



## **Press Release**

**Athens, 20 November 2015**

### **Cooperation of the Ombudsmen of Greece and FYROM for the border refugee camps**

**The Ombudsman institutions of Greece and FYROM conducted on Tuesday 17.11.2015 a joint visit to the temporary refugee camps at the borders of the two neighboring countries, in Eidomeni and Vinojug. The joint visit aimed at fact finding on living conditions and protection of the fundamental rights of the refugees. It was an initiative jointly taken after the meeting of the two Ombudsman representatives in October in Thessaloniki facilitated by the Institute for the Study of Human Rights of the University of Columbia and the Municipality of Thessaloniki.**

In the joint visit to the two camps the participants were the Acting Greek Ombudsman Mr. Vassilis Karydis, the Deputy Ombudsman for children rights Mr. George Moschos, the Deputy Ombudsman of FYROM Mrs Vaska Bajramovska Mustafa, the Deputy Ombudsman Mr.Slavco Timov, senior investigators of the two Ombudsman Offices responsible for refugee, migration and OPCAT issues, as well as representatives of NGOs and UNHCR.

In the joint visit the Ombudsman institutions watched step by step how the refugees were received in the two camps and how their basic needs were covered in the transit phase. The basic difference is that the Greek camp is run without any State coordination or contribution, it is based in the volunteer work and offer of food, other supplies and services by UNHCR, IOM and several NGOs (Doctors without Frontiers, Medecins du Monde, Red Cross, Solidarity Now, Praxis, Arsis, A-21, Save the Children, Greek Council for Refugees, Greek Rescue Team, Caritas, Metadrasis, Mazi Mprosta, Evangelical Church of Greece, DRF etc). The camp in Vinojug operates under the Crisis Management Centre comprising the State representatives directly competent (Police, Ministry of Social Affairs) who cooperate with UNHCR and the Red Cross and it is an official registration point at the entry in the country.

The Ombudsman institutions consider as a very positive development that the immediate needs of the refugees in move are covered in the two camps, in a transit however phase of smooth border crossing every 20 minutes that entails a short waiting period at the camps. The maximum capacity of the Greek camp cannot exceed 1700 people at the same time, whereas twice recently (23/10, 9/11) they had to deal with over 10.000 refugees in a day.

It is also very positive that a strong solidarity movement developed in the two countries, with NGOs and individuals offering help to the refugees.

However, the Ombudsman institutions consider that refugee movement across Europe, without prejudice to Schengen or national border provisions, presents de facto situations at the points of border entry and exit that should not be ignored by the competent Governments. The Ombudsman institutions consider that in any case the State should ensure the safety of the persons and their fundamental rights for access to asylum, provisional shelter, food and water, basic clothing, medical treatment, information on rights and procedures, protection of vulnerable groups such as families, pregnant women, children and unaccompanied minors, victims of trafficking, ill treatment or torture, elderly people, persons with disabilities etc. Special attention has to be drawn on protection from smugglers and traffickers in their route as well as from phenomena of economic exploitation.

The Ombudsman institutions also consider it is the State's responsibility and preemptive role to set as an immediate priority a cohesive contingency plan for provisional refugee sites and basic supplies to larger refugee groups, to cover any future risk of border restrictions in the refugees route across Europe.

The present joint visit in the border refugee camps reflects the Ombudsmen common understanding of the need for continuous cooperation with counterpart institutions in all the neighboring countries in view of their common mission to safeguard human rights and the Rule of Law basic principles that face the challenge of the refugee crisis.

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