

PRISON TIME FOR UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE MINORS IN GREECE (27/10/2016)

Specialised establishments are overwhelmed. The authorities and NGOs are doing everything they can, under difficult conditions, to improve conditions. This is part two in our series of exclusive reports on migrant minors.

When Ahmed set foot in Greece, he immediately felt safe. The last thing this young 17-year old Syrian expected was to find himself in prison. Yet that is what happened. A few steps from the Macedonian border, close to Idomeni, he was stopped by the Greek police. They took him to a prison where he was detained with adults for 40 days. “One day, I wanted to watch television, like the adults. All of a sudden, the guards grabbed me and led me to an interrogation room. They yelled at me, hit me in the back.” Today, he still does not know the reason for this punishment.

“Why was I locked up? “

“No one explained to me why I was locked up”, states this Syrian, who has been living in a centre in Athens since March. This adolescent with the slender frame comes from Daraa, in the south of Syria. Before the war, his parents fled to Lebanon, and his brother to the United Kingdom. “I was alone and I wanted to find my brother”. At that time, in February, the border was still open.

According to Greek law, when the police stop an unaccompanied refugee minor, the police become responsible for him until a spot in a suitable centre becomes available. Yet, centres are at capacity. That’s why, supposedly for their own protection, minors are first taken by the police to closed institutions and must often live alongside adults. There are currently 1,100 slots in centres adapted to the needs of minors travelling alone, but at the same time 2,500 young people are awaiting housing in Greece, according to the numbers from local authorities. The “chronic shortage of suitable centres” creates a situation where children must “endure prolonged arbitrary detention”, “often in degrading conditions”, revealed the Human Rights Watch report published last September. In mid-October, 381 unaccompanied minors were living in detention centres, often for months, according to Human Rights Watch, a human rights organisation. Thirteen of them were even being officially temporarily detained in a police station. Another 1,246 lived in precarious camps or centres with nationals of their country of origin, without any protection or care. Seventy-nine percent of them come from Syria, Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Especially vulnerable

Most are young people, but children are also among them. One unaccompanied minor out of five is under 14. Foreign unaccompanied minors are considered to be especially vulnerable. Without protection or care, they quickly fall victim to sexual violence, criminal networks and human trafficking. Human Rights Watch considers that it is vital not only that they be able to live freely, but especially that they benefit from psychological counselling and legal aid, and that they have the possibility of engaging in recreational activities. However, it appears this is often not the case. Most have not even met their guardian yet, observed the human rights organisation.

Other organisations could not find harsh enough words to describe the situation: Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children and the Greek NGO Praksis highlighted in a joint report that Greece was failing in its mission to allow minors to enjoy their fundamental rights. The European Commission also finds the situation problematic: Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, recently asked during his State of the Union speech that the EU and Greece “take swift and effective measures to protect unaccompanied minors. Should Europe fail to do so, it would betray its historic values”.

But why specifically is the question of refugee minors in Greece now coming up again in the news? Simply because the problem has become particularly blatant over the course of the summer. Prior to March, most minors - but also adults and families - passed through Greece to go directly to central Europe. But since the closure of the Balkan Road in the spring and the entering into force of the EU-Turkey agreement, asylum-seekers who arrive on the Greek islands in the Aegean cannot continue on their way, and children and adolescents, like the others, remain stuck in Greece, where centres to accommodate them have quickly filled up. The Greek authorities, already overloaded, must now take care of this group, which must be looked after in a specific way, and they are unable to.

“I AM SO TIRED OF WAITING” (27/10/2016)

Hamdou, 16, is sitting in a large garden, surrounded by orange trees and lemon trees, a three-story villa rising behind him. A few young people are playing ping pong. Hamdou is pale, with chubby cheeks that make him still look like a child. A Syrian, he has been living for seven months in this shelter operated by the NGO Praksis and located in Mitilini, the capital of the island of Lesbos, with 23 other adolescents. He shares a room, which holds four double beds, with seven other young people. The ceilings of this neoclassical villa are high, and two computers have been set up in the living room. The young people can learn English and Greek, they are seen by a psychologist, and a lawyer provides them with legal assistance for their asylum application. Hamdou was lucky.

When he arrived on the island of Lesbos eight months ago, fleeing the war in Syria, his accommodation was distinctly less pleasant. In the registration camp of the Moria hotspot, just a few kilometres from Mitilini, minors are placed in a closed institution, the “Detention Centre”. “It was like a prison”, relates Hamdou. He had just endured a long and difficult journey. For seven hours, he had walked to the Turkish border, and from there another three days to the Mediterranean coast, where people smugglers brought him to Lesbos on an inflatable boat.

Seventy-five young people currently live behind the walls and fences of this packed camp where, in all, 6,000 refugees live in an extremely small space, 20 per container. In front of each shelter there is only a small yard of gravel, where children and adolescents can move around a little.

When Hamdou lived there in March, he was not allowed to leave the centre. Now, social workers from an NGO can organise excursions for young people once a week, and there are accompanied walks around the camp every day. The atmosphere is very tense. “Here, living conditions are not good, which

also affects the psychological condition of the children and young people”, observes Konstantina Belteki, a Praksis social worker. At the end of September, a young boy living here was raped in the camp, and four other young boys were arrested.

Hamdou had to stay there 16 days, others live there for four months. Greek law allows the detention of unaccompanied migrant minors for 25 days maximum, as a “last resort”. According to Konstantina Belteki, this limit is often exceeded.

Giorgos Spyropoulos, who runs the centre in Lesbos, explains that even when children arrive in an open shelter, they often still feel confined. The processing of asylum applications lasts so long that many of them see no end in sight. Young people are affected by this uncertainty even more than adults. Hamdou also finds it difficult to tolerate this situation. “I am so tired”, he says, “so tired of waiting. I am losing so much time here”. Hamdou would like to learn German, because his brother is living in Germany. He filed an application for family reunification, but has still not received any response.

“These are very strong young people.”

“These are very strong young people, they made it through the dangers of the trip alone. They are able to survive, even despite all the traumatic experiences they have had”, states Mariliz Dialatzi, the psychologist who is seeing Hamdou and the other young people in the shelter. They do not act like typical adolescents, they are much more serious. But the permanent state of frustration is making them lose their minds.

They have a harder time than adults accepting that it’s the end of the road.

From the beginning of their escape, they have had a clear objective in mind, adds the psychologist, but they are now confronted with a huge obstacle: the processing of the asylum application, which is not moving forward. “Each time they ask why this is taking such a long time, each person, their friends, their lawyers, the asylum departments, give them a different answer. In the end, they do not trust anyone anymore.” It’s a very painful experience. Their vision of their future disappears, many become depressed or harm themselves.

EU Member States could help minors by giving them priority when they are grouping refugees from Greece. In fact, 64,000 refugees should have already been sent to other EU countries to relieve Greece. Up until now, there have only been 4,000, among which only 75 unaccompanied minors. Germany only welcomed four. “Member States must accelerate the speed of transfers and give priority to children and unaccompanied minors”, says the European Commission. Human Rights Watch, but also Save the Children and Doctors Without Borders, also think that family reunification requests filed by minors must be processed on an expedited basis.

This would free up spaces in centres in Greece.

At the same time, the conditions of accommodations on site must be improved, emphasise human rights organisations. It was for this, among other reasons, that the European Union made 115 million euros available to Greece in September. Thanks to these funds centres are currently being expanded,



but often this involves temporary accommodation. To go faster, priority is given to building separate protective zones within camps to house minors and provide care from social workers 24 hours a day.

“Creating the most accommodations possible is one of our greatest challenges”, explains Galit Wolfensohn from UNICEF, an organisation for the protection of children. From New York, she was sent to Athens to help the Greek government improve its infrastructure. The priority is to give children and young people living in centres the protection and assistance they need, such as psychological counselling, for example. UNICEF is also working with Greek authorities to create structures that will make it possible to take in children and young persons for the long-term; for example, by living with a host family.

According to Galit Wolfensohn, the Greek legal guardian system also needs to be reformed. That’s because prosecutors, who overnight become the guardians of a large number of refugee minors, are overwhelmed. Often, they do not even meet the children one on one, write the experts at Human Rights Watch, and many young people do not even know they have a guardian. EU rules nevertheless require that a guardian be appointed within five days after the application for asylum.

There too, improvements must be made in the future: EKKA, the authority under the Ministry of Social Affairs responsible for refugees, wishes to register, train and evaluate legal guardians. “The Greek authorities acknowledged that action had to be taken”, affirms Galit Wolfensohn, the expert from UNICEF.

For Ahmed, the Syrian who spent 40 days in detention and now lives in a centre in Athens, this is no longer important. Things have finally changed for him. For a few weeks now he has known that he will be able to join his brother in Birmingham, as the British have authorised his family reunification application. They have not seen each other in two years. What will he want to do then? Learn English, he says. For now, he does not have any other projects, he adds, a smile on his lips.