

Protests at Greek Detention Camp Highlight State Violence Against Immigrants in Europe

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Protests over the weekend by immigrant workers in Greece highlight growing state violence against immigrants throughout Europe.

On Saturday evening, dozens of immigrants at the Amygdaleza detention centre near Athens refused to return to their sleeping quarters and set fire to their mattresses. The inmates were protesting against the inhumane conditions prevailing in the camp and a decision allowing their detention to be extended by 12 to 18 months.

According to one media report, electricity at the camp had been cut off a number of days previously. This suggests a deliberate provocation by state authorities.

Inmates threw water bottles and stones at police, who stormed the camp using teargas and stun grenades. After prolonged clashes, the police then arrested over 50 of the 1,620 immigrants in the camp.

The Amygdaleza detention centre, located next to a police academy at the foot of Mount Parnitha, has been criticized by human rights organizations for its abominable treatment of refugees. Photos of the camp show young detainees standing behind two-metre high fences topped with layers of razor wire.

Following the latest clashes, Sotiris Douros, the mayor of the region, told the media he regarded the rebellion as inevitable and noted that the municipal government had long warned about the risk of such an event. He described conditions at the camp as unbearable. Speaking to Greek television, the head of the local police federation warned that such incidents would reoccur.

Detainees at the Amygdaleza camp went on hunger strike in April to protest their detention conditions. Their strike was joined at the time by another 2,000 immigrants held at centres around the country.

Following the hunger strike, a number of immigrant defence and human rights groups held a protest outside the Amygdaleza camp in May. After a group of ten people was allowed to go inside the camp, the defence groups issued a statement declaring: "Detention conditions remain appalling ... Overcrowding, minimal hygiene, incomplete or no courtyard, inadequate or no medical care, cases of police brutality. Thousands of people are herded into the cells of the detention centre without any concern for their welfare, without even any rights as prisoners."

The delegation concluded that the centre was a prison that “destroys fundamental rights and should be closed.”

In its annual report on human rights abuses published at the end of May, Amnesty International (AI) severely criticized Greece for its treatment of immigrants. The report specifically described conditions at the Greek immigrant detention centre in Elliniko as “inhuman and degrading.”

The same report condemned the recent building of a wall on the Greek-Turkish border aimed at deterring refugees from entering Greece. The AI report went on to criticize a total of 24 European Union states, including France, Germany and Italy, for their own grave abuses against refugees and immigrant workers.

The brutal treatment of immigrants and refugees in Greece is a product of the Fortress Europe policy adopted by the European Union, aimed at deterring all those fleeing war, political persecution and poverty from settling in Europe. The EU’s agency for the protection of European borders, Frontex, has worked closely with the Greek state and the Greek police to set up centres that are overcrowded and characterized by subhuman conditions. Only a tiny percentage of those seeking refuge in Greece are eventually allowed to remain in the country.

Since 2006 Frontex has provided Greece with extensive aid to police its land and maritime borders. Two operations—RABIT (Rapid Border Intervention Teams) and Poseidon—involved sending hundreds of European police to reinforce and train Greek police and immigration guards within the country and on its border with Turkey.

Frontex set up its first ever specialised branch office, the so-called Frontex Operational Office, on October 1, 2010 in Piraeus. The EU has also provided financing for the building of a network of detention camps across Greece.

From 2007 to 2011, Greece received €119 million (\$158 million) from the External Borders Fund and €52 million (\$69 million) from the EU Return Fund. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) also works closely with Greece to implement its “Action Plan” for the rapid repatriation of refugees trying to get into the country.

The deplorable conditions at camps across Greece that are funded by the EU are triggering protests by immigrants, which in turn are being exploited by the Greek government and media to fuel racism and divert attention from the country’s social crisis following four years of austerity measures dictated by the EU in behalf of the international banks.

In a further indication of the deadly conditions facing immigrants attempting to enter Europe, six young Egyptians drowned off the coast of Sicily at the weekend after their boat ran aground. The rickety fishing boat had been carrying more than 100 immigrants from Egypt and Syria.

According to the United Against Racism web site, a total of 17,306 asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented immigrants died attempting to set foot in Europe between 1993 and the end of last year.

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