

Refugees face catastrophic conditions in Italy and Greece

By Martin Kreickenbaum
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The human rights organization Amnesty International has accused the Italian security forces of using torture and ill-treatment to force refugees to submit to fingerprinting.

Their report shows how refugees who have risked life and limb to reach Europe, seeking protection, are denied all rights and are subjected to arbitrary treatment by the authorities. They are chased along the border fences, which have sprung out of the ground like mushrooms. They are interned for months in reception camps, which only exist because there is nowhere else for them.

Amnesty International interviewed a total of 174 refugees in Italy, 24 of whom stated that they had been ill-treated by the police. In 16 cases, they have been beaten. A 25-year-old Eritrean woman reported that she had been struck in the face by police officers until she agreed to be fingerprinted.

A 16-year-old from Sudan was abused with electric shocks: “They used a rod to give me electric shocks. Many times on the left leg, then on the right, the chest, the abdomen. I was too weak, I could not defend myself, and then they took my hands and placed them on the fingerprint machine.”

A 16-year-old and a 27-year-old reported they had been tortured on their genitals. The older one said he had initially received electric shocks from the security forces in Catania in Sicily, and was then forced to strip. “I sat on an aluminium chair, with an opening in the seat,” he said. “They held me firmly by the shoulders, squeezed my testicles with pliers and pulled twice. I cannot tell you how painful that was.”

All the abuse documented by Amnesty happened in so-called “hotspots,” the registration centres established by the European Union in Italy and Greece within the last year. The EU’s aim was to prevent refugees making the onward journey to the rest of Europe, and ensure that an asylum application was made in the first country of arrival, as laid down in the Dublin II treaty.

Amnesty regards these restrictive policies as the cause of the ill-treatment of refugees. “EU leaders have driven the Italian authorities to the limits of what is legal—and beyond,” explained Amnesty’s Italy expert Matteo de Bellis, during the presentation of the report. “As a consequence, traumatized people who have landed in Italy after an agonizing journey confront flawed procedures and in some cases, repugnant ill-treatment by the police.”

In the hotspots, refugees are not only mistreated during the registration process, they are also deprived of their right to apply for asylum. Registration is used to select refugees by ethnicity.

Those who, solely on the grounds of their nationality, are suspected of coming to Italy as “irregular” migrants are separated from those regarded as having good prospects for a successful asylum claim.

The interview takes place without providing any information about the asylum process and without any legal support. Arriving completely exhausted and often traumatised by their flight, refugees are questioned immediately upon their arrival in the hotspots, completely unaware that this could have an immediate bearing on their future. Refugees, who, following this short interview, are refused the right to lodge a claim for asylum, are then presented with a deportation order.

In this way, under pressure from the EU, the Italian authorities have been able to increase the number of deportations, and also through repatriation agreements with various countries of origin in which human rights are routinely ignored. Only in August, the Italian government reached such an agreement with the government of Sudan, resulting in refugees deported by Italy arriving at the airport at the Sudanese capital Khartoum only to be arrested immediately by security forces.

Matteo de Bellis sharply criticized the refugee policy of the European Union. “The hotspot approach that has been devised in Brussels, and is run in Italy, has increased the pressure on the bordering states, not decreased it,” he said. “It leads to the abhorrent violation of the rights of desperate and vulnerable people, for which the Italian authorities directly and the European leaders are politically responsible.”

And this is especially the case as the resettlement programme agreed to by the European Union a year ago has not come into effect. Of the 160,000 refugees who were supposed to be transferred to other EU member states at that time, only some 6,000 have been moved. In total, since the beginning of the year, some 158,000 refugees have reached Italy via the Mediterranean.

In Greece, the situation confronting refugees is no less catastrophic, especially on the Aegean islands where some 16,000 have been interned in hotspots for months. The camps, which were only supposed to house 8,000, are completely overcrowded and lack basic amenities. Recently, even drinking water was being rationed to maintain reserves.

According to official figures from the Greek government, 8,500 refugees have lodged asylum claims on the Aegean islands, but have to wait months for them to be processed. Of the 600 officials promised by the EU to assist with asylum claims, only a tiny

portion have materialised, so that only 60 to 70 cases a day can be processed.

Protests continue to increase in the camps, with the refugees mainly directing their anger at the officials and facilities of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), which is primarily responsible for refugees being stuck in the camps.

On August 24, refugees protesting at the Moria camp on Lesbos, where some 7,000 are being kept, set fire to four EASO containers. Two days later, refugees on Chios attacked EASO containers, throw stones and burning blankets. Three containers were destroyed, and EASO officials had to be evacuated.

“It is no coincidence that the camps are burning,” according to the head of the UNHCR office in Greece, Philip Leclerc. The European Union is well aware of the extremely tense situation. A report by the European Commission seen by news magazine *Der Spiegel* notes that the staff of EU agencies and aid organizations face serious problems on the ground. This is why many EU states have withdrawn their agreement to send additional asylum support staff to Greece.

The EU has cynically calculated that the permanent internment of refugees on the islands is a means of deterrence. When the Greek government announced the transfer of refugees from the hotspots to the Greek mainland, to reduce the pressure a little, this was sharply criticised, especially by the German government.

The interior ministry in Berlin told *Die Welt*: “It must continue to be made clear that for the overwhelming number of new arrivals, being housed on the mainland is not a consideration, but that the processing of asylum claims takes place on the Greek islands.” Improvements in the camps should “be made primarily by expanding their capacity on the islands.” In other words, the Merkel government could not care less about the fate of the refugees. They should continue to be kept in inhuman conditions and without rights, imprisoned in camps.

Recently, the number of refugees coming from Turkey to the Greek islands increased slightly. In the last three months, more than 10,000 refugees arrived who had to be accommodated on the islands.

Without any legal recourse to leave Greece, more and more refugees are trying to get to central Europe illegally via Bulgaria and Serbia. However, at the Balkan Summit at the end of September, the EU made it unmistakably clear that the Balkan route was being hermetically sealed. To that end, the EU border agency Frontex was expanded and additional police officers and soldiers deployed to Bulgaria and to Serbia, which is not a member of the EU.

Some 7,000 refugees remain stuck in Serbia, and can move neither forward nor back. Of these, 1,200 have occupied an abandoned warehouse in Belgrade, and are attempting to survive the bitter winter there. Migrants who attempt to go to Hungary are hunted down by the police, beaten up and then shipped back to Belgrade without any due process.

The French government has also announced that following the dismantling of the so-called “Jungle” refugee camp at Calais, other such informal camps would also be forcibly cleared by the police. In particular, this affects a tent camp in Paris, near the “Stalingrad” metro station, between the 10th and 19th

arrondissements. There, more than 2,000 refugees, mainly from Afghanistan, Sudan and Eritrea, are holding out with virtually no state support. They are mainly supported by charities, who bring food and hygiene supplies.

President François Hollande had previously announced that France would not tolerate any more “Jungles,” and only those with a valid claim to asylum would be accommodated. In Paris, the refugees in the tent camp are to be taken to a new reception camp where there is space for just 400.

An Afghan refugee from the tent camp expressed his incomprehension regarding the police action. Speaking to the AFP news agency, he said, “If they aren’t going to provide us with any accommodation, why do they destroy our tents?”

Meanwhile, the ruins of the former Calais refugee camp have witnessed considerable unrest. The 1,500 remaining refugees, who are all minors, are protesting that they are not being transferred to the UK, as promised, but being taken to reception camps in France. Following the police clear-out of the “Jungle,” the youth and children had been permitted to stay in some containers they had erected themselves, hoping to be reunited with family members in Britain.

However, the British government has maintained its harsh stance, excluding family reunification even for minors. “In Calais, no further requests for transfers to the United Kingdom are being processed,” an official statement read. “All cases and emigration towards the UK are only being processed at the special reception camps for young people.”

When the youth realized that they were not being brought to Britain, their anger grew. Armed with sticks and stones, they marched into the former camp, damaging vehicles and throwing stones. The police arrived with a large contingent of special forces and drove the young refugees back with tear gas.

Michael McHugh, who works with unaccompanied minors, told the *Guardian* that there were more military-equipped police at the camp than social workers, teachers or therapists. “These are the most at-risk children in Europe,” he said.

However, the answer of the European Union to the millions who have had to flee the imperialist wars and conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen or Sudan consists of sealing off the border even more tightly, refusing the right to asylum and using police-state methods.

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