



Border Violence Monitoring Network

“A FOOTBALL BETWEEN THE GREEK AND TURKISH ARMY”: EVROS ISLETS, ONE YEAR ON

9 August 2023

One year ago, on 9 August 2022, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) published a [statement](#) on the conditions of a transit group, composed largely of Syrian nationals, who were stranded on [an islet](#) in the Evros river for more than three weeks, many in urgent need of medical attention. Despite civil society organisations (CSOs) filing for Interim Measures at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), and a Rule 39 measure being indicated on the same day mandating that Greek authorities provide the group with food, water, adequate medical care and ensure that they were not removed from Greek territory, the transit group reported being violently pushed back to Turkey.

This was not an unprecedented case; BVMN had published a [report](#) just weeks before analysing violent practices deployed by the Greek authorities which had quickly become systematically applied to groups stranded in the Evros river. BVMN data gathered through monitoring distress calls at the Evros border since the beginning of 2022 reveals that 40% of all calls pertained to groups stuck on islets, of which half resulted in an indication by the ECtHR mandating Greece to launch search and rescue operations. Yet only 37% of these groups were successfully rescued. Significantly, 65% of these islet rescue operations occurred in a short time frame between May and June this year, directly coinciding with the Greek election period, one month of which Greece was led by caretaker government until the second round of elections were complete. During this time, the [Hellenic Red Cross](#) also deployed units to assist in [rescue operations](#), a practice which had not been seen in prior records, nor has it been observed since the end of June and the victory of Nea Demokratia. The remaining 63% were either not provided with assistance and lost contact with CSOs, or reported being pushed back to Turkey. It can be presumed that many of those who lost contact were also pushed back.

A year later, BVMN is publishing another statement pertaining to a transit group of approximately 52 people who have been stranded on a [small islet near the village of Lagyna](#) on Greek territory since 13 July 2023, including children as young as three years old, pregnant women and elderly individuals. The group [reached out to Alarm Phone](#) on 21 July 2023, reporting that they required immediate assistance, having already been stuck for eight days in dire conditions while Greece suffered a [heatwave](#). Alarm Phone alerted the Greek authorities, Frontex and UNHCR on the same day, however, on the 22 July 2023, were informed that despite “*extensive searches by the Greek Authorities and Frontex joint patrols in the location*



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indicated by the coordinates area and also more widely, no human presence was found". Considering the significant number of [cases](#) where the Greek authorities have made [similar statements](#), despite the [extensive funding they receive from the EU for border technology](#), along with [reports](#) that the transit group saw and heard drones flying over them, this seems implausible. Instead, it aligns with a pattern of behaviour by Greek authorities whereby groups are strategically and intentionally left without assistance or declared impossible to find, likely as part of an attempt to conceal pushback operations.

Several days later, on 28 July 2023, the transit group informed Alarm Phone that they were being attacked by what they described as *"police and mercenaries"*, sending [a video](#) evidencing the abuse. Together with the Rule 39 Initiative, Alarm Phone filed an application for Interim Measures to the ECtHR, which was indicated on 2 August 2023, obliging Greece to provide food, water and medical assistance to the group. Once again, on 3 August 2023, the Greek authorities claimed that they were unable to find the group despite their continuous searches. In desperation, the transit group reported attempting to cross to the Greek riverbank, where they were intercepted by police. After several calls by Alarm Phone staff to nearby border guard stations, which predominantly went unanswered, a woman from the transit group reached out to Alarm Phone again sharing an extremely distressing story. She reported that the group were driven for half an hour before being heavily beaten, including the women and elderly individuals, with attackers stripping the women of their clothes and forcing the men to stare at them undressed, before returning them to the islet. These reports are consistent with a well established pattern documented by BVMN data regarding pushbacks from Greece; since 2019 196 pushback testimonies have been collected; 92% of those contained reports of physical beatings and 58%, reports of individuals being forcibly undressed. Additionally, she reported severe concern that two male members of the transit group had been so heavily beaten that she feared they were dead, as they were still missing from the group. Again, this would be consistent with BVMN data which has monitored six reported deaths relating to islet cases - from [drowning](#), [delayed medical assistance](#), or [insect bites](#).

On 7 August, the group reported another attack by *"mercenaries"* who subsequently pushed them back to Turkey, after which the Turkish army reportedly forced them back onto the islet. Stating that they had become *"a football between the Greek and Turkish army"*, at the time of writing, the transit group remain in extreme distress, having experienced significant physical and psychological abuse, with members of the group - including a pregnant woman - in critical medical condition. This pattern of behaviour is far from new, having been [first documented by BVMN in November 2020](#), it has endured and systematised over the past three years. Not only can these reports be considered indicative of serious breaches of *non-refoulement* and of international and Union human rights law, the significant accounts of violence and degrading treatment could likely amount to a breach of Article 3 ECHR.



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In just a year of closely monitoring these cases, BVMN and other civil society actors are able to bring forth [documented evidence and testimonials](#) of continuous, systematic breaches of the rule of law in Greece. The state response to this is utterly devoid of any accountability, relying on [haphazardly executed investigations](#) that serve only to evade scrutiny, and characterised by a persistent failure to comply with European Court rulings that has gone unmentioned by EU stakeholders. It is time to come to terms with what being “[Europe’s shield](#)” really means to the European Commission, happy to outsource their dirty work to Europe’s frontline Member States or strategically placed Third Countries who, in turn, willingly play their part. The reality for people on the move is instances of extreme violence, of torture, and often of death, while the EU’s readiness to turn a blind eye to the evidence in the name of “internal security” renders them wholly complicit

We urgently call upon the Greek state to comply with the ECtHR ruling ([Application no. 29970/23 S.H.N. and Others v. Greece](#)), rescue the transit group and provide immediate access to food, water, medical care and international protection systems. We seek to reiterate that an intervention by the ECtHR should not be necessary to ensure the safety of men, women and children seeking to access international protection in Europe. Access to asylum procedures, including an individualised assessment, right to appeal and effective legal remedy should be granted to all persons regardless of status, country of origin, age or gender.

We call for an urgent, truly independent investigation into the persistent breaches of human rights and excessive use of force deployed by the Greek authorities to prevent people from accessing international protection systems. This investigation must have clear outputs whereby perpetrators are held accountable for the violations they have perpetrated against people on the move.

As always, we stand in solidarity with all people on the move and call for an end to the systematic and illegal practices at Europe’s borders.