

Refugees increasingly entering Greece via land routes

Greek police detained 1,658 refugees and migrants in March after they crossed the border from Turkey by land.



A barbed wire fence sits on the Greek-Turkish border [File: Reuters]

Athens, Greece - A growing number of refugees and migrants are reaching Greece via land routes from Turkey, with Greek authorities increasingly accused of carrying out illegal pushbacks on the land borders.

On Friday, the Greek police said that 1,658 refugees and migrants were detained in March after crossing into Greece through the Evros River, which is situated on the Turkish border.

That number was more than five times higher than the same period in 2017, which saw only 262 people detained on the country's frontier with Turkey, the Greek daily Ekathimerini reported.

The new data comes just two months after the Greek Council for Refugees published a report alleging that Greek authorities were increasingly conducting "systematic pushbacks" in the Evros region.

Eva Cosse, a researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW), said pushbacks are considered a violation of both international refugee law and human rights law.

"We've been monitoring the issue of pushbacks," Cosse told Al Jazeera.

"Pushbacks at sea stopped when the [Syriza] government came to power [in January 2015], but pushbacks on land have never really stopped," she added.

"People should have the opportunity to seek asylum but pushing back people can put them in danger."

While Greece has been widely criticised for pushbacks and the declining humanitarian conditions for tens of thousands of asylum seekers trapped in

camps, migration minister Dimitris Vitsas has defended the government's approach to the crisis.

"One of our central priorities for the immediate future is the implementation of major infrastructure projects in the islands, in cooperation with the local government, aiming at enhancing everyday life of the inhabitants who are in the front line during the ongoing refugee crisis," he recently told reporters.

Vitsas added that the Greek government "will continue to vigorously defend the values of humanity and solidarity".

'Dangerous'

Yonous Muhammadi, head of the Greek Forum of Refugees, also said the number of people crossing via Evros is "increasing".

"We have people coming four or five times, entering Greece and then being pushed back to Turkey," he told Al Jazeera by telephone.

Describing the land route as "dangerous", Muhammadi cited a string of reported deaths along the Evros River, where rising waters made the journey perilous.

Meanwhile, the number of refugees and migrants reaching Greek islands by crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey was ostensibly on the rise again.

According to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), more than 16,595 people have reached European shores by making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean so far this year.

During that period, at least 501 people died or went missing, UNHCR noted.

Between January and March, one person out of every 14 crossing the Mediterranean died, compared with one death in every 29 people who made that journey during the first three months of 2017, the UN recently said.

On March 17, a boat carrying refugees capsized en route to Greece from Turkey. The Greek coastguard subsequently found 16 bodies, among them children.

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