

# In Plain Sight:

## The Human Cost of Migration Policies and Violent Practices at Greek Sea Borders

### Executive summary

Accounts of violence at Greece's borders have proliferated in recent years, against a landscape in which medical and humanitarian assistance for people crossing into Greece by land and sea is limited or absent, and independent scrutiny of border management practices is non-existent. Since launching medical activities in response to the urgent needs of new arrivals on the Aegean islands of Samos and Lesbos, MSF has received repeated accounts of patients' lives endangered by violence and pushbacks. Drawing on operational and aggregated medical data, patient testimonies, and observations of MSF staff gathered between August 2021 and July 2023, this report builds on an existing body of accounts of violence and pushbacks at Greece's borders, and highlights the physical and psychological suffering, as well as the life-threatening risks, endured by those seeking safety and protection in Greece.

On Samos and Lesbos, MSF responds to the medical and humanitarian needs of people arriving by sea within the context of an established framework and in conjunction with other actors. Over the past two years, MSF has provided emergency medical assistance to 7,904 people shortly after their arrival on the islands during 533 separate responses. Many of the new arrivals were in a state of emotional distress, as well as being exhausted, wet, thirsty, hungry, suffering from exposure to harsh weather conditions, and covered in scratches and bruises. Among them were women in advanced stages of pregnancy, new-born babies, unaccompanied minors and elderly people. Many MSF patients described having been trapped in vicious cycles of violence, pushbacks and repetitive dangerous sea crossings. Meanwhile, approximately 2000 other people, who had reportedly arrived on the islands, were never located by MSF teams at the communicated location by the end of the intervention and their whereabouts were not further identified.

In the aftermath of the tragic shipwreck off the coast of Pylos, in southwestern Greece, on 14 June 2023, in which approximately 500 people have lost their lives, there has been increased international attention and scrutiny of Greek border management practices<sup>1</sup>, including the conduct of the Hellenic Coast Guard. Since August 2023, MSF teams on Samos and Lesbos have observed a marked increase in the number of arrivals on the islands, accompanied by high-profile Hellenic Coast Guard-led rescues. Despite this, shipwrecks and violence at sea and land borders reportedly continue to this day.

---

<sup>1</sup> Aljazeera, [New lawsuit filed against Greece on behalf of refugee shipwreck survivors](#), September 2023 ; The Guardian, [We just want to know if he is alive or dead': migrants desperate for news of relatives in Greece shipwreck disaster](#), June 2023.

The majority of MSF patients who gave their testimonies describe having survived multiple pushbacks and crossing attempts prior to their ultimate arrival. Patient testimonies point to a recurring practice of pushbacks at sea and from land, reportedly carried out by uniformed officers and/or unidentified masked individuals. At sea, accounts describe the forceful towing of asylum seekers' boats, deliberate damage to boats' mechanical components, and being abandoned at sea on life rafts. From land, testimonies point to a pattern of practices including physical assault, handcuffing, informal detention, groups being forcibly taken to the shore before being pushed back at sea, as well as humiliating strip searches.

MSF patients report having been subjected to various and alarming forms of inhuman treatment in the lead-up to being pushed back. These include physical assaults, including beating with sticks, slapping, kicking, punching and handcuffing of hands and ankles. Physical violence is reportedly often accompanied by intimidation tactics and behaviour including the shooting of firearms, verbal harassment and humiliation, forced strip searches and intrusive body searches of men, women and children, and the destruction or dispossession of essential personal belongings carried by people on their journeys.

The repeated exposure to hazards and reported violence upon crossing, coupled with the near-total absence of assistance at land and sea, threaten the lives and wellbeing of people seeking safety and protection. MSF teams have responded to the urgent medical needs of 60 survivors of shipwrecks off the coast of Samos and Lesbos, in which 22 people, including children, tragically lost their lives.

After arriving on land, people report that they are forced into hiding out of fear of being pushed back. Sometimes they are in hiding for days, without access to food or water and exposed to the elements and dangerous terrain. Between August 2021 and July 2023, MSF treated 557 patients with injuries reportedly caused by water inhalation while swimming, engine burns, physical violence, or falling while climbing or escaping from uniformed officers and/or masked individuals. MSF teams have treated patients with signs of dehydration, hypoglycaemia and heat exhaustion, as well as winter-related medical conditions such as frostbite and hypothermia, with dire health risks for the most vulnerable people, including pregnant women and children.

The violence and non-assistance that people experience at the Greek-Turkish border exacerbate people's pre-existing vulnerabilities and physical and mental health conditions, and compound past traumatic experiences of violence, harming people's physical and psychological wellbeing. The accumulated chronic stress of multiple violent experiences has a devastating long-term impact on people's mental health. In the above-named period of almost two years, MSF mental health teams conducted 8621 psychological and/or psychiatric consultations, in which they oftentimes observed how past experiences in people's countries of origin and on their journeys, compounded by demeaning acts involving humiliation and dehumanisation, strip people of their dignity and self-worth, aggravate existing trauma and instill vulnerability, leaving long-lasting emotional scars.

MSF teams continue to provide emergency medical care to newly arrived people on Samos and Lesbos, despite periods when their work was obstructed. However, the overall provision of humanitarian assistance on the islands takes place in a climate of suspicion and criminalisation – of both humanitarian workers and those they seek to assist. The ever-shrinking humanitarian space has

negatively impacted the efforts of civil society to respond to the needs of people seeking protection in Europe.

As MSF continues to respond to the human and medical consequences of Greek and EU migration policies that promote deterrence and violent border control practices over safe passage and assistance, we call for the following actions to be taken as a matter of urgency:

- MSF urges the Greek government and European leaders to take all necessary measures to ensure that individuals seeking protection in Greece are treated with humanity and dignity. This includes immediately and permanently ending all pushbacks and violent practices at borders, ensuring continued search and rescue at sea, and granting individuals access to fair asylum procedures and humanitarian and medical assistance on arrival, in line with their obligations under European and international law.
- The Greek government must actively build an enabling environment for the protection and wellbeing of individuals seeking protection and safety. Continued impunity for violence against asylum seekers, migrants and refugees must be countered through effective accountability and independent monitoring, and there must be an immediate halt to disproportionate restrictions and criminalisation of civil society organisations providing assistance to new arrivals.
- MSF urges the European Commission, donor states and other EU member states to use any available mechanisms to ensure accountability for violence and compliance with European and international law.