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Subject: Greece's National Action Plan on Asylum Reform and Migration Management
= *Information by Greece*

This note provides the executive summary of the progress report of the activities on the implementation of Greece's National Action Plan on Asylum Reform and Migration Management, covering the period of January - May 2013.

GREEK ACTION PLAN ON ASYLUM AND MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROGRESS REPORT

January – May 2013

Introduction

In line with the EU Law and in view of an efficient Common European Asylum System, Greece has achieved to implement the concrete set of measures of the revised Action Plan on Asylum and Migration Management, presented at the Informal Council in Dublin last January.

The significant progress made, as depicted in this Report, clearly indicates the country's determination to implement an effective asylum and migration policy, as well as its ability to fulfill its obligations, to abide to the European Law and to deliver as promised to the Member-States and the European Commission.

Greece already implements the new legislative instruments on asylum and reception through two new independent services that guarantee the effective examination of asylum applications and provide first reception services to new arrivals.

Furthermore, Greece continues to implement a successful management programme to its external, thus European, borders, while at the same time ensures access to international protection for all illegal migrants entering its territory.

A standardised framework has been adopted for all pre-removal facilities through concrete measures that, inter alia, include the improvement of catering, cleaning and security services. At the same time, inadequate pre-removal facilities have been closed down, while in depth improvements have been scheduled for the existing ones.

International Organisations and NGOs are actively involved in order to provide to all illegal migrants information regarding their rights and obligations, translation, legal, medical and social services.

Within the scope of the relevant EU regulations, Greece has developed a concrete plan for open accommodation facilities for asylum seekers, vulnerable groups and unaccompanied minors.

In order to fully implement its asylum and migration policy, Greece has launched an in depth cooperation with the European Commission and the Member-States for the adequate use of available EU funds.

Greece reiterates that the asylum and migration issue is not only a Greek problem but is mainly a European one and, therefore, Greece has, in various occasions, appealed to the principle of solidarity among Member-States for an in depth cooperation on political and funding issues.

Since mid-January 2013, Greece has implemented the following measures (detailed description is provided with the *Prioritisation Exercise Document*)

Chapter 1: First Reception Service

- The **First Reception Center** in Fylakio, Evros (Greek-Turkish-NE land border) is operating since mid March and will be fully operational by the end of June. Two (2) additional centers with a capacity of 200 and 120 places respectively are under construction in Lesvos and Attiki and will be fully operational by the end of 2013.

- Two **Mobile Units** will be operational in June, in cooperation with NGOs and UNHCR GREECE.
- The **Screening Centers** in Chios and Samos have been re-furnished and operate since April 2013. Their operation is based on outsourcing services to NGOs, cooperation with International Organizations and a part of the existing personnel of the Central First Reception Center.

Chapter 2: Reception of Asylum Seekers, Vulnerable Groups and Unaccompanied Minors

- An amendment of Law 3907/2011 (pending for vote before the Parliament) will authorize the First Reception Service to establish and operate open reception facilities for vulnerable groups and asylum seekers.
- Two **open accommodation centers** are already available in the district of Athens. The facilities, situated in the district of Athens will accommodate vulnerable groups, mainly unaccompanied minors. Both facilities will be operational by October 2013, as its running costs have been secured for a year under EEA Grants. After the first year of operation, the running costs will need to be covered by the New Multiannual Financial Framework (2014-2020).
- Two more centers suitable for the accommodation of asylum seeker families have been identified (in Attica and Serres). Since both premises need large scale refurbishment (4.800.000€), funding through the use of **Structural Funds** will be sought. It should be stressed that the operation of these Reception Facilities will be feasible once their running costs will be secured under the New Multiannual Financial Framework (2014-2020).

Chapter 3: Asylum in Greece

- An effective management of the ‘**backlog**’ is in process. All 52.334 pending cases have been digitized and processed. After archiving 17.170 cases as inactive, the Appeal Committees are processing since January the remaining 35.164 cases. By the end of May, 3.330 cases have already been examined with a recognition rate for international protection of 25,28%. In order to accelerate the process, the Appeal Committees have recently been doubled to 20 through the financial contribution of the EASO/UNHCR project. All “backlog” cases are to be concluded by mid 2014.
- The **new Asylum Service** and the **new Appeals Authority** have completed the process of staffing, housing and equipping the five regional asylum centers (in Athens, Thessaloniki, Alexandroupoli, Orestiada and Rhodes). Special note should be made to the training programme, coordinated with **EASO and UNHCR**, for the asylum caseworkers and Appeals Authority rapporteurs.
- The Asylum Service, in particular the regional office in Athens and the unit located within the First Reception Center of Fylakio, will begin operations on **June 7th 2013**. Additional offices and mobile units are being set up in Mytilene (aka Lesbos), Samos and Chios.
- However, serious **budget shortfalls** remain to be urgently addressed, relating to interpretation services, securing free legal assistance for asylum seekers. Urgent funding of these services could be secured under current ERF Annual Programmes, ERF Emergency Measures 2013 or EEA grant.

Chapter 4: Pre-removal Centres

- The pre-removal centres, operating under the responsibility of the Hellenic Police, constitute the specialised facilities for the detention of those illegal migrants who are subject to the return procedures under the provisions of the **Return Directive 2008/115/EC**.
- Five (5) **pre-removal centres** are operating in Amygdaleza, Corinth, Paranesti, Xanthi and Komotini, with total capacity of 5000 places. The establishment of four (4) additional pre-removal facilities at Lesvos, Western Macedonia, Ritsona and Karoti- Evros, will increase the total capacity to 10.000 places by the end of 2014.
- The plan to reach 10.000 places by the end of 2013, described in the revised Action Plan, has been changed due to difficulties to finance the running costs of the centres.
- In order to improve the quality of services regarding catering, cleaning and security of pre-removal facilities, a set of **high standards** has been included in the tendering procedure which will be launched by the end of June.
- **Old and non appropriate facilities** are gradually **closing down** - Venna, Elliniko (Old), Aspropyrgos and Tycherio detention centers have been already closed down.
- The significantly **low return rate**, due to difficulties and delays in the issuance of the necessary travel documents by the Consular Authorities of the third countries, extends the detention period and creates the need for increased capacity in pre-removal centres.

Chapter 5: Returns

- Greece is vigorously supporting a major IOM **Voluntary Repatriation Programme**, launched in August 2012, in order to assist up to 8.500 immigrants, who have registered an interest in returning to their respective countries of origin. The procedure for the activation of the option (extension), as stipulated in the ongoing Grant Agreement with IOM, is in progress and is estimated to be completed by 15-6-2013.
- The Hellenic Police is implementing, through the Repatriation Department of the Attica Aliens Division, an **additional returns programme**, aiming at the repatriation of approximately 6.000 illegal immigrants who do not or no longer fulfil the conditions for entry and/or stay in the country.
- In total, a **26,90% increase** in returns has been achieved during the first quarter of 2013, compared to 2012, out of which **60,40%** has been achieved through the IOM Greece Voluntary Repatriation Programme.
- The **obstacles** posed by various Consular Authorities (mainly Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Morocco, Algeria and Iran) concerning undue delays and, in many cases, refusal on issuing travel documents, “act as a brake” to a further increase of the return rate. This is a practical and a political issue that should be dealt and discussed by all Member States and the European Commission.
- **Readmission Agreements** on mainly European (E.U.) and/or National (bilateral) level will contribute importantly to the performance of returns’ rate.

Chapter 6: Border Control

- Greece is committed to the implementation of an **integrated border management system** in order to achieve effective control and surveillance of its external land and sea border.
- **Operation “Shield”** in Evros, started on the 2nd of August 2012, has led to a **96,8% reduction of migration flows** towards the Greek-Turkish land borders. The Operation, currently ongoing with manpower of 735 police officers, **will be extended** at least until the end of 2013. The funding of the extension period will be covered by funds from scheduled actions which have not been or will not be implemented on time, by the two APs (2012, 2013) of the EBF.
- The **extension of the existing integrated border surveillance system**, in progress in the area of Evros (i.e. thermal cameras), focuses on the improvement of border management, the reduction of the deployed human resources (i.e. police officers) and, consequently, the limitation of the respective costs. The project of the Orestiada P.D., covering 35km of the river border, will be completed by the end of 2013, whereas the study for the project of the Alexadroupolis P.D. (i.e. 90 km borderline surveillance), is expected to be ready by the end of June.
- The establishment of **five (5) Regional Operational Centres** at the **Eastern Aegean Islands** (Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Kos and Rhodes) will be completed by the end of July.
- The installation of the **VIS equipment** at the border crossing points is close to completion.

- The tendering process regarding the procurement of the necessary equipment for the operation of the **European Advanced Passenger Information System** (APIS) has been launched.

In **conclusion**, it needs to be noted that the revised Greek Action Plan of January 2013, which is a living document, has been prioritized but in order to be fully operational additional funding is needed. The Revised Greek Action Plan on Asylum and Migration Management replies to all relevant political objectives.
