

Report on GCR teams' visit at the New Detention Centres for Aliens in Komotini and Xanthi

In the framework of the extraordinary missions carried out by GCR supported by Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the team visited the New Detention Centres for Aliens in Komotini and Xanthi.

Mission dates: Tuesday, August 28th 2012
Sunday, September 2nd 2012

Location: Police Academies in Komotini and Xanthi.

Purpose: The visit of the New Detention Centres in Xanthi and Komotini was intended to record detention conditions on one hand and to provide information and legal consultation -primarily- to detainees on the other.

Detention Centre History: The said detention centres were established overnight beginning of August 2012, housed at the facilities of the former Police Academies in Xanthi and Komotini, respectively. A large number of police officers and border guards were forced to leave their homes overnight in order to travel to Xanthi and Komotini to guard aliens that were being deported. One police officer serving at an urban centre in Thessalia said that it had been over one month since he had last seen his wife and children. In an effort of sweeping immigrants from the centre of Athens and other big cities, those transferred are: a) sans-papiers that were found to be in Athens; b) people held in Athens detention centres; c) sans-papiers who had crossed the border through Evros River.

Number of detainees and services offered:

Detainees are 794 people in Komotini and 488 in Xanthi. Detailed briefing sessions, mainly one-to-one, were held with all detainees. Very few detainees did not express the wish to contact us. For a large number of detainees, legal action already initiated by GCR lawyers is still outstanding.

Description of the detention areas: Detention areas are the bunks of the former police academies, excluding other buildings (e.g. restaurants, cafeterias, assembly areas). Both police academies have two-storey buildings. Each storey consists of one foyer and the main living space, which includes one corridor and rooms with an average of six beds (we also saw however mattresses on the floor). Each building is narrowly surrounded by a particularly tall wire hedge that also delineates a small courtyard in front of each detention building.

Living conditions common in Komotini and Xanthi

Interpreters are not provided; as a result, communication ranges from impossible to particularly difficult. Basic communication is carried out with the help of detainees that speak Greek.

Each detainee had one sheet made of some kind of pulp and one pillow; most pillows had no pillow-cases. Toilets, the only source of potable water for detainees, are located in the middle of the main space; there is no warm water; detainees have been given one towel and flip-flops.

Food is provided by catering companies. All detainees complain about the quality of food and the lack of meat. A positive aspect is that each floor in Xanthi also includes a designated praying space. There is no dining room; detainees eat seated on their beds.

Police often resorts to violence as a means of repression. Order Reinstatement Units (in Greek MAT) vans are stationed outside each hosting centres, ready to intervene in case of disorder.

We also confirmed:

- Lack of cooperation and communication among detention and arrest authorities, which means delays in elaborating detainees' files.

Living conditions in Komotini

Water is not potable and all detainees report stomach aches; they are given 1 toilet paper every 15 days.

Among detainees, there is one heroin addict; as it had been one month since he last took his dose, he was not able to sleep and his bones ached; when he asked for medication, a police officer beat him. Detainees clean their rooms and toilets themselves.

There are no visiting hours (a detainee said -and this was confirmed by his fellow detainees- that he had not been able to see his father who had come from Athens to visit him). This detainee said that he had to take medication and money was asked from his father. Detainees complain that when police officers ask for money to buy them cigarettes or for various other miscellaneous expenses, they never give it back.

They also complain that a high-rank officer, who visited the space, perhaps the Commissioner, told them that: "for pains in the eye, the ear, the tooth or the head, there is no doctor; the doctor is there only for the dying". They complain about the lack of police supervision on each floor in building C, which leaves a "semi-wild" situation. There had been a clash between Afghans and Bangladeshis a week ago; Police officers intervened after half an hour; three people were transferred to the hospital with injuries and never came back.

There are people, who have completed three months in detention from the day their asylum request was submitted; nevertheless, they have neither been through an interview, nor have they been released.

Detainees have no clothes to deal with a weather change. Some people sleep on the floor. There are rooms that host up to 11 people, meaning that there is no space to move around. On one floor in building B, of the overall 12 toilets offered for at least 100 people, only one toilet was working; on another floor, only 5 of the 12 toilets were usable.

Detainees have spinach twice a week, which they do not actually eat as it has not been rinsed. They report that when they handed over their personal items (cell phones, money) upon their introduction in the detention area, such items were not noted down (however, items were in fact noted down in Xanthi, placed in sachets and given a reference number, a bar code etc). Thus, as detainees have no access to the phone numbers stored in their cells, they lose contact with their family and friends.

In Komotini, yarding time lasts 15-20 minutes and not every day. Detainees clean their spaces themselves. Many detainees reported problems and pain when urinating, as well as that their urine was very dark. They reported that police officers release trained dogs in the corridor to terrorise them. As detainees said, some of the police officers photographed this incident with their cell phones. There are complaints that photos of detainees have been taken also during their yarding time.

Living conditions in Xanthi

There are complaints about:

- 5-minute yarding time;
- Lack of medication;
- Beating and transfer to the hospital in a bad state;
- Serious lacks in personal hygiene and cleaning items (soaps, shampoos, detergents);
- Cleaning ladies only clean the toilets;
- Detainees constantly eat spaghetti or solely rice and bread; they have meat once a week, i.e. spaghetti with minced meat;
- Many people sleep on mattresses on the floor.

In Xanthi, 3 detainees reported a minor's beating by guards with clubs; he was injured in the eye and was then released.

Medical screening, common remarks

A team of the Hellenic Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (HCDCP) is there. Discontent was expressed about the fact that detainees ask to see a doctor and they are not allowed to do so; certain detainees report lack of medication. There have been cases of people with severe problems that were in fact transferred to the hospital, where it was confirmed that they should undergo surgery; however, hospitals refuse to operate on them unless their surgery expenses are paid. Many want to talk to a psychologist, but there is none in the Detention Centres.

Common remarks on the legal status of detainees in Komotini and Xanthi

We confirmed that approximately 20 people had legitimising documents, were legal in Greece and thus should not be detained. Data recorded in Xanthi and Komotini detention centres do not seem to correspond with the data recorded at the Aliens Directorate (Petrou Ralli); therefore, it will be impossible to relate files to actual people. As an example, all detainees from Congo are recorded alike, without making any distinction between DRC and Brazaville originals.

Hellenic Police Headquarters have not decided yet who the competent person is for issuing the decision to raise detention; (nevertheless, in Xanthi, 9 people that were immediately found to be legal were released one week ago under a decision revoking return).

When aliens were arrested, they were not given the time to take their personal items with them (in some cases, this included their shoes). Deportation decisions were issued for everybody, even for people that were under a regime of protection by the Greek state.

We recorded cases of Victims of Torture and cases of people entitled to family reunification under Dublin II; relevant requests however cannot be lodged and conveyed by the detainees themselves because of the lack of interpreters. Many have families in Athens, which they are not able to contact to tell them where they are held. Many have repeatedly tried in the recent past to lodge a request for asylum at the Aliens Directorate of Attica, yet without success because of the practice followed by the Police (only 20 requests admitted, once a week). Many do not wish to lodge a request while detained under such conditions, because they fear that they will be held longer and opt for trying again to lodge a request through Attica Aliens' Directorate.

Both in Komotini and in Xanthi, minors registered to be adults are detained together with adults.

Specific remarks on the legal status of detainees in Xanthi

Of the 100 first detainees that arrived in Xanthi, 55 were asylum-seekers, 9 non-asylum-seekers and 36 had already received a judgement rejecting their request.

Up to the date of our visit, 16 asylum requests had been lodged (13 via the police and 3 via a lawyer).

During the recent visit of the International Organisation for Migration, 28 people had requested voluntary repatriation.

Specific remarks on the legal status of detainees in Komotini

Nobody has been released and nobody has been deported.

Specific remarks regarding police officers

Higher-rank police officers were particularly genial towards mission members; officers entrusted with guarding detainees on the other hand were particularly stressed by the hygiene conditions and the fear that they could catch a contagious disease coming from detainees. At times, they were edgy and ill-tempered not only with detainees but with mission members too, openly expressing extreme views. There were some bright exceptions among officers, but unfortunately, although they were touching, these were very few.

General remarks on detention centres

The detention centre in Xanthi, when compared, is better organised than the one in Komotini. For example, detainees are able to use their cell phones to contact whomever they want and to receive money from relatives in Greece or abroad; moreover, effort has been made by OTE to find a solution to the issue of the devices' compatibility with the special call cards for calls outside Greece.

As regards detainees' rights in both detention centres, the situation prevailing confirms UNHCR's statement made years ago that Greece is now in a humanitarian crisis. We believe that these detention centres do nothing but appease the debate about cleaning urban centres from aliens, while both under the relevant EU Directive and under national law, only people on a deportation order should be held in such centres, this too being an ultimate step.

A very costly apparatus to guard and feed them has been established, without any kind of organisation, planning and efficiency. The victims of this situation are detainees and, to a certain extent, police officers that guard them. The latter, lacking training and interpreters, are called to implement a tactics that goes brutally against human rights and the purpose of Detention Centres.

Actions by the Greek Council for Refugees

- All detainees' questions were answered on the spot;
- All issues regarding detainees' legal status were noted down and were codified, to allow for subsequent reports to the authorities with a view to resolve these, both on a general and an individual level;
- The capital problems confirmed were reported to supervising guards and solutions were recommended;
- Detainees' individual cases are still monitored up their final resolution;
- GCR has been investigating ways to publicise findings, both in Greece and abroad, to push for the best possible results.