



# GREECE



The number of undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Greece has been increasing over the past few years. In 2008, 44,610 undocumented migrants were arrested crossing the Turkish border into Greece. The official number of foreigners living in Greece is 800,000 but this number does not include the estimated 200,000 undocumented migrants. Often escaping conflict and instability in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Palestine, migrants frequently endure extremely poor living conditions when they reach Greece. Currently, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is providing psychosocial support to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers kept in three detention centres: Pagani on the island of Lesbos, Venna in Rodopi, and Filakio in Evros, both in Northern Greece.

## CONTEXT

According to Greek law, undocumented migrants may be detained for a period of up to 12 months in closed detention centres. The usual period of detention ranges between a few weeks and three months. Sanitary conditions and healthcare coverage in detention centres range from basic to extremely poor. Psychosocial support is completely absent. No provisions are in place to meet the needs of vulnerable groups like women, children, chronically ill patients or victims of torture. Once out of detention, migrants, including unaccompanied minors, are left to survive on their own and often end up homeless or living in squalor. Undocumented migrants are not entitled to access the public healthcare system for anything but emergencies. Even then, they often don't have the money required to pay for treatment and medication.

## MSF IN GREECE

### *Assistance to migrants in Patra*

Patra is the main port of exit for migrants hoping to reach Western Europe. Between May 2008 and August 2009, MSF ran a daily clinic in the shantytown of Afghan

migrants, and organised mobile clinics in other locations to assist migrants from Africa. MSF offered primary healthcare and psychosocial support and contributed to the improvement of living conditions. The project was closed in September 2009 following the demolition of the shantytown by Greek authorities and the dramatic decrease of the migrant population in the area.

### *Work in detention centres*

Between June and September 2008, MSF worked in Pagani detention centre, on the island of Lesbos. A total of 1,202 migrants received medical care and psychosocial support. MSF intervened to improve basic living conditions. At the end of September 2008 MSF closed the project in Lesbos, publicly deploring inadequate cooperation of regional authorities which restricted MSF's access to the migrant population.

After renegotiations with the authorities in August 2009, MSF started new psychosocial support programmes in three detention centres: Pagani, Venna in Rodopi, and Filakio in Evros, both in Northern Greece. In the summer of 2009, between 500 and 1,200 migrants were detained at the Pagani detention centre, a third of whom, were

unaccompanied minors, women and children. Around 600 migrants are detained in centres in Venna and Filakio. MSF psychologists and interpreters/counsellors working in the detention centres offer support in individual and group counselling sessions. Most of the migrants come from unstable regions, like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq and Palestine.

Many migrants have been through traumatic experiences during their trip to Europe. Often, they have no choice but to use the services of smugglers, putting their lives at risk.

MSF patients in the detention centres present symptoms of anxiety (28%), depression (26%) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (11%)<sup>1</sup>. Our beneficiaries have experienced uprooting and suffer from multiple losses and uncertainty about the future. Detention aggravates their fragile mental health status. Vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors, children, women and victims of torture are at increased risk. The difficult living conditions, overcrowding, confinement, and the threat of forced repatriation, contribute to feelings of distress. Over the past four months, MSF has witnessed detained migrants who, out of despair, have been driven to hunger strikes, protests and sometimes self-injury or even suicide attempts.

In detention centres, living conditions are often unacceptable and degrading. In Pagani, overcrowding had led to a dramatic deterioration of living conditions and to the onset of protests. The number of migrants detained was often more than 800, reaching up to 1200 in a facility with an official capacity of 275. There was often only one functioning latrine per 100 or 200 people. During periods of overcrowding many migrants had to sleep on dirty mattresses on the floor, covered by stagnant water from overflowing showers. The migrants were rarely allowed to go out to the yard and families were detained separately. In Venna and Filakio detained migrants are faced with inadequate distribution of food, clothes and hygiene items, as well as irregular and insufficient access to the yard.

The Pagani detention centre closed temporarily for renovations in November 2009, following repeated MSF appeals to authorities to address the humanitarian emergency taking place there. MSF teams are still present in Lesbos following up the situation. Another MSF team continues to work in Venna and Filakio detention centres. MSF has raised concerns with authorities regarding the poor living conditions in detention centres, the limited provision of medical care, the absence of mental health services, the ineffective care of unaccompanied minors, the lack of screening procedures and the absence of a follow up system for medical cases.

*“I was two months pregnant when I arrived. I have been in the detention centre for 45 days. I lost my baby here. I was bleeding a lot. They took me to the hospital but when I came back nobody checked on me. I cannot stop crying now. I cannot stay any longer inside the cell.”*

ERITREAN WOMAN (AGED 19), PAGANI DETENTION CENTRE (15/08/09).



*“My entire family, my parents, my three brothers and my sister, were killed when a bomb fell on our house. I went to answer the phone and then the bomb fell. The roof collapsed over the room my family was sitting in. There was a lot of dust. I could see their hands under the debris. I could not see their faces. I only saw the face of my youngest brother. Now, here, I need to go outside the cell because inside the cell I think of the bad things that happened at home.”*

PALESTINIAN BOY (AGED 16), PAGANI DETENTION CENTRE (2/10/09).

*“I was in Istanbul locked up in a basement for 40 days. I did not see the sun for 40 days. The smugglers were asking for more money. They threatened that they would keep me there forever if I did not pay the extra money. The smugglers would make you very scared. They threatened us all the time saying that they would kill us. Once, they hit me on the head and arm with a thick piece of wood. I couldn't move my arm for two weeks.”*

AFGHAN MAN (AGED 24), SURVIVOR FROM SMUGGLING VESSEL THAT SANK OFF THE COAST OF LESBOS IN OCTOBER 2009, KILLING 10 PEOPLE.



<sup>1</sup> DATA FROM MSF MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD AUGUST TO OCTOBER 2009