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PRESS RELEASE

Re: Call on the Government of Greece to investigate and end the push-backs of Turkish refugees

Following the coup attempt on July 15 2016, the Turkish government declared a state of emergency and began to target any individual opposing the government, the Hizmet Movement (known also as Gulen Movement) in particular. According to a report released by the United States Department of State on human rights practices in Turkey in 2018 (2), between July 2016 and July 2018, Turkish Ministry of Justice reported that “investigations” were opened into 612,347 persons, the majority of whom were affiliated with the Hizmet Movement. After the coup, the government operated prisons became filled with people who were detained and awaiting trial, and began to operate over capacity. 28 individuals disappeared, some kidnapped in broad daylight in front of their families. Reports of torture, mistreatment, and abuse skyrocketed from tens in 2017 to more than 2,500 in 2018. 51 people lost their lives under suspicious circumstances in official custody.

In addition to opening investigations into persons associated with the movement, the government has made many attempt to limit its citizen’s physical freedom and freedom of speech. 155,000 individuals whose family members were allegedly connected to the Hizmet Movement were banned from traveling, and the government has investigated over 45,000 social media accounts and blocked more than 50,000 websites. Furthermore, during the first six months of 2018, Twitter received 8,988 court orders and requests from authorities to remove content.

The persecution carried out by the Turkish government through witch-hunts has led many of the citizens to escape Turkey using illegal methods as their their passports were confiscated. So far, the asylum-seeking Turkish citizens who cross the Evros to escape from a tyrannical regime in Turkey are embraced humanely by the Greek authorities. However,

there have been recent reports of several push-back cases, in which groups of Turkish asylum-seekers were beaten by masked men and forced back to Turkey. In the last couple of months, there have been several reports that Turkish asylum seekers who entered Greece through the Evros river were beaten by masked men and pushed back into Turkey.

According to Advocates of Silenced Turkey (AST)'s report¹ on this issue, the pushbacks raised concerns among human rights activists and those who are sensitive to such matters. Ten Greek refugee NGOs urged for the immediate investigation of reports of collective expulsions in Evros region. In addition, Rebecca Harms, a member of EU Parliament, stated that this situation violates international law.

International human rights law protects these families. Greece is a party to many human rights treaties and conventions as part of the European Union and United Nations, thus has an obligation to protect these people when they reached Greece soils. More specifically, both under the EU and UN legislation, Greece cannot return, deport or expel these refugee families knowing that they will suffer from the Turkish government's persecutions.

Alfred De Zayas, Former UN Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order and Professor of International Law at Geneva School of Diplomacy, states that "Looking at the current situation in Greece, it must be emphasized that Greece is obliged to comply with its commitments under international human rights law and refugee law. Members of the Hizmet Movement fleeing from the Turkish government's harsh persecutions fulfill the definition of a refugee under the 1951 Refugee Convention and have every right to demand protection from deportation to Turkey, where they face persecution."

Moreover, Professor Anwar Alam, Senior Fellow at Middle Institute with Policy Perspectives Foundation in New Delhi, also emphasizes that "In this context it must be brought to attention that fleeing Hizmet or non-Hizmet people from Turkey to Greece via Evros River or Aegean Sea enjoy legal right of protection after crossing into Greece border. EU Asylum Procedures Directive (Directive 2013/32/EU) states that a first country of asylum is a country where the person has already received international protection – a refugee-like protection, or another kind of "sufficient protection" which must at least include non-

¹ Advocates of Silenced Turkey. (2019). *Refugees and Latest Push-Backs in Greece*. New Jersey, USA: Advocates of Silenced Turkey. <https://silencedturkey.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/REFUGEES-AND-LATEST-PUSH-BACKS-IN-GREECE.pdf>

refoulement guarantees (Article 35 of the Directive). Therefore, Greek authorities are urged to comply with this legal injunction and investigate the issue of masked men who are pushing back the refugees to Turkey.”

Migrant pushback is a growing concern, especially in the Greek-Turkish land border. Push-backs, as the word conveys the message, is stopping migrants in the borders and pushing them back by force to the country where they came from. According to Article 4 of Protocol 4 (Art 4-4) to the European Convention on Human Rights, push-back is defined in legal terms as “The well-established definition of collective expulsion is any measure of the competent authorities compelling aliens as a group to leave the country, except where such a measure is taken after and on the basis of a reasonable and objective examination of the particular cases of each individual alien of the group.”

Therefore, we urge the Greek authorities to review their border security procedures and give serious consideration to maintaining safety of asylum seekers to remain in compliance with international laws and regulations. The Greek authorities should investigate the pushback and violence allegations whether those allegations are against border security guards or non-governmental violent groups.



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