

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Amnesty International urges the Greek Government to carry out a transparent and thorough investigation into the circumstances which led to loss of life in the Aegean

Amnesty International expresses its profound concerns over the loss of life of migrants and refugees including several small children near the island of Farmakonisi on 20 January 2014. In the early hours of Monday, 20 January 2014, a fishing boat carrying 28 migrants and refugees including many small children capsized and sank near the island of Farmakonisi. The group consisted of 25 Afghans including ten children aged between one and nine years old and three Syrians.

Sixteen individuals including a child were rescued by the Greek coastguard. However, the bodies of a mother and a child belonging to the group were found by the Turkish authorities the next day. According to news reports, the bodies of two more women and two children washed up today on Turkish shores leaving six children still missing. Amnesty International has been informed that the survivors received medical treatment on the island of Leros and since then –except one- have been held in the Leros police station.

According to the official statements of the Greek coastguard, the fishing boat carrying the migrants and refugees was found not moving and with no lights on near the island of Farmakonisi in the early hours of last Monday. The authorities said that in view of the bad weather conditions, a decision was taken to tow the boat to the island of Farmakonisi and that during the towing operation the migrants and refugees on board moved to the one side of the boat leading to its capsize and sinking. A search and rescue operation followed the incident which still continues.

On the other hand, the testimonies survivors provided to the UNHCR according to a press release issued by the organisation, resemble the testimonies Amnesty International has previously collected on push-back operations of the Greek coastguard – the practice of summarily turning back a group of migrants across the border towards Turkey. UNHCR press release reports that the survivors alleged their boat was being towed by the Greek coastguard with great speed towards Turkey when it capsized. The Greek coastguard, however, denied these allegations in a subsequent statement this afternoon and reiterated that the boat carrying the refugees and migrants was towed towards the island of Farmakonisi, not back towards Turkey.

Push-back operations carried out by Greece deny people the right to explain their individual circumstances and raise any protection or other concerns. As such, they are in breach of Greece's international obligations and EU law.

Amnesty International has continuously called on the Greek authorities to stop these push-back operations not only because they are completely unlawful but because they put people's lives at risk as a result of the way they are being carried out.

Testimonies collected by Amnesty and published in a [previous report](#) point to a blatant disregard for human life shown by the Greek coastguard during push-back operations carried out in the Aegean Sea.

Interviewees who described being returned to Turkey from the Aegean said that their inflatable boats were rammed, knifed, or nearly capsized while they were being towed or circled by a Greek coastguard boat. They said their boats' engines were disabled and their oars removed, then they were just left in the middle of the sea. Life-endangering practices were also reported by people caught after crossing Greece's land border with Turkey along the river Evros.

Amnesty International calls on the Greek authorities to initiate a thorough, transparent and independent investigation into the incident of 20 January 2014 off the coast of Farmakonisi Island; bring to light the circumstances which led to loss of life and prosecute those who are responsible.

The organisation further calls the Greek government to investigate all allegations of collective expulsions (push-backs) and ill-treatment on Greece's land border with Turkey and in the Aegean and prosecute officials involved.

The recent loss of life on the Aegean is yet again another reminder of the dangerous journeys migrants and refugees have to endure to reach Europe. Since August 2012, at least 136 refugees, the majority of whom were Syrian and Afghan, lost their lives in at least twelve known incidents attempting to reach Greece by boat from Turkey. EU and member states should ensure effective search and rescue at sea by focusing their efforts into saving lives rather than protecting borders.

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