



EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL MIGRATION and HOME AFFAIRS

Deputy Director-General

Brussels,

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for your "Open Letter" of 10 August, providing further information on the situation in the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) of Vial, Chios, and further expressing concerns as to the living conditions of irregular migrants and asylum seekers in that RIC. I apologise for the delay in replying which has in part been due to the many developments that took place in the last months, which I would like to inform you now about.

I highly appreciate the NGOs support to Greece with non-food items as well as with legal and health assistance. Such support has proved essential to help the Greek authorities cope with the increase in arrivals experienced particularly in the first half of 2018.

Whilst the management of the RICs and providing adequate reception conditions is primarily the responsibility of the Greek authorities, in particular the Reception and Identification Service (RIS, in the Ministry for Migration Policy), we share your concerns about the situation. The growing pressure in the RIC is due to increase in arrivals, delays in the asylum procedure and limited number of returns. This has resulted in the RIC being overcrowded and operating above its capacity with migrants staying longer periods of time on the islands than desirable. Urgent actions are required by the Greek Authorities to use the EU funds available and deliver on the ground.

We have therefore undertaken further and intensive activities to encourage the Greek authorities to swiftly act in that sense. On 19 September, Commissioner Avramopoulos, accompanied by DG HOME's Director General, Vivi Michou, met with Prime Minister Tsipras and relevant Ministers dealing with migration issues. This was followed by dedicated bilateral meetings with the relevant Ministries held by myself on 20 September and 18 October to follow up on the main conclusions reached. I intend to continue frequently meeting with the Greek authorities as well as with UNHCR and IOM in order to push for sustainable solutions in this field.

Overall, there seems to be renewed commitment of the Greek authorities to implement the EU-Turkey statement and find solutions to the most pressing problems, such as the situation in the RICs and winterisation, while working on solving more structural issues such as the expedient use of funds available under the National Programme, addressing more strategically reception and integration needs and increasing returns.

Regarding the **decongestion of the RICs**, the Minister for Migration Policy confirmed that his top priority is to start transferring eligible persons to the mainland, starting from

3,000 persons from Moria, where the very difficult situation is well-known. Already hundreds of eligible persons were transferred to the mainland. Overall, between June 2016 and August 2017, almost 11,000 migrants were transferred to the mainland with UNHCR assistance and an additional 37,000 migrants have been transferred to the mainland since 13 August 2017 until 23 October this year. In 2018 so far, 3,837 migrants have been transferred from Chios to the mainland while 2,430 people have arrived on Chios in the same period. We have asked the Ministry to continue the efforts to transfer eligible persons to the mainland in order to decongest the hotspots. To this end, the Commission has provided additional funding through emergency assistance to increase the capacity of mainland camps.

Regarding **insufficient toilets and showers, electricity and other issues related to the conditions in the RIC and provision of non-food items**, 78 million Euro have been made available under the EU-funded National Programme for works, infrastructure upgrades and supplies. The Greek authorities have started with minor repairs in October, and items not needing procurement will follow. On Chios in particular, the Greek Ministry of Defence (Army) has performed certain maintenance works on the sewage system and has requested a list of needs from the Reception and Identification Service in order to move forward. We expect the first procurement procedures to be launched in the coming weeks.

Regarding access to **potable water**, the Army (in charge of the water and food supply in the hotspots) has informed us they distribute 2,5 litres of bottled water per person per day in the hotspot without having observed any shortage of bottled water. However, in VIAL, during the summer months, there were water cuts twice a week, lasting 8 hours each time, due to the general water shortage on the island.

As regards the **quality of food** in the hotspot, according to the information available to the Commission, the Army has conceived the catering programmes with the help of a specialised doctor-nutritionist based on the rule of nutritional and calorific value. The Ministry has conceived six different programmes of catering (general catering, babies 0-6 months, babies 6-12 months, children 1-12 years old, diabetic diet, vulnerable groups such as pregnant or breastfeeding women). There is a distribution of fruits and vegetables 5-6 times per week. Each day, a joint committee of officials from the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Migration Policy conducts checks with regard to the quality of food and the expiration dates on the food. In addition, once a week, a military veterinary doctor conducts food checks. The delays in food distribution observed are due to the very high number of beneficiaries in the RIC.

Regarding the food provision during "**pre-registration**" in particular, food is provided by the Army to the newly arriving migrants during the registration process by the Hellenic Police HP/RIS, as well as at the different stages of the asylum procedure. A **second rejection** does not relieve Member States from their responsibility to provide for humane and dignified living conditions, including the provision of food of adequate quality. Of course this should happen under the condition that the beneficiary person continues to live in Vial and his/hers location of residence is known to the authorities.

Regarding sexual and **gender-based violence and overall security in the RIC**, we have recently awarded a grant to the Hellenic Police to allow for an increase of the police staff on each island, in particular encouraging the secondments of female staff. As a result we expect that a total of 98 officers should be deployed on Chios in addition to the officers of the local Police Directorate.

Regarding the **recruitment of additional doctors** to provide adequate health care to migrants but also to carry out the vulnerability assessment (which is the first step in the asylum procedure), the Commission has provided emergency financial assistance to the Ministry of Health amounting to EUR 24 million for the comprehensive ‘Philos’ medical support project. Under the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) Greek National Programme, the Commission will continue to support the provision of healthcare by the Ministry of Health under ‘Philos II’. In this regard, the Minister of Health launched on 21 September (deadline 22 October) a call for the recruitment of additional 103 doctors for RICs and 220 doctors for the local hospitals (1,575 people in total). In the meantime, the Army agreed to deploy 11 doctors of which 5 on the islands and the Ministry of Health to deploy mobile units to cover needs throughout the country. We are informed that two military doctors have already been deployed in Vial. The Ministry of Health expect the new doctors to be deployed by January 2019 at the latest. This will be significant step forward since the significant delays in carrying out the vulnerability assessment are delaying the asylum procedure at first instance.

Regarding access of **children to school**, the Commission is providing funding under the AMIF national programme for the inclusion of migrant children in the Greek national education system but also supports UNHCR with emergency assistance for non-formal education activities on the Eastern Aegean islands. For the moment there is a public kindergarten operating under the authority of the Greek Ministry of Educations in Vial since February 2018 with 40 children, in two shifts from 08:00 to 16:15 hours as well as an education establishment operated by Metadrasi for 6-22 years old persons. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) organises activities for the unaccompanied minors at the relevant safe zone.

Regarding the acceleration of the **Asylum procedure**, there has been progress with the implementation of the new asylum law. In terms of capacity, GAS plans to recruit additional contractual staff (54) with EU funds, to deal with the backlog on the islands. A hiring procedure through the High Selection Board for the Public Administration is also ongoing; therefore, the Asylum Service will be further reinforced until the end of the year. A call for the creation of working groups is also ongoing, whereas a mobile unit was successfully deployed for two weeks in Kos to cover urgent needs. The cooperation between EASO and GAS has also been reinforced and EASO has recently started a pilot on Lesbos for the support to the regular procedure with the deployment of 20 caseworkers. The new merged procedure was also rolled out as of 27 August and should also help accelerating the first instance, although conclusive statistics are not available yet. The Greek authorities are currently discussing about further support for 2019 in view of dealing with the backlog of cases both on the islands and in the mainland. As discussed during my visit to Chios, I have also raised with Member States the issue of the quality of experts requesting more experienced experts and longer deployments.

Finally, regarding the **second instance** of the asylum procedure, 8 additional appeals committees have been formally established in September and their members have now been selected; the committees should be up and running by the end of November 2018. We are working very closely with the new Appeals Authority to finds solutions to accelerate the processing of the backlog of cases.

Regarding **interpretation services**, I am happy to inform that, on 22 October, the Ministry of Migration Policy could successfully finalise the call for tender and select a company. The additional interpreters are expected to be deployed on the ground in the second half of November. The successful completion of the call resolves one of the major impediments in migration management – the lack of interpreters for RIS for more than 9

months – and will facilitate critical operations on the islands, in particular registrations, medical screenings and vulnerability assessments.

Other areas in which the Commission is assisting the Greek authorities include **integration measures**, which are also crucial for alleviating the pressure on the reception system and consequently help decongesting the islands. With the help of the IOM, at least 6,500 places are to be created under the integration programme in 2019. Until this becomes fully operational, the IOM may already start providing integration services, including education, to beneficiaries of international protection who are currently accommodated in the rental scheme for asylum seekers (ESTIA) to free up places.

I could present more examples of our continuous effort to support the Greek authorities in rendering results on the ground more tangible. In this context the action of NGOs working with the RICs or in the RICs is very welcome.

I reiterate my gratitude for the work undertaken by NGOs in Chios. I encourage you to continue supporting the Greek authorities in their day-to-day efforts to bring reception conditions up to standards, always respecting the law, rules and regulations that govern the operations of the Reception and Identification Centre of Vial, in particular with regard to security considerations.

We will soon have a new Commission representative deployed on Chios as of mid-November and who will follow all these matters very closely and liaise with all relevant stakeholders, including you. I would also be happy to meet your organisations again during my next visit to Chios, probably in the first quarter of 2019.

Yours faithfully,

Simon MORDUE

*[E-signed]*