



Barbed wire fences surrounding the refugee reception facilities on the islands. Credit: Matthew Cassel

THE REALITY OF THE EU-TURKEY STATEMENT

How Greece has become a testing ground for policies that erode protection for refugees

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 HRS CE T FRIDAY 17 MARCH 2017

One year ago, European states closed their borders along the Western Balkan route and European Union (EU) leaders put in place the EU -Turkey Statement ¹ (the Statement), a so-called temporary measure to stop irregular migration to Europe. Now EU leaders are declaring their approach a success.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Oxfam are providing humanitarian response on the Greek islands and mainland, and as our experience clearly shows, the context on the ground is far more troubling and complex.



INTRODUCTION

This brief² outlines three areas which illustrate how Greece has become a testing ground for policies that are eroding international protection standards:

- i. The growing difficulty in seeking international protection and the diminishing access to fair and efficient asylum procedures;
- ii. A convoluted and constantly changing process that lacks oversight, checks and balances; and
- iii. The increasing vulnerability among those stranded in Greece.

Beyond the deeply concerning situation in Greece, the EU is looking

Greece put safeguards in place to uphold international standards but they are now slowly being removed, under pressure from European leaders,⁶ as they do not facilitate the goal of sending all migrants back to Turkey. Greek Law 4375/2016, put in place to implement the Statement, exempts vulnerable cases—e.g., unaccompanied children, single parents with minor children, and the elderly—and those eligible for family reunification in another EU state from accelerated border procedures that truncate each step of the process. To date, these groups have been de facto exempt from the admissibility procedure. This exemption enables them to lodge a claim for asylum in Europe, and frees them to move from the overcrowded islands to sites on the mainland. In December, however, the European Commission and Greek authorities released a Joint Action Plan (JAP)⁷ proposing to remove these safeguards. Thirteen Greek and international organisations⁸ have urged the Greek Parliament not to do so.

Exacerbating matters is the indisputable need for legal counselling and assistance on the islands. There is very little reliable and

Various responders working on the islands explained that to their knowledge, there is no reliable system in place for reporting such

elsewhere and a model for the future. As evidenced by this paper, it is not possible, even in the European context, to apply this model while complying with international standards and ensuring asylum seekers' rights. EU leaders should not replicate this model or expect that it will work elsewhere. Basic human rights and the right to seek

TO THE GREEK GOVERNMENT:

viii.

¹ European Commission, "EU-Turkey statement", 18 March 2016, Press release 144/16 <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/>

² Based on observations from ongoing programming and joint research conducted on the islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos in February and March 2017.

³

