



## Lack of handover plans for the response in Greece puts asylum seekers at risk, NGOs warn

Humanitarian organisations welcome the transition to Greek Government management of all aspects of service provision for asylum seekers on the Greek islands and for unaccompanied children throughout Greece. However, as this transition begins, and the European Commission scales down support for humanitarian assistance currently provided by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), there are growing concerns over the potential for deteriorating living conditions and diminishing access to essential services, as few details have been released about the plans for how this handover will be implemented.

In just over two weeks, on 31st July, the majority of European funding provided directly for NGOs responding on the Greek islands will come to an end. These NGOs have been providing aid for the nearly 14,000 people who are seeking international protection on the islands, but unable to move due to policies underpinned by the European Union – Turkey Statement. Under the new system, the Commission will support the Government to manage all aspects of the response through asylum, migration and integration funds (AMIF) and internal security funds (ISF) through DG HOME. The transition is a change from the current system in which NGOs provide services funded by the European Commission (directly through DG ECHO). In addition to the response on the islands, funding and responsibility for meeting the needs of the 2,250 unaccompanied children across Greece will largely also transition from DG ECHO to DG HOME funding under Government management.

This handover has the potential to be a positive step if implemented transparently, promptly and in close collaboration with the organisations currently providing services. However, to date, no national response plan has been released, and information about how the transition will be implemented is severely lacking. Without a clear transition plan, gaps in services will likely occur, and men, women and children may be put at greater risk, without the health, legal and other services and safety they need and have the right to.

We are already seeing the impact of similar service provider transitions. In Lesbos, for example, the contract for the organisation providing primary health care and conducting vulnerability assessments as part of the asylum procedure in the Moria Reception and Identification Centre ended on 30<sup>th</sup> May. Its 10 doctors, who had provided care for the more than 2,000 people living in the facility, as well as supported the Greek Asylum Service with vulnerability assessments, were replaced by just three doctors meant to fulfil the same responsibilities. Information from the ground indicates there is now a backlog in vulnerability assessments in both Chios and Lesbos, and a dire lack of primary health care.

Additionally, there has been a persistent shortage of safe accommodation and alternative care options for the children arriving to Greece alone throughout the response. There are currently 2,250 such unaccompanied children across Greece in need of safe shelter, but just 1,270 shelter spaces available. Roughly 1,000 unaccompanied children are therefore on a waiting list for shelter, with some living in squats, on the streets, or placed in “police protective custody” (detention) while they wait. As a result of this transition, at least five shelters are set to close, resulting in fewer shelter spaces available, and the number

of children in detention, as a form of accommodation, is on the rise. Other forms of appropriate care, such as foster care and semi-independent living, which are more cost-efficient and in line with the needs and best interests of the children, have received little coordinated support or approval from the Government, and there has been no information released about if and when even existing, small scale alternative care initiatives will be continued, let alone expanded upon.

Any gaps in services caused by an uncoordinated transition would impact the health and well-being of thousands of already vulnerable people. It is therefore critical to learn from the lessons of the past years of this response and avoid a foreseeable humanitarian emergency.

**We call on:**

- **The Greek Government** to consult with UN agencies, donors, NGOs and civil society to urgently develop and release a national response plan for the transition period and beyond. This plan should include clear steps for close collaboration and a smooth handover between current and new service providers to ensure no disruption or deterioration of services and living conditions on the islands or for unaccompanied children throughout Greece.
- **The Greek Government** to invest in and facilitate the development of more effective and sustainable forms of alternative care for unaccompanied children, particularly supervised semi-independent living and foster care.
- **The European Commission** to provide technical and coordination support to ensure that its funds are available, accessible, and used effectively and efficiently to prevent against disruption of essential services. This should include facilitating regular coordination meetings between relevant organisations and the competent authorities as necessary, to ensure a smooth handover between service providers.
- **The EU and other donors** to encourage the Government to ensure continuation of health, mental health and psychosocial support, education and legal services on the islands and a variety of appropriate alternative care options and protection services for unaccompanied children throughout Greece.