

STATEMENT OF CONCERN:

Arrivals on 11/10 Report Illegal Pushback, Violence & Separation of Families in Greek Waters

As members of the north shore emergency response group in Lesvos, Greece, we are deeply concerned by reports of an illegal pushback in Greek waters at approximately 2:50 – 3:35 AM today, 10 November 2017, as well as allegations of violent behaviour by the Turkish coastguard.

At 3.47am, Refugee Rescue boat 'Mo Chara' received a request by the Hellenic coastguard to assist in transitioning people to the port of Skala Sykamineas. When Mo Chara arrived on scene, the crew was informed that 17 people had been pulled from the water and they were likely hypothermic. Hellenic coastguard had administered emergency blankets but the people were evidently distressed.

Once the people had been delivered to Skala, they were met by on-shore landing teams, including Lighthouse Relief and Refugee Rescue. Two unaccompanied minors and five people requesting medical attention were identified amongst the arrivals. All people were from Afghanistan and Iran.

Several arrivals reported that their dinghy – originally carrying 37 people – was intercepted by the Turkish coast guard in Greek waters. It is alleged that a Turkish official fired multiple gun shots into the air before retreating, and then returned to fire shots into the water close to the dinghy, while ramming the boat with their vessel on a number of occasions.

According to reports by the arrivals, when the Hellenic coast guard vessel arrived at the scene, Turkish authorities were asked to stop firing and those in the boat were reassured they were now safely in Greek waters. 17 people jumped from their dinghy into the water and swam to the Hellenic coast guard vessel for safety, reporting the Turkish coast guard aggressively attempted to pull people from the water at this time. One of these men reportedly suffered a head wound as a result, and later received treatment at the Stage 2 facility in Skala.

Those that were not able to swim from the dinghy to the Hellenic coast guard – mainly women, children and the elderly – were loaded into the Turkish coast guard vessel and taken back to Turkey. Arrivals to Skala report that families were separated as part of this interception.

These reports demonstrate several clear violations of international maritime law by the Turkish coast guard. Namely, Article 98 (1) of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) calls for every state to assist any person in distress at sea, and the Guidelines on the Treatment of Persons Rescued at Sea (2004) calls for governments to provide safety to people recovered in their search and rescue territory (Resolution MSC.167 (78), para. 2.5).

It appears that neither of these internationally binding regulations were upheld by the Turkish authorities in this case. These reports add to the mounting evidence pertaining to illegal push backs in Greek waters, as suggested on multiple occasions by various search and rescue teams on the northern shore of Lesvos.

We accordingly urge the UN Refugee Agency to fully investigate this incident and the broader trend of illegal pushbacks in Greek waters, and put pressure on authorities that undermine their international obligations and needlessly put lives at risk. This abdication of responsibility by the EU and its member states has no basis in international law.

Signed,

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Signed on 10 November 2017

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