

## **How the Rabbit saved the refugee**

### **Iranian refugees detained in Evros continue wave of hunger strikes**

27<sup>th</sup> November, Athens

**Four Iranians detained at the border station of Feres in northeastern Greece have sewed their mouths in protest of their prolonged detention. Only one of them, a journalist, managed to apply for asylum. The situation in Feres is critical due to overcrowded cells but also because victims of torture, asylum seekers and other vulnerable groups are held for long periods in detention.**

In the beginning of October two Iranian refugees started a hunger strike while being in detention in Evros. They stitched their mouths using fibbers from their shoelaces as an act of protest against their deportation and for their right to political asylum. If they wouldn't had been in a critical medical condition, which led to their transfer to Alexandroupolis hospital, their cases would not have reached the public. They would have been possibly deported back to Iran where they would face imprisonment and execution for political reasons.

Since the early summer of 2010 more and more refugees - mainly coming from Iran – are caught up in the midst of a protection gap. They resorted to hunger strikes as act of political resistance, their last means of struggle, the only way to be heard and helped. Repeatedly they have fought for their right to asylum, some of them succeeded. They also fight for their freedom and basic human rights.

A few days ago, at the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, another four Iranian refugees went on hunger strike in the detention facility of Feres in the prefecture of Evros. They stitched their lips to protest against the inhuman detention conditions, long detention periods and the arbitrary rejections of their asylum claims. The second day of the hunger strike the authorities transferred all of them to Soufli and put them into a cell officially named the "disciplining cell" (πειθαρχείο). Obviously, this is an act of demoralisation and isolation. "*We just want freedom,*" they claim now. Although one of them is already in critical health condition, they are determined to uphold the hunger strike until their demands are heard and they are released.

B.M. is one of them. After a period of more than 100 days in prison, he was informed that his asylum claim was rejected in first instance although he was able to carry with him all the way to Greece a complete documentation of his case and the reasons for being persecuted back home. As a journalist and blogger of the Iranian Opposition he had been reporting about the election frauds of 2009, criticising also human rights violations by the government. He participated in the demonstrations of the opposition and published and distributed together with others information leaflets and critiques about the regime. Many of his co-workers were arrested; one of them was killed. He himself was also arrested, detained and tortured for his political activities as opponent of the Regime of Ahmadinejad. Despite the life threats upon release he continued his political work until the danger rose to such a high level that he was forced to leave in order to escape from the danger of death penalty. To claim international protection in Europe he had to leave his family behind.

*"I thought I would be able to continue my political resistance after leaving Iran. Now my only aim is to survive. ... Our comrades we left behind, our families are in prison. I wish they could be with us and I want to express my solidarity also now from behind the bars. We have not forgotten you. ... And I want to ask you, why we have to be in prison again? In Iran we had no freedom of expression; here we do not have the possibility. ... I request you to think about: Exploitation, habit and prayer. When exploitation becomes a habit, we usually pray for our freedom, but we should struggle for it!"*

Despite the fact that the low asylum recognition rate of Greece is well known outside Europe, as is the lack of social support to refugees in Greece, refugees claim asylum from behind the bars of the detention centres of Evros, due to their legitimated fear of deportation, torture and death. Their only aim is to reach a safe haven.

Certainly, the wave of protests of detained refugees is larger than estimated nowadays since many protesters are never heard. Only rarely they can reach the public. The plethora of prisons and other detention facilities in Greece are a grey zone concerning human rights. Even lawyers who have the legal right to enter face severe access problems. Thus information flows are usually blocked. The easiest way for the Greek authorities to get rid of the struggling refugees is the isolation and “silent” deportation. This was the case of the two Iraqi refugees E.A. and E.A.M. in August 2010 who were deported from Soufli to Turkey and from there to Iraq after complaining to human rights lawyers about human rights violations and the degrading detention conditions.

Meanwhile the four detention facilities in the border region Evros have been criticised for years by human rights organisations for their utterly devastating detention conditions, repeated human rights violations and an overall lack of access to international protection. Refugees’ rights cannot be safeguarded in Greece, which is the reason for a number of other EU member states to halt their returns of Dublin II cases to Greece. The overcrowded detention facilities in Evros region continue to hide daily more than 700 refugees behind their bars, many of them being detained for more than three months.

The severe human rights violations and the great hardship refugees encounter after arriving in Greece were neither addressed by the Greek governments’ call for help to the European Union, nor encountered by the European response in form of a special mission of the armed Frontex force ‘Rabbits’. Instead the underlying philosophy of their measures taken is the discouragement of undocumented border crossings through the institutionalisation of mass detainment under inhuman conditions, maltreatment by the authorities, the deprivation of basic rights and the establishment of a legal deportation machinery (in contrary to the illegal push-backs that were taking place until 2009).

The arbitrary treatment of new arriving refugees by the Greek authorities combined with the recent reinforcement of the Readmission Agreement between Greece and Turkey exposes them to the danger of chain deportations. According to the Readmission Agreement (signed 2001) Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian and Turkish refugees can be returned to Turkey after undergoing only simplified procedures, since their further deportation to the countries of origin is feasible. All refugees arrested upon arrival in Greece are automatically receiving an administrative deportation order and a temporary detention decision is issued. In every case a readmission request is sent to Turkey while the Greek authorities detain them for an uncertain period up to six months with the aim to deport them.

The humanitarian crisis concerning immigration to Greece is worsening every day. When we talk about a humanitarian crisis, we refer to inhuman living conditions, thousands of homeless and unprotected refugees - among them many minors, lack of access to basic health care and mere hunger. The term has been used repeatedly by international organisations such as UNHCR and the Doctors of the World to describe the current situation at the Greek borders. The overall crisis in Greece has been strengthened by racist attacks that became an every day phenomenon within the last months, especially in the neighbourhoods with a high percentage of immigrant populations. The anticipation of this crisis by the Greek society as normality is

reflected in a climate of tolerance, ignorance and the absence of punishments for the responsible of the racist attacks. The characteristic increase in votes for the neo-Nazi party “golden dawn” (Chrissi Avgi) which received in Athens 5% in the last municipality elections shows the dangerous results of the lack of a functioning welfare state and migration policy (asylum, reception, health care etc).

The Frontex mission in Greece and the presence of almost 200 Rabbit officers in Evros is obviously not answering to the problems of refugees in Greece but just adding to a political iconography of “security” in Europe through widely disseminated news pictures of Frontex dogs and high technique border patrols while the real crisis remains unsolved and hidden.

#### Short history of hunger strikes by refugees in Greece within the last year:

- 19<sup>th</sup> September -  
22<sup>nd</sup> October 2009: After a number of revolts inside the detention centre Pagani on Lesbos island, the prison was finally officially closed and the last refugees left to Athens. Huge numbers of refugees had been imprisoned in the overcrowded prison all over the summer, leading to repeated uprisings. The refugees demanded freedom through hunger strikes, broke the doors of the cells and put the cells on fire. The revolts gained a lot of public attention and media coverage through the noborder action Lesbos 2009.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2010: Refugees detained in Venna put fire on their clothes and mattresses to protest against their prolonged imprisonment and the inhuman detention conditions. Only three days later 42 of them were judged penalties of 4-6 months detention and following deportation without having any access to lawyers and interpreters. Then they were transferred to other prisons in order to isolate them.
- 13<sup>th</sup> March: In the night of 13<sup>th</sup> March 2010, 35 detainees set the detention centre of the police station of Patras on fire to protest against their detention and the detention conditions.
- 13<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> April: 124 detained refugees started a hunger strike in the detention centre of Samos protesting against the transfer of 60 refugees from Samos detention centre to a prison close to the Bulgarian border and to protest against their deportation
- 20<sup>th</sup> July: Beginning of the hunger strike of Iranian refugees in front of the UNHCR offices Athens. At the 31<sup>st</sup> August the eight refugees were granted political asylum on their 38<sup>th</sup> day of hunger strike (some were on their 15<sup>th</sup> day).
- 22<sup>nd</sup> September: 100 Palestinian refugees started a protest and hunger strike in front of the Greek section of the UNHCR in Athens. They demanded asylum and housing from the Greek government (the protest is going on).
- 6<sup>th</sup> October: Two Iranian refugees who were detained in Evros, around 25 to 30 years old, stitched their mouths using fibbers from their shoe-laces as an act of protest against deportation and for the right to political asylum. They were transferred to Alexandroupolis hospital at the 7<sup>th</sup> of November because of

their worsening health condition but they denied medical treatment. Their protest reached the public through the statements of the director of the hospital who was anxious about their health condition.

- 14<sup>th</sup> of October: Hunger strike of 49 protesters, eight of which sewed their lips together with medical threads. They protested in a makeshift tent in front of Athens University (Propylaia). Among the hunger strikers, were refugees whose first instance interviews were delaying for more than a year, while others' cases were pending at second instance for several years. They protested 77 days and kept 36 days of hunger strike. Finally, they were granted political asylum at November 18<sup>th</sup>.
- 28<sup>th</sup> October: Complaint by the International Federation of Iranian Refugees lodged with the European Court of Human Rights against the Greek government for its violation of refugees' rights
- 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> October: Hunger strike of 25 Kurds and 13 Afghan refugees in Lavrio reception centre demanding for asylum. Most of the refugees living in the oldest reception centre of Greece have been waiting since years for their asylum claims to be proceeded. The protest included the demands of the total of the reception centres' population for better reception conditions.
- 9<sup>th</sup> November: An Iranian refugee threatened to commit suicide inside the Greek council of Refugees in Athens demanding to talk to journalists.
- 19<sup>th</sup> November: More than 40 Afghan refugees, among them families and a forty day old baby, started a protest in front of Athens University (Propylaia) setting up tents and sleeping there. They plan to start a hunger strike in the beginning of December if their demands for asylum will not be heard. Their asylum cases are pending since years.
- 22<sup>nd</sup> November: 14 migrants started a hunger strike in the prison of the police station of Chania, Crete and demand for freedom.
- 22<sup>nd</sup> November: Four Iranian refugees sewed their lips and started a hunger strike in the detention facility of Feres, Evros.
- 23<sup>rd</sup> November: The four strikers from Feres are transferred to Soufli in a special "disciplinary cell". They continue they hunger strike.
- 25<sup>th</sup> November: Four sans papiers immigrant prisoners from Palestine sewed their lips together with needle and thread at the Kassaveteia Prisons near Volos, central Greece, protesting their prolonged and completely unjustified imprisonment, while another three refused their meals. In the last fourteen months, all seven of them, together with another 25 Somalis, Afghanis and Palestinians, have been pushed from one prison to another, after they were arrested for the sole crime of illegally entering the country. Their release is pending while the deportation is also being legally processed.

*There were/are many more protests. It is impossible to tell about all of them.  
And there are many more that will follow...*

Some more information in the www:

For the situation of Iranian refugees in Turkey see the report of the OMID advocates for Human Rights of June 2010:

[http://www.omidadvocates.org/uploads/2/4/8/2/2482398/report\\_on\\_the\\_situation\\_of\\_iranian\\_refugees\\_post\\_june\\_12th\\_one\\_year\\_later.pdf](http://www.omidadvocates.org/uploads/2/4/8/2/2482398/report_on_the_situation_of_iranian_refugees_post_june_12th_one_year_later.pdf)

Statement by the International Federation of Iranian Refugees on the Striking Asylum Seekers in Greece - Sunday, 7 November 2010:

<http://iransolidarity.blogspot.com/2010/11/statement-by-international-federation.html>

Announcement of the Committee of Iranian political refugees in Greece:

<http://antiracismfascism.org/images/stories/iranoi%20propylaia.jpg>

Statement by the UNHCR Greek section, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2010:

[http://www.unhcr.gr/Press\\_Rel/2010/pi05-08-2010.htm](http://www.unhcr.gr/Press_Rel/2010/pi05-08-2010.htm)

Other sites reporting on the hunger strikes of refugees in Greece:

[http://w2eu.net/2010/08/24/hunger\\_strike\\_of\\_iranian\\_refugees\\_in\\_athens\\_at\\_unhcr/](http://w2eu.net/2010/08/24/hunger_strike_of_iranian_refugees_in_athens_at_unhcr/)

<http://deviousdiva.com/2010/08/24/iranian-hunger-strike/>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Save-Iranian-Asylum-Seekers-In-Greece/140452572653837>