

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE TO MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN GREECE

Findings from
MSF's intervention
in detention facilities
for migrants

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MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES
ΓΙΑΤΡΟΙ ΧΩΡΙΣ ΣΥΝΟΡΑ

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Introduction

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is an international, independent, medical humanitarian organisation that delivers emergency aid to people affected by armed conflict, epidemics, health-care exclusion and natural or man-made disasters. In Greece, MSF has been offering medical assistance to migrants and asylum seekers between 1996 and 2004 and between 2008 and today. In the latter period, since 2008, MSF has mainly responded to emergency medical and humanitarian needs of migrants arriving to Greece through the Greek-Turkish borders, of the Evros region and the Islands of the Eastern Aegean. This report describes the findings from our medical action during the first four months of 2013 and outlines the severe gaps that the responsible authorities need to cover to ensure the minimum requirements for the safe and dignified living of newly arrived migrants and migrants under administrative detention.



Medical findings and the impact of detention on the health of migrants and asylum seekers placed under administrative detention

During the first four months of 2013 MSF provided medical assistance and humanitarian aid in detention facilities for migrants in Evros (Filakio, Soufli, Tichero, Feres), and the pre-return centers of Komotini, Xanthi and Drama.

During this period our teams treated 1,908 medical cases and referred 231 (12.1%) patients who needed health care provision at secondary health care level. The most common diagnoses were for dermatological diseases (19.6%), upper respiratory infections (15.8%), gastrointestinal problems (14.6%), musculoskeletal problems (13.8%), mental health complaints and psychiatric disorders (5.1% and 2.5% correspondingly). Lastly, several cases of injury were recorded – unintentional (4.1%) and intentional (3%).

The medical problems our teams addressed reveal that the population suffered mainly from health conditions related to detention (conditions, length) and the lack of systematic medical care. The inadequate living conditions: acutely substandard hygiene conditions, exposure to cold, lack of sufficient ventilation and access to natural light, inadequate diet, no or very limited access to the outdoors and to physical exercise – are all factors contributing to the occurrence and transmission of several diseases (dermatological, respiratory, gastrointestinal, musculoskeletal). In addition **the fact that migrants and asylum seekers are subjected to a very lengthy deprivation of liberty (up to 18 months) and have none or limited opportunity to communicate with the outside world and their families, is a significant aggravating factor in their mental health.**

The impact of detention on the physical and mental health of migrants is also recorded in detail in the public reports of MSF regarding its interventions in immigration detention centers for the periods 2009-2010 and 2011.¹

The following examples recorded during the previous months through our medical work are indicative of the impact detention has on migrants' health.

- **Scabies outbreak.** It is indicative that during the months of January and February dermatological diseases constituted the most common diagnostic category (18% and 24% of total diagnoses). A significant number of those cases were serious as they presented secondary infections due to the lack of timely and systematic treatment.
- **Patients with chronic conditions** - diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, respiratory problems, serious arthritis, epilepsy - or facing physical disabilities.

1 Migrants in detention – Lives on hold, 2009- 2010 (http://www.msf.org/msf/fms/article-images/2010-00/Migrants_in_detention.pdf)

- **Patients who were diagnosed with a mental health disease** and while under treatment, remained detained in unsuitable conditions over several months. Our teams recorded also several cases of **self injury and suicide attempts** (in total nine patients - some of whom had attempted to end their lives more than once). Symptoms of depression and anxiety were also identified widely in the population.
- Cases of unintentional injuries related to the substandard (unsafe) living conditions and cases of intentional injuries related to physical violence.

It should be stressed that the detention of persons with chronic or acute medical problems - including psychiatric cases - in inappropriate conditions and limited access to health care constitutes a serious threat to their health and safety.



Detention of vulnerable persons

During their intervention MSF also recorded a number of serious problems which are related to the detention of vulnerable groups (unaccompanied minors, victims of torture):

- **Serious gaps in the protection system for unaccompanied minors resulting in their long term detention - often in the same rooms with adults.** It should be noted that our teams have recorded a significant number of cases of underage migrants who had wrongly been registered as adults. These children due to the lack of an age determination procedure, including a protocol for medical examination, remain detained in unacceptable conditions without any protection for many months.
- **Detaining persons who arrive from conflict zones, such as Syrians today, who have often suffered traumatic events and present psychological symptoms, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).**

Gaps and shortcomings that must urgently be addressed by the authorities:

- **Lack of continuity in the provision of medical care** which results in repeated interruptions of medical assistance activities over several months and in detained migrants having extremely restricted access to healthcare.
- **Significant obstacles in ensuring referrals to secondary care.**
- **No screening process in place for the initial medical assessment and for the vulnerability assessment of newly arrived or detained migrants.**
- **Protection system for unaccompanied minors gravely lacking.**
- **Absence of procedure for speedy release on medical grounds** when the patient's health and access to treatment are not ensured in detention.
- **No follow up from the responsible public health authorities** with regular visits to the detention facilities.
- **Lack of interpretation services, legal aid and information services.**
- **Acutely substandard living and hygiene conditions.**
- **Absence of a regulatory framework** (internal regulation) for the operation of the immigration detention facilities and **insufficient human resources** (centers staffed almost exclusively with police staff).
- **Extremely long duration of incarceration.**

It should be noted that **living conditions are even worse in the detention facilities of Police stations and detention facilities of the Coast Guard** that are used for the detention of migrants throughout Greece .

In particular regarding newly arriving migrants and refugees, currently arriving via the sea route, **operation of the First Reception Agency in the Aegean Islands must be prioritized** as should the set up of reception facilities.

Access to healthcare is urgent for all newly arriving refugees and migrants detained by the thousands. Provision of medical care is lacking in almost all immigration detention facilities.

