

Mistreatment of detainees and asylum seekers widespread in Europe

By Jean Shaoul
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A report by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) details the shocking abuse and mistreatment of detainees, particularly asylum seekers and juveniles, in some of Europe's detention centres. It warns that prison guards had carried out reprisals against detainees who had spoken about their ill treatment to the CPT.

The CPT visited detention centres in 25 of the 47 members of Council of Europe to examine conditions relating to the treatment of detainees. These included prisons, police stations, holding centres for immigration detainees, psychiatric hospitals, and social care homes.

Its findings are contained in *24th General Report of the CPT: European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1 August 2013-31 December 2014)*.

The CPT drew attention to the mistreatment of asylum seekers, saying that they were being held in conditions that were both inhumane and degrading, particularly in Spain, Italy and Greece, which take in the largest number.

In Greece, migrants were being held in police stations all over the country for long periods. The report cited the example of Perama Police Station in Piraeus, where two or more women were held for months in a dark, mouldy and dilapidated basement cell measuring just 5 square metres, with no access to outdoor exercise or hygiene products.

Greece's austerity measures had affected the most vulnerable members of society. There was an extreme shortage of staff, and overcrowding at prisons was widespread. Prisons were operating at two or three times their capacity, prisoners were sharing beds or sleeping on mattresses on the floor, and there was a serious lack of hygiene and access to health care. At

Korydallos Men's Prison, a wing of some 400 inmates was staffed by only two prison officers during the day, leading to mistreatment, bullying and intimidation by police officers.

The detention and mistreatment of asylum seekers is becoming a growing issue throughout Europe.

In Britain, for example, around 30,000 asylum seekers—nearly one third of them women and children—are detained every year, and the number is growing. They are isolated from the outside world, allowed only one visitor, and confined, without time limit, until their asylum cases are heard. It is not uncommon for asylum seekers to be held for as long as a year until their cases are heard. If their appeal is rejected, they are deported immediately without regard for their safety. They have no right to health care or legal aid.

A report into Britain's Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, which holds more than 400 female asylum seekers, found that nearly three quarters of the 46 women interviewed had been raped, while 41 percent had been tortured. More than half said they had been persecuted for being a woman, while 18 percent had been persecuted for their sexuality.

Such treatment is bound up with the policy of "Fortress Europe" pursued by the European Union's member states: the sealing off of the continent from the flood of refugees, the result in large part of Europe's support for the US wars of aggression against Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and covert operations in Somalia, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere.

The CPT also expressed its concern about the situation confronting those under 18 years of age. It said that the deliberate ill treatment of juveniles by law enforcement officials remained a real concern in a number of countries.

There were credible allegations of detained juveniles being ill treated, including being kicked, slapped, punched or beaten with batons at the time of apprehension (even after the juvenile concerned has been brought under control), during transportation or subsequent questioning in law enforcement establishments. It was not uncommon for juveniles to become victims of threats or verbal abuse (including of a racist nature) while in the hands of law enforcement agencies.

It recommended that juveniles should not be subject to police questioning without a lawyer or trusted adult, held in law enforcement establishments for more than 24 hours, housed in large dormitories or placed in solitary confinement as a disciplinary measure. That the CPT should make such recommendations speaks volumes for the conditions its investigators observed.

Of great concern to the CPT was that their previous reports had been ignored, some of their previous recommendations had not been implemented, and prisoners or detainees who spoke with their investigators faced reprisals from guards.

Reprisals took the form of undue restrictions on basic entitlements, solitary confinement for fabricated disciplinary or security reasons, placement in worse conditions of detention, withdrawal of support for early release, assault and other kinds of ill treatment. This had occurred in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Moldova, Russia, Spain, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Ukraine.

One prisoner in Ukraine had allegedly been subjected to severe beatings after the CPT's previous visit to the establishment and been made to shout to other inmates—while he was being beaten—that he would never again complain to the CPT. The CPT, which has no powers of sanction, called on the authorities to prevent the risk of further intimidation and to protect witnesses and “whistle-blowers.”

CPT President Letif Hüseyinov said, “Intimidation or retaliation against persons the CPT has interviewed may not only violate their human rights but also strikes a blow to the preventive mechanism established by the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture.”

The CPT report has attracted little media attention—only *Deutsche Welle* reported it—and no public response at all from the political authorities responsible for this terrible state of affairs.

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