent Agencies, the latter are obliged to proceed to all necessary actions related to its administrative investigation and then forward the full dossier contents to the Independent Authority. In addition to this, the national mechanism addresses cases for which the European Court of Human Rights has handed down convictions against Greece,

when these convictions identify shortcomings in the disciplinary investigation process or reveal new evidence that had not been assessed from a disciplinary perspective.

With regard to the reported cases of informal refoulement of migrants from the Greek-Turkish border to Turkey (through Evros river) in February 2021 and from 01/09/2021 to 31/01/2022, the key points are the following:

- i. Two (2) complaints reporting informal refoulement of migrants from the Greek-Turkish border to Turkey (through Evros river) were filed in February 2021. In particular:
  - a. The competent Agencies received a document from “the Greek Ombudsman”, the Independent Administrative Authority, revealing allegations made by a Syrian national about reprehensible police officers’ actions as well as about the unlawful refoulement to Turkey through Evros river, of himself and other aliens of various nationalities. These actions were allegedly committed on 23/02/2021.
  - b. The competent Agencies received a document from “the Greek Ombudsman”, the Independent Administrative Authority, revealing allegations made by a Syrian national holding a residence permit in Germany, about reprehensible police officers’ actions that allegedly took place in Alexandroupoli, at an unidentified detention area on 21/02/2021, as well as about the unlawful refoulement to Turkey through Evros river, of himself and other aliens of various nationalities on 22/02/2021.

The results of the disciplinary investigation that was ordered for both aforementioned cases are still pending.

- ii. One (1) complaint reporting informal refoulement of an alien from the Greek-Turkish border to Turkey (through Evros river) was filed from 01/09/2021 to 31/01/2022. In particular:
  - a. The competent Agencies received a document from “the Greek Ombudsman”, the Independent Administrative Authority, revealing allegations made by an Afghani national about reprehensible police officers’ actions that allegedly took place between 3 and 4 September 2021 (when he was working as interpreter at Frontex) during his transfer and detention at an unidentified Agency, along with three (3) more aliens, two (2) of them being minors, as well as about the unlawful refoulement to

Turkey through Evros river, of himself and other aliens, that allegedly took place in the afternoon hours of 04/09/2021.

The results of the disciplinary investigation that was ordered are still pending.

I would like to stress that in case of allegations and complaints, the lack of sufficient evidence regarding the exact place and time of the reported incidents, as well as the details of the alleged perpetrators, witnesses and aliens-victims, substantially hinders the verification of the said allegations. In case the international non-governmental organization “Human Rights Watch” provides more evidence in relation to the reported cases and sends them to the Hellenic Police Headquarters, it will be possible to establish and impose (once proven) the respective disciplinary sanctions on the police officer(s) involved in any way and means.

Apart from the national allegations and complaints audit and investigation framework, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), pursuant to Art. 111 of the Regulation (EU) 1896/2019, as supplemented by the relevant Decision of the Executive Director of the Agency (ED Decision No R-ED-2016-106 dated 06/10/2016), has established a process called “Complaints Mechanism”. This voluntary and anonymous process allows third country nationals who believe that their rights have been violated by law enforcement officers or border guards involved in joint operations with Frontex, to file complaints. Such a complaint may be founded on articles 18 (Right to asylum) and 19 (Protection in the event of removal, expulsion or extradition) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Then, the member states whose officer was involved in any violation incident, must keep Frontex informed regarding the internal investigations, the adoption of disciplinary measures, etc.

Furthermore, we must not in any case disregard the actions undertaken by the national Authorities to safeguard the lives of the migrants attempting to illegally cross the borders through Evros river. In witness whereof, it should be stressed once more that in dozens of recorded cases, Hellenic Police officers went beyond their reasonably designated mandate and put their lives at risk to save hundreds of irregular migrants, in extreme weather conditions such as floods in Evros river.

It should be stressed yet again that no detained migrant requesting international protection is refouled, until their application is examined and rejected, in full compliance



with the domestic and international law and especially with the provisions of the Geneva Convention and the procedures laid down in Directive 2013/32/EU, which was transposed to our national law by virtue of L. 4636/2019, as well as with the respective case-law of the Council of the State (StE).

In conclusion, I would like to stress that police agencies and their staff will continue to operate in a continuous, professional, lawful and prompt way, taking all necessary measures to effectively manage the refugees/migration flows, in a manner that safeguards on the one hand the rights of the aliens and on the other hand the protection of citizens especially in the first line border regions.

Yours sincerely,

DIMITRIOS MALLIOS

[signature]

Major General

Chief of the Aliens & Border Protection Branch/Hellenic Police Headquarters

# “Their Faces Were Covered”

## Greece’s Use of Migrants as Police Auxiliaries in Pushbacks

Greek security forces are using third country nationals to place stripped and barely clothed migrants onto small boats, take them to the middle of the Evros River, and force them into the frigid water, making them wade to the riverbank on the Turkish side.

Based on interviews with 26 Afghan migrants and asylum seekers, 23 of whom were summarily returned after crossing from Turkey to Greece between September 2021 and February 2022, *“Their Faces Were Covered”* documents how Greek authorities assaulted, stripped, and robbed them before pushing them back. It also exposes how Greek authorities have been using men, who often wear black uniform-like clothes and balaclavas to obscure their faces and appear to be of Middle Eastern or South Asian origin, as proxies to carry out some of these abuses.

The report calls on the Greek government immediately to halt all pushbacks from its territory, to immediately stop employing third country nationals in collective expulsions, and to provide fair, humane, and dignified treatment for all people seeking safety in Greece. It calls on the European Commission to open legal proceedings against Greece for violating EU laws prohibiting collective expulsions, to establish an independent border monitoring mechanism to investigate allegations of violence at borders, and to ensure that none of its funding contributes to violations of fundamental rights. It calls on Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, to inform the Management Board and the Greek authorities of its intention to trigger article 46 of its regulation, under which the agency has a duty to suspend or terminate operations in case of serious abuses, if no concrete improvements are made by Greece to end these abuses within three months.



*Women migrants from Afghanistan hold signs that read “Stop pushbacks” during a rally in Athens against Greece’s pushbacks of migrants and asylum seekers at the border with Turkey. February 6, 2022.*

© 2022 Dimitris Aspiotis/Pacific Press/  
LightRocket via Getty Images