

Video shows Greek authorities performing illegal “push backs” at refugee crossing

By George Gallanis
30 December 2019

In an exposure of the nightmare confronting refugees seeking passage into Europe, footage published by the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* shows Greek authorities performing illegal “push backs” at the Greek-Turkish border in northeastern Greece. The footage confirms what refugees and non-government groups have described as taking place for years.

Push backs stand in violation of international law and violate both the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Geneva Convention. International law states that refugees have the right to asylum processing and cannot be forced to return to a country that does not guarantee their safety. In this case, the many fleeing to Greece are escaping violence and possible death from imperialist-instigated war in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The push backs flow from the anti-refugee policies of the right-wing New Democracy (ND) government, inherited and built upon from policies and attacks on refugees by the previous pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government. The pretensions of Syriza as being left were used as cover to ram through austerity measures and increase attacks on desperate refugees. Such a bitter experience makes clear that the defense of refugees must be waged by the international working class not only against right-wing parties such as ND but also against pseudo-left groups like Syriza, which represent the interests of the upper middle class and the financial elite, not the working class.

Footage from a total of eleven videos shows masked men, some donning military garb, transporting groups of migrants and refugees from the Greek side of the Evros River to the Turkish side. The footage is from a security camera on the Turkish side and a cell phone camera, possibly from a Turkish border official. Of the latter, the man is holding a cell phone as he walks along the Turkish side of the Evros. People, likely refugees, appear. On the

opposite side of the river, masked men can be seen pulling an inflatable boat from the water into the Greek side. The man filming is heard yelling “no deport” in English.

According to researchers at Goldsmiths University who analyzed the videos for *Der Spiegel*, the footage’s metadata places the date of the video recordings on September 17, 2019, between 10:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

For years, refugees have spoken out against the Greek government for performing push backs. Moreover, six current and former security authorities informed *Der Spiegel* the Greek military had previously been carrying out the illegal deportations which are now being performed by Greek police—or Greek citizens. The push backs seen in the videos were likely carried out by Greek police. The nearest police station is only a few kilometers away.

Meanwhile, documents from the Turkish Interior Ministry estimate from October 2018 to October of this year that approximately 60,000 refugees were illegally deported from Greece.

A United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention visited 20 detention facilities, some housing refugees, in Greece between December 2 and December 13. The group confirmed with lawyers representing migrants and non-governmental groups that push backs are taking place, stating some migrants attempting to apply for asylum in Greece from Turkey “are arrested, detained in very poor conditions, and summarily returned across the Greece-Turkey land border.” “We understand that it’s not occasional. In fact, we understand that it’s a long-standing practice dating back several years now,” said Leigh Toomey, vice chair of the group.

But for those who make their way into Greece, a possible new nightmare awaits them. While the UN group will be releasing a final full report in the coming year, its preliminary findings point to severe overcrowding at

refugee camps, continuous pretrial detainment in which refugees are not given a fair trial and are instead placed in detention based on the testimony of a police officer, and children being tried as adults and placed in overcrowded detention centers. “We are also seriously concerned that unaccompanied minors and other children are being detained and treated as adults. Detention of children in the context of migration is prohibited under international law and should be discontinued,” the report said.

The barbaric mistreatment of refugees did not appear overnight. Greece’s ND party is only intensifying the brutal anti-refugee policies of the previous Syriza government.

Under Syriza, the Moria detention camp on Lesbos was described by the *BBC* as “the worst refugee camp in the world.” Seven thousand refugees, many of them children, are forced to live in a camp designed to hold 2,000. Refugees and migrants in Greece have faced attacks by riot police, forced evacuations from their homes and severe overcrowding.

In March 2016, Syriza brokered a deal with the EU and Turkey establishing Greece as a prison for refugees. The agreement declared all refugees entering Greece through “irregular” routes, such as traveling across the sea by boat from Turkey to Greece, will be deported back to Turkey, unless a refugee can prove he or she will be persecuted if returned to Turkey.

Political responsibility for the conditions facing refugees in Greece lies with Syriza and the ND government, which is continuing the brutality against refugees. According to the UN, since the start of the year, over 55,000 asylum-seekers have arrived from Turkey. Monthly arrivals increased from 1,486 in February to 10,551 in September.

The growing influx of refugees is being met with more repression. ND is in the process of establishing the Unified Border Surveillance Agency, a new arm of the Greek state that will further expand the surveillance, attacks and deportation of refugees coming into Greece.

Last month, Greece’s Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced the hiring of 400 new guards to be stationed along Greece’s land border with Turkey and another 800 new guards for the Greek islands.

In November, ND announced plans to construct new detention centers on mainland Greece by July 2020. The ND government plans to move 20,000 refugees from the Greek islands to the new centers. While promoting the centers as more humane and cleaner refugee centers, in reality the centers will function as new jails, in which the

ND will have more control over the refugee population. The detention centers will be completely closed off and will operate like the closed detention centers in the United States. Hidden behind walls, detention guards will operate with limited scrutiny. Guards will be allowed to carry out attacks on refugees with impunity.

The move has been condemned by humanitarian groups. Medecins Sans Frontieres’ Christos Christou told reporters, “The detention centres, the closed centres...may become prisons at the end of the day, and will not treat people as humans. They will treat them as problems.”

Martha Roussou, senior advocacy officer for the International Rescue Committee in Greece, said, “The government’s announcements represent a blatant disregard for human rights. The creation of closed facilities will simply mean that extremely vulnerable people, including children, will be kept in prison-like conditions, without having committed any crime.”

And the Greek branch of Amnesty International said, “In reality, we are talking about the creation of contemporary jails with inhumane consequences for asylum seekers, and more widely, negative consequences for the Aegean islands and their inhabitants.”

The growing attacks on refugees are being coupled by the whipping up of anti-immigrant xenophobia by ND. While Greece’s working class confronts increased austerity measures and some 33 percent of Greek youth face unemployment, the ND government seeks to blame the woes confronting the Greek working class and youth on refugees, a process increasingly echoed across the rest of Europe and the United States.

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