Greece: Ongoing crackdown on migrants’ rights defenders as pushbacks of people on the move continue

Statement

Geneva, 28 January 2021 - The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) is deeply concerned about the criminalisation of human rights defenders and humanitarian organisations providing assistance and defending the rights of migrants and asylum seekers on Lesbos island and urges the Greek authorities to immediately put an end to the outlawing of solidarity with people on the move.

On September 28, 2020, the Lesbos Police Directorate issued a press release indicating that 33 human rights defenders from four international NGOs working on migrants’ rights in Lesbos were to face charges including “espionage”, “violation of state secrets”, “creation of and participation in a criminal organisation” and “violations of the migration law”, for allegedly “having provided confidential information to refugee flows from Turkey via closed groups and internet applications under the guise of humanitarian action”. The press release further pointed out that the Greek intelligence service as well as the Greek counter-terrorism unit of the Hellenic police were involved in the investigations. Moreover, the text stated that the NGO members did carry out those illegal activities, thereby violating their presumption of innocence.

The OMCT underlines that the names of the 33 human rights defenders were not mentioned in the press release. Furthermore, at the time of publication of this statement, none of the individuals concerned have received any official communication regarding the ongoing investigation against them.

Nonetheless, the criminal file and the names of the allegedly investigated NGOs were leaked to several Greek media outlets following the publication of the Lesbos Police’s press release. This triggered a smear campaign against the NGOs Mare Liberium, Sea Watch and Josoor International Solidarity, as well as against the project Alarm Phone and the association FFM e.V, whose names appeared in the leaked information. Moreover, several newspapers inaccurately reported that the 33 human rights defenders had been arrested.

“The persecution of rights defenders and organisations on charges of “facilitation of irregular migration” and even “espionage” attacks the essence of the right to defend rights in Greece”, said Gerald Staberock, OMCT Secretary General. “Our intelligence and counter-terrorism services must protect our security and rights. When ‘they protect us from defending rights’ it is not only cynical but outright dangerous for democracy”.

Greek authorities publicly stigmatise the work of those defending migrants’ rights by equating their work with human smuggling. In a press conference held on December 8, 2020, the Greek Minister for Migration and Asylum, Mr. Notis Mitarachi, accused the NGO Aegean Boat Report of facilitating the illegal crossing of migrants from Turkey into Greece. The unfounded accusations levelled against the NGO were categorically rejected by Aegean Boat Report. In an interview with the newspaper The Times in December 2020, Mr. Mitarchi further claimed that Al-Kahir Foundation and Aegean Boat Report are funding human traffickers to help migrants reach Greece.

Non-governmental organisations that work on migrants’ rights play an essential role to defend the human rights of people on the move in a context of systematic violations of international human rights standards by the Greek authorities, including illegal pushbacks and collective expulsions of migrants, as recently denounced by the UN Committee Against Torture (UNCAT).

The Greek state has consistently failed to submit the information concerning the alleged intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders and humanitarian workers and volunteers that was required by the UNCAT.

We strongly condemn this crackdown on civil society actors in Greece and call on the authorities to put an end to the ongoing criminalisation of NGOs and volunteers working in the country in the field of humanitarian assistance to migrants and asylum-seekers, and to guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights and humanitarian activities without fear of reprisals.
The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) is the largest global NGO group actively standing up to torture and protecting human rights defenders worldwide. It has more than 200 members in 90 countries. Its international Secretariat is based in Geneva, Switzerland.

For more information, please contact:

Iolanda Jaquemet, Director of Communications
jj@omct.org,
+41 79 539 41 06