

Human rights violations on the island of Farmakonisi

Alarm Phone demands immediate transfer of all refugees stranded on the Greek military island Farmakonisi – Travellers stuck on the island face inhumane conditions

We strongly condemn the human rights violations that occur on the island of Farmakonisi and nearby at sea. We demand the immediate transfer of refugees from Farmakonisi to other islands where support is available and where people are not subjected to military control. We also demand an adequate reception infrastructure and that the UNHCR, NGOs and civil solidarity groups are granted access to this military island.

In the past weeks, the Alarm Phone reported repeatedly about the life-threatening situation that travellers face who, after crossing the Aegean Sea, stranded on different Greek islands for hours or days until getting rescued by Greek authorities. One island where many people frequently strand and where they, at times, get stuck for several days and nights, is the island of Farmakonisi. The situation for travellers landing there is different from the ones on all the other islands in this area, due to the island's special status.

Farmakonisi is an uninhabited island, a military observatory and restricted area. A military special monitoring unit is stationed there and the Ministry of Defence is its responsible authority. The current situation on this island is particularly dramatic for refugees due to the absence of any reception infrastructure. Newly arriving people are dealt with only by the military until the port authority from Leros arrive to pick them up and transfer them. Access to Farmakonisi in order to address the basic needs of newcomers has never been granted to NGOs and the UNHCR. For a long time now, the UNHCR is seeking to receive the permission to set up a first reception facility on the island.

Usually, refugees are not offered required amounts of food, water or adequate shelter. Sometimes they even receive neither food nor water for several hours. In many distress cases when people reported to us from the island, they stated that they had to wait without blankets, none were given even to the smallest infants. And of course, considering that many refugees are survivors of war, facing military forces after the traumatic experience of crossing the sea by boat is a difficult situation in itself.

The personnel of the coastguard on Leros, who are responsible to transfer travellers off Farmakonisi, often do not respond in a timely manner to distress calls of stranded groups. We have testimonies suggesting that many were even forced to stay on Farmakonisi for several days and nights before being transferred.

Moreover, travellers have reported ill-treatment by the military personnel on the island, stating that they had been threatened and beaten. We acknowledge that compared to the situation in the past, such cases of violence seem to occur less frequently. Yet, impunity seemingly characterizes any human rights violations connected to this island until today.

However, many human rights violations on Farmakonisi concerning illegal push-back practices have been exposed by different human rights groups throughout the last three years. Newcomers were detained on the island, sometimes mistreated and even tortured (1). Farmakonisi became specifically well known when, on the 20th of January 2014, eight children and three women died when their vessel capsized near the island while

being towed by the Greek coastguard, in what seems to have been a pushback operation in breach of international law. In July 2014, survivors and families of the victims made an appeal for justice after Greek courts stopped all further investigations in Greece (2). In January 2015, the case was brought before the European Court of Human Rights.

We as the Alarm Phone nowadays receive many emergency calls from Farmakonisi. We continue to offer support in co-operation with the responsible authorities, but we also document testimonies of alleged human rights violations and pass them on not only to the authorities for further internal investigation but also to the public.

Each individual failure to assist a person in danger and each separate ill-treatment should be brought to justice. Human suffering needs to take an end. Refugees are no territorial invaders or military targets but people in need of international protection.

We repeat once more: We strongly condemn any human rights violations that occur on the island of Farmakonisi and nearby at sea. We demand the immediate transfer of refugees from Farmakonisi to other islands where support is feasible and where people are free. We also demand that the UNHCR, NGOs and civil solidarity groups are granted access to this military island to set up an adequate reception infrastructure.

Freedom of movement is everybody's right!

Alarm Phone, 15 December 2015

Additional information:

Farmakonisi (Greek: Φαρμακονήσι) lies south of Agathonisi, east of the islands of Leipsoi, Patmos and Leros, and north of the islands of Kalymnos and Pserimos.

- (1) Pro Asyl published a very detailed report on push-backs in November 2013 and exposed several such instances near Farmakonisi, including cases where the travellers had already landed on the island of Farmakonisi and were pushed back afterwards. See: http://www.proasyl.de/fileadmin/fm-dam/1_EU_Fluechtlingspolitik/proasyl_pushed_back_24.01.14_a4.pdf
- (2) The appeal of the survivors and families can be found here: <http://www.proasyl.de/en/home/farmakonisi-we-demand-justice/>

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