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## Guest Editorial

### Assyrian Refugees Face Harsh Discrimination in Greece

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(AINA) -- As countries become more intricately interconnected in this era of globalization, nation-states have turned to more restrictive policies on immigration and asylum. The Greek example is one such case. Assyrian refugees and asylum seekers in Greece are living under exceptionally difficult conditions. Their expectations for a life free from human rights violations, instability, and restrictions have been tokens of wishful thinking since their status as "undocumented illegals" does not allow for better circumstances.

Amnesty International has continually accused Greece of human rights abuses against genuine refugees and asylum seekers. In an annual report, Amnesty condemned the government for the improper manner of processing applications for political asylum and for the unjust deportation of asylum seekers in need of protection. Other international agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, World Organization Against Torture, Minority Rights Group International and the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights have repeatedly expressed disapproval of Greece's treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees. Even while I was there, hundreds of refugees and various human rights groups took to the streets of Athens in protest against these injustices.



Shamiran, 19, wants to study English

Under International Law, asylum seekers, many of which may be legitimate refugees or victims of persecution and human rights violations, should have every right of access to Greek land and the asylum procedure regardless of how they entered Greece. According to Athens News, however, Greece has the lowest recognition rate in the EU with a 0.3 percent in 2002 and less than 1% in 2003 while the EU average is 21 percent. It was also noted that Iraqis, many of which are Assyrians, make up the largest group of asylum-seekers in Greece and across Europe.

When I first visited Greece in 2001, I was shocked to find a reality completely converse to the idea I had about life in Greece. The idea I had was primarily based on nostalgic stories of Assyrians who had lived there in the early 1980s, filled with images of a youthful and vibrant beach life, beautiful and friendly people, and endless social activities. A lot has changed since then. Today, Assyrian/Chaldean Iraqis are far from the European standard of living. As one refugee put it, "we are living in paradise...but as monkeys; what good is it to live in paradise as a monkey?"

That is when I decided to relay the difficulties these people face to the rest of the world. In the winter of 2004, I began the process of making a short film entitled **Voices in Exile**, where I documented the experiences, current living conditions, and future expectations of just a few of these refugees. Many of the subjects covered in the film are about hardships Assyrians face, ranging from lack of protection to the extremely high prices of electricity they must pay, sometimes even exceeding rent.

Employment is hard to find even in the best of economic times, integration is nearly impossible, repatriation to Iraq is not a viable option, and inadequate counselling about future prospects and their rights as asylum seekers are just a few of the concerns of Assyrian exiles. The situation continues to deteriorate as many are awaiting the closure of the last refugee humanitarian resettlement programs out of Greece, even while an outstanding 90% of Assyrians in Greece are allegedly without papers and legal protection.



Those that can afford to study do so without receiving any study certificates upon completion of a course. Lacking ID cards makes them ineligible to receive certificates or degrees

for study. I met many young disillusioned Assyrians who had hopes for studying, but whose dreams have been crushed, as they continue awaiting their fates to enter other destination countries year after year with no positive response.



Juaneh, 65, recently became a widow

In one incident, Greek police badly beat an Assyrian man, who happened to come upon a police station as his first point of contact, and sent him on a flimsy wooden boat across the Aegean back to his immediate point of origin, Turkey, where he was vulnerable to being deported back to Iraq. Greece and Turkey signed a treaty in 2001 allowing for this practice, a practice that violates international laws of *non-refoulement* (no forcible return). The ill-treatment by the Greek authorities has many Assyrians thinking of Greece as merely a stepping stone, with most wanting to come to North America or Australia. Many Assyrians view Greece as an interim phase and do not consider integration into Greek society as an option or possibility, due in part to the hostile government position to the Assyrians and refugees in general.

State sovereignty seems to be stronger than ever these days, where immigration laws are subject to change at any time and new restrictions on travel and visa requirements are under the direct control of the state. Most of the world's democratic states are bound by the rule of international law, and in all fairness, it is not only Greece that is unjustly treating asylum seekers, even though their remarkably low asylum recognition rates speak for themselves. The fact of the issue is that the international human rights regime lacks the power of enforcement. Countries acting in contravention of these laws and norms do not fear reprisal or any repercussions for their actions.

Something must be done to help the estimated 2000 Assyrians in Greece. Many of the refugees I met were astonished at my interest in knowing their living situation. They feel neglected and forgotten, and their frustrations are easily understood given their current circumstances. Many fear that without legal status, they can be forcibly returned to Turkey, an action often practiced by the Greek authorities.

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*Lidia Kiorkis is an Assyrian American currently living in Chicago. She has a BA in International Studies from DePaul University and has recently returned from South Africa after completing an MA in Forced Migration Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research in Johannesburg focused on the Somali refugee population and its relationship with native Muslim South African local NGOs. She has lived and worked with refugees in Egypt, as well as with Latino communities in Chicago and Mexico.*

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