

For Immediate Release

Greece: Investigate Pushbacks, Violence at Borders ***Groups Press Parliament to Open Inquiry***

(Athens, October 6, 2020) – Members of Greece’s parliament should urgently establish an inquiry into all allegations of unlawful returns of migrants to Turkey by law enforcement officers and others, 29 human rights and humanitarian aid organizations said in an open letter released today. These returns are carried out mainly through pushbacks and collective expulsions and are often accompanied by violence.

Parliament should exercise its oversight authority to investigate the allegations of these illegal acts by state agents and proxies on Greece’s sea and land borders with Turkey. The parliament’s inquiry should examine whether any illegal acts identified are part of a *de facto* government policy at odds with international, European, and Greek law.

Over the years, nongovernmental groups and media outlets have consistently reported the unlawful return, including through pushbacks, of groups and individuals from Greece to Turkey by Greek law enforcement officers or unidentified masked men, who appear to be working in tandem with border enforcement officials.

Reports from 2020 recorded multiple incidents in which Greek Coast Guard personnel, sometimes accompanied by armed masked men in dark clothing, unlawfully abandoned migrants – including those who had reached Greek territory. They abandoned the migrants at sea, on inflatable vessels without motors; towed migrant boats to Turkish waters; or intercepted, attacked, and disabled boats carrying migrants.

Nongovernmental organizations and the media have also reported persistent allegations that Greek border guards have engaged in collective expulsions and pushbacks of asylum seekers through the Evros land border with Turkey.

On June 10, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said it was “closely monitoring” the situation at the Greek border and [reported](#) receiving “persistent reports” of migrants being arbitrarily arrested in Greece and pushed back to Turkey. The IOM said that Greece should investigate.

On August 21, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said it was “deeply concerned by an increasing number of credible reports indicating that men, women, and children may have been informally returned to Turkey immediately after reaching Greek soil or territorial waters in recent months,” and urged Greece to refrain from such practices and to seriously investigate these reports. The agency had released a statement making similar calls [on June 12](#).

On [July 6](#), during a debate at the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) on fundamental rights at the Greek border, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, said those incidents should be investigated. In

its new [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), presented on September 23, the European Commission recommended to member states to set up an independent monitoring mechanism, amid increased allegations of abuse at the EU's external borders. But no such system has been instituted.

Confronted during a CNN interview with an August 14 [New York Times article](#) documenting pushbacks, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis [said](#): "It has not happened. We've been the victims of a significant misinformation campaign," suggesting instead that Turkey was responsible.

Greek lawmakers should conduct a prompt, effective, transparent, and impartial investigation into allegations that Greek Coast Guard, Greek police, and Greek army personnel, sometimes in close coordination with uniformed masked men, have been involved in acts that not only violate the law but put the lives and safety of displaced people at risk.

Any officer found to have engaged in such illegal acts, as well as their commanding officers and officials who have command responsibility over such forces, should be subject to disciplinary and criminal sanctions, as applicable. The investigation should seek to establish the identity and relationship of the masked men and other unidentified officers to law enforcement and take steps to hold them to account. The investigation should cover events surfaced in 2019 and 2020, the groups said.

The following quotes may be attributed to members of the groups involved:

"Despite government denials, over the years many witnesses and victims have told us about pushbacks from land and sea that put migrants' lives at risk," said Eva Cossé, Greece researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Parliament should step up now and do all it can to put an end to this life-threatening practice."

"The continued failure to address the serious allegations of pushbacks and violence against people on the move at Greece's borders can no longer be tolerated," said Adriana Tidona, migration researcher at Amnesty International. "We call on the Greek parliament to exercise its powers in the interest of all those who have been harmed by these actions and to ensure that there is no repetition."

"Over the years, we have filed a score of complaints about or related to pushbacks at Greece's borders, including deaths, that Greek prosecutors seem to ignore," said Panayote Dimitras, spokesperson for the Greek Helsinki Monitor. "Greece needs to act quickly to set up an independent border monitoring mechanism to investigate violations, as proposed by the European Commission, and end these abuses once and for all."

"The right to seek asylum must be upheld at all times," said Josie Naughton, chief executive officer of Help Refugees. "The Greek parliament should urgently conduct an inquiry to examine the well-documented and illegal practices of pushbacks and mass expulsion, which endanger the lives of men, women, and children seeking asylum in Greece."

"We have documented the pushback of more than 1,150 asylum seekers from Greek territory in

the past three months alone,” said Natalie Gruber, spokesperson for Josoor. “These are not isolated incidents but systematic violations of national, EU, and international law that the parliament cannot shrug off as fake news anymore.”

“Greek authorities are systematically expelling migrants, including those who have reached Greek territory, and abandoning them in open water,” said Amelia Cooper from Legal Centre Lesbos. “The Greek parliament should not only open an investigation of these events, but must also decree and enforce – immediately – the cessation of illegal collective expulsions at all Greek borders.”

“In order to break with the current failures to hold member states like Greece accountable for their pushbacks and rights violations at borders, the European Commission must step up its efforts and quickly put in place an appropriate monitoring mechanism,” said Marta Welander, executive director at Refugee Rights Europe. “Such efforts must also involve civil society, NGOs, and national human rights institutions to ensure that available evidence is taken seriously and leads to timely investigation and redress.”

“The protection of the borders, of vital importance in itself, can be in compliance with international law and human rights standards,” said Antigone Lyberaki, SolidarityNow’s general manager. “The Greek parliament has both the means and a constitutional obligation to oversee and investigate the alleged infringement of international human rights obligations by the Greek state.”

“As a child protection organization, Tdh Hellas is particularly worried about the fact that among those reported to have been violently expelled across EU borders are children, including babies,” said Melina Spathari of Terre des hommes Hellas. “The Greek government should stop such acts and try instead to address the chronic gaps in the reception and protection system for families and unaccompanied children.”

Signatories:

Human Rights Watch
ActionAid Hellas
Amnesty International
ARSIS – Association for the Social Support of Youth
Danish Refugee Council
Equal Rights Beyond Borders
Fenix – Humanitarian Legal Aid
Greek Council for Refugees
Greek Forum of Refugees
Greek Helsinki Monitor
Hellenic League for Human Rights
Help Refugees
HIAS Greece
HumanRights360
International Rescue Committee
INTERSOS Hellas

Josoor
Legal Centre Lesbos
Lesvos Solidarity
Medecins Du Monde – Greece
Mobile Info Team
Network for Children’s Rights
PRAKSIS
Refugee Legal Support
Refugee Rights Europe
Refugees International
Refugee Support Aegean
SolidarityNow
Terre des hommes Hellas