

## **How can we overcome the dead-end situation on the refugee issue in Greece?\***

**By Spyros Rizakos, Head of Ngo AITIMA**

The period when refugees massively transited Greece on their way to central and northern Europe was succeeded by the gradual closure of the Balkan route and the implementation of the policy marked by the EU-Turkey Joint Statement. Thus, since last March the approximately 60.000 refugees who had already entered and continued entering Greece with the aim of moving on to other European states suddenly realized that they had to stay in Greece. Most of the refugees who had come to Greece before March 20 – approximately 50.000 persons – are now staying in the mainland, whereas the other 10.000 who crossed our borders after 20 March are obliged by the authorities to stay on the islands.

Today, seven months after these developments, the situation that has been formed raises serious concerns.

Despite the Greek authorities' efforts, a big part of the refugees located in the mainland are still accommodated in temporary camps which do not meet the standards for dignified living conditions. At the same time, there is significant delay in the registration and examination of the asylum applications.

The approximately 10.000 refugees located on the islands face the above but also other more acute problems. On the one hand, their number exceeds the capacity of the Reception and Identification Centers (usually referred to as hot-spots) – something which results in degraded living conditions – and on the other hand, their asylum applications are being registered and examined with serious delay as well. However, the situation gets even worse in their case by the fact that they are not allowed to leave the islands and, most importantly, by the serious possibility of their readmission to Turkey, where their rights are not respected.

It comes naturally that this situation causes impatience, frustration and nervousness to the refugees, a big number of whom qualify to be transferred to another European country by virtue of the family reunification and relocation procedures. Their protests are becoming more and more frequent. Especially on the islands, where the problems are more acute, these protests become even more intense, often leading up to damages of the facilities and violent incidents with the security forces.

At the same time the situation that has been shaped obviously has a great impact on the dynamics developing in the local communities. The impact on the islands is even graver, where more than 10.000 refugees have been stranded for more than seven months because of the EU-Turkey Joint Statement. This dead-end situation favors the growth and mobilization of extremist groups which have already organized

demonstrations, that have led up to incidents against refugees and Ngo staff in some cases. Similar phenomena have been tracked in the mainland as well. It is not incidental that racist attacks are being recorded again. It becomes obvious that the potential prolongation of this situation will feed even more this kind of incidents causing dangerous transformations in local societies.

How can we overcome the dead-end situation that has been formed?

**The cornerstone for resolving the problem is taking advantage of the existing international, EU and national legal frameworks that regulate the examination of the asylum applications.** If we implement it rigorously – uninfluenced by the expediencies and the constraints of the current European politics– we will ensure refugee rights while at the same time safeguarding social cohesion.

The first step towards this objective must be the fast registration of the asylum applications as well as the fastest possible processing of the family reunification and relocation cases. Thus, a big part of the refugees who are stranded at the moment in Greece would be transferred to other European countries. It is baffling that this has not constituted the Greek authorities' priority from the very beginning, since it would unquestionably facilitate the offering of more adequate reception conditions to the refugees and would blunt the tensions.

The second step should be the fair examination of the asylum applications which would lead to the regularization of the refugees and subsequently to their social integration. Although this step seems very simple and self-evident, the fair examination of the asylum requests submitted on the islands has been compromised after the EU-Turkey Joint Statement. This happens because these requests are mainly rejected as inadmissible by the Greek authorities on the premise that Turkey, from where the refugees came, constitutes a first country of asylum or a safe third country to which they can be readmitted. At this point, it should be stressed that all human rights organizations in Greece and Europe agree that the EU-Turkey Joint Statement and Turkey's classification as a first country of asylum or a safe third country contravene with both international and the EU law. Even more so when the situation in Turkey has deteriorated significantly since the latest developments, at which time it also suspended the enforcement of the European Convention of Human Rights. The fair examination of the merits of asylum applications submitted on the islands-which is in accordance with international, EU and national law- will relieve the very exacerbated situation prevailing there, since the asylum applications will be considered admissible and the refugees will be allowed to leave the islands.

Let us all hope that the competent authorities will come to the realization that their action must be swift and coordinated in that very direction, so that no more precious time is wasted!

\*This article was posted on the website of the Greek newspaper Efimerida ton Syntakton on October 30, 2016.