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## GREECE SAYS IT'S SPEEDING UP ASYLUM CASES AND RETURNS

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Greece said it has begun to enforce fast track procedures for new asylum applicants and is stepping up deportations to Turkey, but aid organisations have voiced concerns that applicants' rights are being trampled upon.

Greece deported 53 asylum seekers in January, police told Al Jazeera, slightly higher than the monthly average of 45 since the EU-Turkey Statement went into effect in April 2016. Turkey and the European Union are obliged to readmit irregular migrants from each other under that agreement.

"The rules have changed. We're no longer open to people who don't have a refugee profile," said Notis Mitarakis, minister for immigration and asylum, on Friday as he headed for the island of Chios, his constituency and one of five eastern Aegean islands bearing the brunt of new arrivals.

"We're now taking at least first instance [asylum] decisions within four weeks," he said.

Greece has long been pressed by its EU partners to speed up asylum procedures. Under a new asylum law that took effect on January 1, asylum applications on the five islands of Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros and Kos are to be adjudicated within 28 days, including appeals. The regular procedure that applies in the rest of the country allows six months for first instance decisions and three months for appeals.

Aid organisations are concerned that the government may be taking short cuts in an effort to hit the tighter deadlines.

"We are already receiving reports of difficulties rejected asylum seekers on the islands [are having] to prepare the needed document of appeal and application to remain [on Greek soil], without legal aid and in such a short time frame," said Boris Cheshirkov, spokesperson for UNHCR Greece.

The new timeframe allows up to 10 days for appeal, but requires applicants to state their reasons in legal terms and in Greek. Human rights lawyers said that is impossible without a lawyer, and authorities cannot always provide one as required by law.

"Under law, new arrivals and asylum seekers in detention have access to legal aid," said Cheshirkov. "However, in practice, the needs are greater than the availability of free-of-charge legal aid."

The Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), a legal aid charity that has helped thousands of asylum applicants, has observed serious irregularities.

"We have a case in Moria [on Lesbos] who went to his interview and it was clear that he couldn't communicate because the interpreter did not speak his language. He received a first instance rejection on grounds of refusing to cooperate," said GCR's Alexandros Konstantinou. "He is Senegalese and did not speak French. Despite this, his interview took place in French while he protested repeatedly that he needed to speak his local language."

GCR has appealed this and other cases with similar irregularities, with suspicions the government may not be acting in good faith.

"What is being attempted is the reduction in the number of asylum applicants, not through the fair adjudication of their cases but through their rejection on technical grounds \* That's our assessment," said Konstantinou.

The new asylum law, passed last in late 2019, allows the government to reject cases if applicants refuse to move to a camp, fail to divulge a change of address or miss a deadline.

Aid groups are also concerned that as resources go to the fast-track procedure, a backlog of 87,000 first instance asylum cases and 38,000 appeals cases will fester.

"We are concerned that this may increase the pressure that [applicants] face," said Cheshirkov.

The European Asylum Support Office last week announced it will boost its personnel in Greece from 500 staffers to 1,500 - and assign a third of its budget to Greece.

### *Pressure on the government*

New Democracy came to power in July, promising to curtail refugee flows from Turkey. Greece received more than 74,000 asylum seekers last year, almost two-thirds of the total entering Europe.

A record 42,000 of them are still on Greece's five east Aegean islands with reception centres, as the government allows only those designated "vulnerable" to move to the mainland before their asylum application is processed. Under the new law, even they will now have to remain on the islands, placing facilities under even greater pressure.

On January 22, local and central government services on the islands were shut down in protest against the high refugee population.

"Our basic goal is to reduce [refugee] flows," migration minister Mitarakis said during the strike, days after stepping into the job. "This will be achieved through strengthening border protection, speeding up asylum, increasing returns [to Turkey] and closed pre-removal centres."

New Democracy is also boosting border protection. The Hellenic Coast Guard is spending 33.8 million eu The defence ministry has requested tenders for a 2.7-km fence that would be anchored along the waterline between Greece and Turkey and rise 50cm above sea level, to prevent small craft from approaching Greek shores.

Islanders are broadly in agreement with these ideas and the speeding up of asylum processes, but they strongly disagree with government plans to replace open reception centres with larger, locked-down camps.

"We demand [the] closure of the camps and no new camps," said Kostas Moutzouris, prefect for the North Aegean, echoing a manifesto put out by the mayors of the five islands this month.

"The important thing is not the size [of the camps]. The important thing is to stop new people from coming. While that's still happening, what is the point of a discussion about size? We will need more and more camps," he said.

Comparatively easily accessible from Turkish shores, Greece and its islands arguably face the biggest refugee challenge in the EU. In the first three quarters of last year, it processed almost 11 percent of all EU asylum cases, far above the 1.6 percent officially expected of it on the basis of population size and GDP.

In the coming weeks, Greece is expected to submit a white paper for a common asylum policy that would allow front-line states such as Greece, Italy and Spain to share new asylum applicants with other EU members.

To prepare the ground for that discussion, Greece is for the first time reaching out to migration hardliners in the EU. Deputy foreign minister Militadis Varvitsiotis met his Polish counterpart earlier this month. "Come with your proposals," he said. "We are ready to discuss them."

Cabinet ministers in Athens have often proclaimed that corners have been turned and deals struck in the tortuous migration portfolio. The view in the east Aegean is different.

"Nothing has changed. It's business as usual," said Moutzouris. "I don't see anything happening. Just words. I'm an optimist, but there have to be certain actions."ros (\$37m) on between 15 and 18 high-speed patrol vessels and hiring a thousand new officers.

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