

Greece blocks 35,000 migrants, prepares to deport hundreds



Athens, March 6 (RHC)-- Greece has repulsed nearly 35,000 migrants trying to cross onto its territory since Turkey opened its border nearly a week ago, government sources said on Thursday, as it prepares to deport hundreds of others who made it through. Ankara announced on February 28 that it would let migrants cross its borders into Europe, going against a commitment to hold them on its territory under a 2016 deal with the European Union.

Ankara has accused Greek forces of shooting dead four migrants, a charge denied by Athens, which says Turkish forces are helping the migrants to cross the border. Both sides used tear gas at the Kastanies border post on Wednesday.

Turkey's interior minister, Suleyman Soyly, visited Edirne province bordering Greece on Thursday and announced the deployment of 1,000 special police to the area to halt the pushback of migrants toward its territory.

Soyly, who said on Wednesday that Turkey was preparing a case at the European Court of Human Rights over Greece's treatment of migrants, accused Greek forces of wounding 164 people and pushing back nearly 5,000 into Turkey.

Greece on Thursday banned most vessels from sailing around the Aegean islands of Chios, Lesbos and Samos. They are all close to the Turkish coast and a regular target for dinghies packed with migrants trying to enter the EU.

Choppy seas discouraged dinghies from making the crossing on Thursday, though in the evening a boat carrying 42 mostly Afghan migrants reached Lesbos. The UN refugee agency handed out snacks and blankets to the group, which included about 10 children. Lesbos already hosts more than 20,000 asylum seekers, many of them living in filthy conditions in overcrowded camps.

The situation at the Kastanies land border crossing in northern Greece was calm on Thursday. Migrants, who include Syrians, Afghans, Pakistanis and Africans, huddled in tents and makeshift camps on the Turkish side of the border. Others stood in line to receive food packages from aid agencies.

Migrants who arrived in Greece illegally after March 1st will be transferred to the northern city of Serres and deported back to their own countries, Greek Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi said late on Wednesday. "Our aim is to return them to their countries," he told the Athens News Agency.

Mitarachi said migrants who entered Greece prior to January 1, 2019 and are living on its Aegean islands would be transferred to the mainland in the coming days. Athens announced on March 1 that it would not accept any new asylum applications for a month following the build-up of migrants at the border. This has triggered criticism from human rights agencies.

"It's very sad that we have seen again human beings treated as political weapons... This is unacceptable," said Francesco Rocca, head of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), on a visit to the border.

The U.N. migration agency, the IOM, also urged all countries to respect the migrants' human rights. "... international legal obligations must be upheld, in particular with respect to those who may be in need of international protection," it said in a statement.

Greece and the EU accuse Turkey of deliberately goading the migrants to cross the border as a way of pressuring Brussels into offering more money or supporting Ankara's geopolitical aims in the Syrian conflict.

Turkey, which already hosts 3.6 million Syrian refugees and faces another influx amid increased fighting in northwest Syria, says it cannot take in any more people. President Tayyip Erdogan discussed the migrant issue with senior EU officials in Ankara on Wednesday but his spokesman said the Europeans had made "no concrete proposition" on how to resolve the crisis.

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