

Council of Europe
The Secretary General

Strasbourg, 17 March 2011

Dear ~~Prime~~ Minister, *Dea George,*

The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) issued a public statement on 15 March concerning the conditions of detention of irregular migrants and the state of the prison system in Greece. This is a highly exceptional step by the CPT, one that is not taken lightly. I am writing to you to comment on the issues raised in the statement.

As regards irregular migrants, the Council of Europe is well aware of the challenges Greece is facing, especially during the past year with the increasing numbers of people crossing into the Evros region from Turkey. I believe that Europe needs to demonstrate its solidarity on this issue and provide the necessary support to your authorities to cope with the problems involved. This is why I have repeatedly stated that countries in Europe should refrain from returning asylum seekers and irregular migrants to Greece until your country is in a position to ensure proper conditions for these people. I will therefore also publicly endorse the CPT's call for the European Union to assist Greece to this end.

I understand that a new Asylum Law has been adopted and plans are in motion to establish a series of screening centres for irregular migrants in order to identify rapidly those persons who are genuine asylum seekers. Further, the new law foresees the possibility to issue a formal suspension of removal for persons who cannot easily be deported to their country of origin, entitling them to basic rights until their departure can occur. These are positive developments and I would be very interested to learn about the timetable for the implementation of the new law and whether you foresee any obstacles in this respect.

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Mr. George Papandreou
Prime Minister of Greece

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At the same time, I must urge you to take the necessary steps to ensure that conditions of detention for irregular migrants are improved, in the light of the CPT's recommendations; this is particularly necessary in the Evros region. I understand that part of the problem stems from a lack of coordination between the various Ministries responsible for migration issues. Your Government informed the CPT in January 2010 that irregular migrants would no longer be held in police stations, where conditions are only suitable for stays of 24 hours or so. I should be grateful to receive information on the current prospects for putting an end to the prolonged detention of irregular migrants in police stations.

The CPT has also raised serious concerns over the state of your country's prison system, pointing to a deterioration in the conditions of detention in recent years and saying that, at present, prisons are not providing safe and secure custody for inmates. The Committee says that a strategic plan is required. This is a strong warning signal requiring action by your Government and I ask for your commitment in this.

Mr. Prime Minister,

I am fully aware of the very difficult economic situation which your country is facing. I nevertheless believe that it is of outmost importance to redress the conditions of detention of irregular migrants and the state of the prison system in Greece as a matter of priority. I can assure you that the Council of Europe is ready to help your Government and to offer its assistance in this regard.

Yours sincerely,



Thorbjørn Jagland