

During the summer of 2018 I successfully applied for a placement with an NGO in Athens, Greece, which provides legal and administrative assistance and support to asylum seekers and refugees on the Greek islands and mainland. I am very grateful to have been granted funding from the UK Human Rights Lawyers Association, which enabled me to carry out this volunteer placement.

Background Information: The Refugee Crisis

Conflicts leading to internal and international displacement of civilian populations are not a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, when speaking about the ongoing “European refugee crisis” this is widely acknowledged as referring to the period beginning in 2015, when increasing numbers of asylum seekers started making the journey across the Mediterranean to reach Europe. In its early stages, heart-warming videos of asylum seekers being openly welcomed into European countries were all over the news and social media¹. Governments across Europe showed solidarity and signed up to relocation schemes for asylum seekers and refugees, as well as allowing their free movement across European borders and into their territories.

Unfortunately, these attitudes did not last long. The rise of a new wave of right-wing and nationalist sentiment amongst European states, often under the guise of security concerns following the Paris terror attacks, led countries to strictly reinforce and police their borders. Measures included the introduction of temporary border controls between Germany and Austria² and the sealing of border crossings between Serbia and Croatia³. Moreover, the temporary relaxation of the enforcement of the EU Dublin Regulation amidst a show of solidarity has since come to an end. Accordingly, the first European country in which asylum seekers arrive and claim asylum will be the one responsible for their asylum claim. A centralised fingerprinting system is used to identify which country an individual has already claimed asylum in, and they are deported there accordingly.

Greece’s geographical location is the key reason it has been so heavily affected by the refugee crisis. Asylum seekers fleeing from the Middle East find themselves in Turkey which borders Greece. On a daily basis, hundreds of asylum seekers try to cross into Greece either via the northern mainland border, by crossing the Evros river (often by foot), or by boat across the Aegean Sea. For those who are successful, the ordeal does not end there. Due to the Dublin Regulation, they have to remain in Greece to see their asylum claim all the way through.

Moreover, Greece is heavily affected by the EU-Turkey deal, which was reached in March 2016. Accordingly, Turkey is a “safe third country” in which asylum seekers, primarily from Syria, can claim asylum and therefore be deported to, as opposed to going through the process on EU soil. The consequences of the deal have led to devastating conditions on Greece’s islands: most prominently, 10,000 asylum seekers are stranded on one island alone

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVLNSOvpmT8>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34239674>

³ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/hungary/11873012/Refugee-crisis-Hungary-declares-victory-in-border-strategy-as-migrants-head-to-Croatia-instead.html>

– Lesbos, home to Moria camp, recently titled by the BBC as “the worst refugee camp in the world”⁴. Thousands are forced to stay on the island with a “geographical restriction” whilst admissibility assessments take place and determine whether Turkey is a safe country for the individual in question. If Turkey is deemed safe for them, then they are sent back. If the individuals prove that they will face persecution in Turkey, for example due to their ethnic background, then their asylum claim will be assessed in Greece, either on the islands, or vulnerable cases will be transferred to the mainland. Unfortunately, these transfers do not always take place timely due to the sheer numbers of individuals and the lack of doctors to assess medical vulnerabilities. Individuals therefore leave the islands without prior authorisation or an official transfer, leading to homelessness on the mainland, the ceasing of their UNHCR monetary assistance and the complication of their asylum applications.

In response to this humanitarian crisis taking place in Greece, hundreds of international and national NGOs and grassroots organisations are working hard to provide much needed assistance and relief. From my experience this summer, most asylum interviews in Athens are scheduled for at least one year after the lodging of the asylum application. During this long wait, organisations try their best to meet the basic needs of asylum seekers by providing food, language lessons, employability workshops and legal assistance. Having spent a month in 2017 teaching English in a community centre, I decided that I had the required knowledge and basis to go back to Athens to provide support in a legal capacity.

My Experience: Volunteering in Athens

I began my placement with the NGO in early July 2018. The Athens team consisted of lawyers, law students and interpreters from all over the world. We primarily operated out of a small space in the centre of Athens, but we also held a weekly legal clinic at a refugee camp, and at a squat in Exarchia, the anarchist area of Athens. We assisted asylum seekers from the initial step of claiming asylum, to accompanying them to the Asylum Service on the day of their interview. In preparation for their asylum interview, which is often scheduled for one or two years later, we went over the timeline of each individual to identify the persecution and dangers they faced in their country of origin. In addition, we put in order their supporting evidence (e.g. medical reports, reports on conditions in their country origin) and translated documents from their home country (e.g. marriage certificates). During my volunteering, I had the chance to accompany an individual to their interview and see first-hand how these are conducted.

Unfortunately, the work was not always straightforward. Every asylum claim encountered different obstacles along different stages of the process. Single parents, for example, who were granted refugee status, could not get the official documents for their children without the signature of the other parent – which in many cases was deceased or missing. Even if the present parent had evidence that their spouse is missing or deceased, the process for getting official recognition as sole custodian involves a costly court procedure. On numerous occasions we had to explain to beneficiaries that even though they have been granted

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v-OHi3iGQI>

refugee status and they can obtain their own official documents, including a travel document, they cannot easily obtain these documents for their children. There were many such frustrating situations that were unfortunately not solved in the time period I was there.

Due to my past experience of teaching English and my ability to speak Greek, my official role was to be the Field Coordinator for the NGO's Athens team. I was responsible for providing incoming volunteers with an induction and overview of the ongoing work in Athens and I was the main point of reference for the NGO in Athens. As such, I represented the NGO at meetings with other organisations: a monthly legal aid actors meeting at UNHCR; a fortnightly advocacy group with NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, MSF and the International Rescue Committee; and a fortnightly grassroots coordination meeting, which on one occasion I facilitated.

My experience in Greece was eye-opening and awakened within me a sense of obligation to provide help and solidarity to those forced to flee their home country due to circumstances beyond their control. Unfortunately, I have come to realise that the UK is not doing as much as it can to support refugees. Whilst enquiring about the possibility of a referral of an unaccompanied minor to the British Dubs Scheme, I was told by two separate NGO actors that applications for this scheme are lost causes. This view was reinforced by the recent Court of Appeal decision that the handling of such applications by the British government was unlawful due to the inadequate reasoning given to rejected applicants⁵. As a nation that purports to uphold human rights and dignity, I believe that more can and ought to be done by the UK to help alleviate this situation.

The scale of the current situation in Greece is unimaginable, and the asylum system is highly bureaucratic and overburdened. The efforts and hard work of NGOs and volunteers on the ground, who carry out small acts of assistance and perseverance, are therefore invaluable and have the potential to make a big difference for an individual. Everyone I had the pleasure of meeting and working with – interpreters, food distributors, psychologists, teachers, lawyers – proved to me that there will always be people that will come forward in times of need and who will work hard to ensure the dignity and protection of those most vulnerable in society.

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/dubs-child-refugees-home-office-immigration-home-office-supreme-court-a8566191.html>