FROM SEA TO CELL:

Tracing Migration Journeys through Crete, Court and (Mainland) Confinement

November 2026



Border Violence Monitoring Network

MOBILE INFO TEAM

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BORDER CRIMINOLOGIES

Who we are

Mobile Info Team is a Greece-based organisation supporting people disadvantaged by displacement or migration to navigate complex legal systems and assert their rights. We provide accessible information and tailored case support and use our daily interactions with people to advocate for change at national and EU levels, amplifying the voices of those affected by exclusionary policies and campaigning for a just migration and asylum system.

Thalassa of Solidarity is a grassroots organization founded in Heraklion, Crete, in 2019. It serves as a meeting point for individuals of diverse backgrounds, fostering meaningful inclusion and creative coexistence. Its initiatives encompass educational programs and practical assistance with legal and administrative challenges. Concurrently, the organization advocates for human rights, with a recent focus on trial monitoring and defending refugees against the unjust criminalization of human mobility.

The Border Violence Monitoring Network is a coalition of organisations that monitors and documents human rights violations against people on the move within European borders. Since 2016, it has published multiple editions of the Black Book of Pushbacks, a 3000-page record of testimonials of violations impacting more than 25,000 people on the move.

Established in 2024, **Detention Landscapes** is an ongoing collaborative project between Border Criminologies, Mobile Info Team and the Border Violence Monitoring Network. The purpose of the project is to develop and maintain an open access database and knowledge hub collating evidence of violations inside immigration detention facilities across countries.

The authors of this report would also like to thank the 8 people who shared their experiences with us, Glocal Roots based on Kos for their valuable insights, the ad hoc researchers who supported the research and drafting process, the various journalists we spoke with as well as the people who supported with the translation of this publication.

Introduction

In the summer of 2025, there was an increase in the number of people crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa to Crete, hoping to reach safety in Europe. Instead, an arduous journey lay ahead: one marked by violence and intimidation upon arrival, immediate detention in informal facilities, arrest and criminal prosecution for some as "boat drivers", dangerous transfers to the mainland, and prolonged detention thereafter in remote facilities devoid of respect for fundamental rights.

Over the past year, many have shared their stories with the media, solidarity groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They have done so in protest against their situation, and to ensure that their experiences would not remain invisible. Their stories speak of uncertainty, isolation and violence.

This publication brings light to those stories, and across 5 chapters, traces each stage of the route travelled:

- **Landing** - lack of state planning, deaths at sea and seizure of belongings
- **Confinement** - conditions of de facto detention
- **Invisibility** - violence and lack of access to the external world
- **Prosecution** - criminalisation and trial monitoring
- **Detention** - transfers and prolonged detention in Sintiki

To map the journey across the chapters, the publication draws on the testimonies of those who experienced it between July 2025 and July 2026, shared with the Border Violence Monitoring Network, as well as research by the archiving project Detention Landscapes. Based on their work monitoring trials on Crete, the “Prosecution” chapter is written by Thalassa of Solidarity, and addresses the systematic criminalisation of people arrested and charged as "boat drivers".

The individual stories which are included across each part shed light on the day to day suffering of people seeking safety, as well as on the structural violence of Greece's migration and asylum system. They expose how inadequate reception planning, prolonged detention, restriction on access to information and legal support, and the criminalisation of people seeking protection have combined to produce a system in which fundamental rights have been utterly undermined. Through the experiences of those who lived it, the publication documents not isolated failures, but a broader policy of deterrence that continues to shape the treatment of new arrivals in Greece.

To preserve anonymity, all names used in this publication have been changed.

Image credit: Ivan Arena

Landing

lack of state planning, deaths at sea and seizure of belongings

Image credit: Rowen Smith

a) Context: lack of state planning despite a steady increase in arrivals

"I thought that Libya was the worst violence I'd ever encountered, but when I came to Greece, I realised it was worse."

Ali

All of the stories recounted in this series began with the same journey across the Mediterranean from North Africa to Crete. Before making the crossing, many had already endured months of arbitrary detention, violence and exploitation in Libya. For some, the journey ended at sea. For those who survived, instead of reaching safety, their arrival in Greece marked the start of a second, equally grim episode.

In 2025, 20,187 people arrived on the Greek islands of Crete and Gavdos from North Africa, representing a fourfold increase compared to the previous year, and standing in contrast to a decrease in arrivals along other migration routes. By July, the number of arrivals on the islands (7,336) had already surpassed the total number of arrivals in 2024 (5,161) and in 2023 (815). At the same time, unfolding diplomatic tensions between Greek, EU and Western Libyan officials were fuelling fears of "weaponisation", contributing to an increasing securitised political discourse.

In Greece, the increase in arrivals was officially presented as a crisis of exceptional magnitude. This alarmist rhetoric was used to justify the adoption of increasingly repressive 'migration management' measures from summer 2025 onwards, intended as acts of deterrence to dissuade further arrivals. These included the deployment of navy vessels near the Libyan coast, an unlawful three-month suspension on the processing of asylum applications, and ultimately, plans to create closed detention facilities on Crete. Taken together, the adoption of these measures as well as the framing concealed a failure to adequately prepare and reinforce reception capacity along a route whose use had been steadily increasing.

For local authorities on the islands, it had long been apparent that an increase in arrivals would quickly overwhelm the already scarce reception and accommodation capacity available. Yet, the immediate operational necessity of accommodating people was hindered by local resistance in various locations in Crete - including Hersonissos, Malades and Heraklion - and poor institutional coordination. Since 2023, local authorities had repeatedly called on the national government for both material and financial support, while responsibility for identifying suitable sites remained contested between different levels of government. As arrivals increased in July 2025, local officials continued to describe the Ministry as completely absent from the response. Taken together, the lack of financial and material support, clear leadership and institutional coordination placed local authorities under considerable strain to accommodate arrivals in whatever space could be found, irrespective of whether those sites could guarantee basic living conditions or access to essential services. The absence of suitable structures and operational readiness was also acknowledged by the Greek Ombudsman, ECRE and the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, who observed that the "humanitarian situation would be manageable if authorities had addressed the lack of reception capacity in a timely manner."

The continued focus on control and deterrence also obscured the fact that measures implemented failed to stop people from arriving. Although crossings temporarily declined after the suspension of asylum applications began, arrivals steadily increased again, reaching almost the same number in December 2025 as in July 2025.

For people apprehended by the authorities and transferred to temporary, unofficial detention facilities in Crete, the suspension came as a surprise. They revealed to BVMN that they lacked, or were unable to access, information regarding the suspension of asylum applications before departing North Africa:

"Personally, I have been in Libya from April 2025, without phone or internet or way to communicate with my family or outside world. The only thing I knew was that I was in unlawful detention [...] So, we do not know that the Minister had stopped the asylum for 3 months. [...] So we came and the camp is detaining us even though we did not know. What is our fault?"

Mahmoud

For others, their journey - and their lives - were unnecessarily cut short at sea. According to official data published by RSA, throughout 2025, incidents in the Cretan region caused 20 recorded deaths and 25 disappearances - the highest number across Greece. The majority of incidents from that period was also recorded in December 2025, with the sea near Crete becoming the theatre of one of the deadliest shipwrecks of the year early in the month. 17 people lost their lives, 15 others were reported missing, and only 2 survived. It was just one among at least another 5 documented shipwrecks that occurred that month alone, bearing witness to the systematic violence and risk of death experienced by people making the crossing the sea. It should be noted that these figures are indicative, and likely a significant underestimation of the actual number of deaths and disappearances that occurred during 2025. Considering the nature of the route, many incidents may either go undetected or unreported. Nevertheless, the above events still reflect a broader pattern of negligent search and rescue operations.

b) Violence at sea, upon arrival, and seizure of belongings

"They also beat us. While rescuing us, they were beating us in the sea, the Greek [Coast] Guards. They beat me in my stomach in their own boat after they rescued us."

Nabil

For those who survived the perilous crossing, people faced violent and hostile behaviour upon arrival in Greece - in some cases, while still on open water; in others, just after arrival. Nabil, who was detained in the Former Exhibition Centre in Chania in July 2025, explained that just after being rescued at sea, he was physically beaten by the Hellenic Coast Guard:

"They also beat us. While rescuing us, they were beating us in the sea, the Greek [Coast] Guards. They beat me in my stomach in their own boat after they rescued us."

Ali, an Egyptian national detained in Heraklion in August 2025, shared that he and others were immediately searched and stripped by the authorities when arrested after arrival:

"When the police came, they searched us aggressively, took away our phones, chargers and powerbanks and put them in plastic bags. They forced us on big buses and brought us to quarantine."

Ali further explained that he and his fellow travellers were forced to take off the top half of their clothing and were promised new ones, a pledge that remained unfulfilled.

Youssef, also detained in Heraklion, echoed these experiences. He described being "treated poorly" and that while being searched, people's phones were taken while all other belongings were thrown away, leaving them with nothing apart from but the clothes they were wearing. Youssef also shared that they were insulted, and called derogatory names such as "malaka" or "ghaidori". All others that BVMN spoke with confirmed having their phones taken away by the authorities, and having to provide their passcode. These first encounters shaped the experiences that followed, with their accounts revealing that the violence experienced during landing often escalated once transferred to the facilities in which people were detained on the island.

Confinement

sub-standard conditions of *de facto* detention on Crete

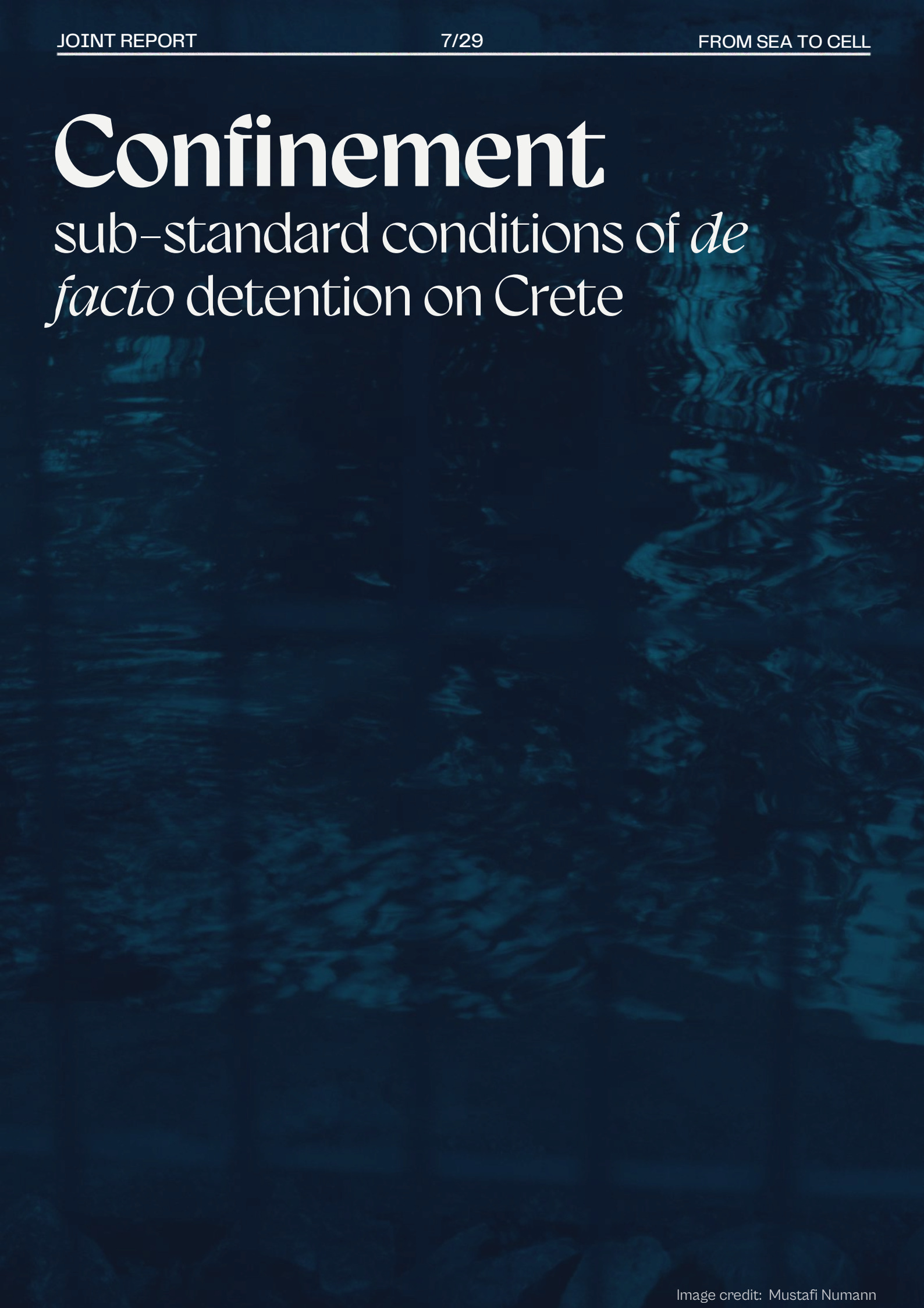


Image credit: Mustafi Numann

"In the three reception sites I visited in Crete, primarily in port areas and improvised facilities, conditions were visibly strained and far below adequate standards for the number of arrivals [...] The atmosphere across all locations was one of uncertainty and exhaustion, with people waiting for transfer under conditions that reflected an overstretched and largely improvised reception system."

Dimitra Margariti, freelance journalist reporting on conditions in Crete in early August 2025. See her report, written in collaboration with Sophia Potsi and published by Inkstick Media here.

Following their arrival and apprehension on Crete and Gavdos, people were immediately placed into detention. In the absence of appropriate reception arrangements, several facilities on Crete were repurposed as detention sites. Most frequently, people were transferred to the Former Agia Exhibition Centre in Chania, the Hellenic Coast Guard security building in the port of Heraklion, or the Old Port Authority of Rethymo, which is not in use anymore today.

Across the facilities, people's accounts paint a shocking yet consistent picture. Together with observations from journalists and solidarity actors who were able to enter some of the facilities, they describe overcrowded informal spaces where hundreds were kept with limited information about their situation, and almost no contact with the outside world. People shared that they had limited access to water, sanitation and healthcare, and about overall unhygienic conditions. They recounted, and showed through pictures, exposure to extreme summer heat, as well as being forced to sleep on scraps of cardboard or between bins to find shade, and insufficient and poor-quality food. Overall, their reports reveal conditions that fell far below the standards required by Greek and EU law, and exposed people to inhumane and degrading treatment.

a) Overcrowding and lack of separation between detainees

"Everybody was sharing the same space, families, Sudanese, people from Egypt, minors. We separated ourselves, made space for women on one side and men on one side. There were no walls or any other thing to separate us. It was something like a [...] storehouse for clothes."

Nabil

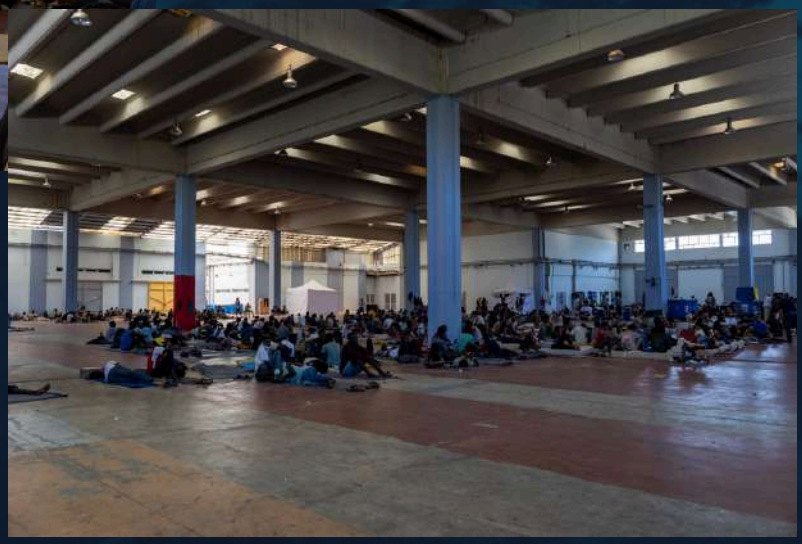
For many, one of the first impressions upon entering the facilities was the sheer number of people confined together. Nabil shared that men, women, families and unaccompanied children were routinely detained altogether in the Former Exhibition Centre in Chania:

"Everybody was sharing the same space, families, Sudanese, people from Egypt, minors. We separated ourselves, made space for women on one side and men on one side. There were no walls or any other thing to separate us. It was something like a [...] storehouse for clothes."

His account confirms a broader pattern documented throughout the summer. By September 2025, overcrowding in the facilities was already severe. In the Former Exhibition Centre in Chania, 1.200 people were confined in a space reportedly only able to host up to 300-400. In Heraklion, people recounted the lack of air conditioning and windows, of hygiene facilities and items, and the inability to access proper and personalised healthcare, also raising public health concerns (as developed below).



Former Exhibition Centre in Chania, August 2025
© Dimitra Margariti



Former Exhibition Centre in Chania, August 2025
© Dimitra Margariti

The absence of separation between different groups was a recurring concern for people. Ahmed, an Egyptian national detained in the Hellenic Coast Guard Security Building in Heraklion in August 2025, explained that apart from families who were held separately, others were all detained together:

"From 10 year-old of age, until old age, [we were] all mixed. Unaccompanied minors were mixed with the rest of the adults. There was not any special treatment by the authorities in this facility toward the minors, and there weren't any NGOs coming specifically asking for minors, it was the same treatment for all of us, all ages."

Youssef confirmed that unaccompanied minors had been detained along with adults for 2 weeks before being picked up by the staff of what he referred to as "an NGO". However, he added that this was not the case for all children: **"[t]here were minors that did not look that young, but had proof [of their age], but still were kept with us and were transferred with us to Sintiki."**

Beyond the practical consequences of overcrowding and the risks it poses to the safety and well-being of adults and children, these accounts also raise serious concerns about compliance with applicable legal safeguards for people in return procedures. Under both Greek and EU law, the detention of children must always be a measure of last resort and happen only in exceptional circumstances. Where detention does take place, children and families must be provided with separate accommodation guaranteeing family privacy. [1]

b) Deprivation of basic needs

"The same clothes that I came with from Egypt, [while] I crossed from Libya, [which] were full of salt from the sea, I wore them for 20 days, I did not wash it. Also when transferred to Sintiki, we wore the same clothes for a long time, until we got some money to buy [new] clothes."

Youssef

While the specific conditions varied between facilities, people's experiences highlight living conditions across structures largely incapable of satisfying basic needs, and in effect, having to make do with as little as possible.

People detained in structures in both Heraklion and Chania consistently reported poor-quality and insufficient provision of food, as well as water. Nabil explained that he received only one bottle of water upon arrival in the facility, which he had to fill up afterwards using only one of two taps available for all detainees.

Ahmed shared that only one tap was available for the whole facility, with limited and insufficient water supply. He also added that even the toilets - reportedly located outside of the building - were not supplied with water, only toilet paper. Ali reported that people had to resort to rationing what little water they had:

"To try to save some water, we would fast Monday and Thursday, and would pierce the bottle to save some water."

Basic hygiene was equally difficult to maintain. Across both facilities, for periods of up to 20 days, people shared that they were not provided with any personal hygiene items, and were not able to shower or provided with new clothes to change into. This reportedly and evidently resulted in people developing transmittable skin conditions:

"We did not shower for 20 days in Libya, then 16 days in Crete, to the point that lots of people got scabies and skin problems." - Ali

"The same clothes that I came with from Egypt, [while] I crossed from Libya, [which] were full of salt from the sea, I wore them for 20 days, I did not wash it. Also when transferred to Sintiki, we wore the same clothes for a long time, until we got some money to buy [new] clothes." - Youssef

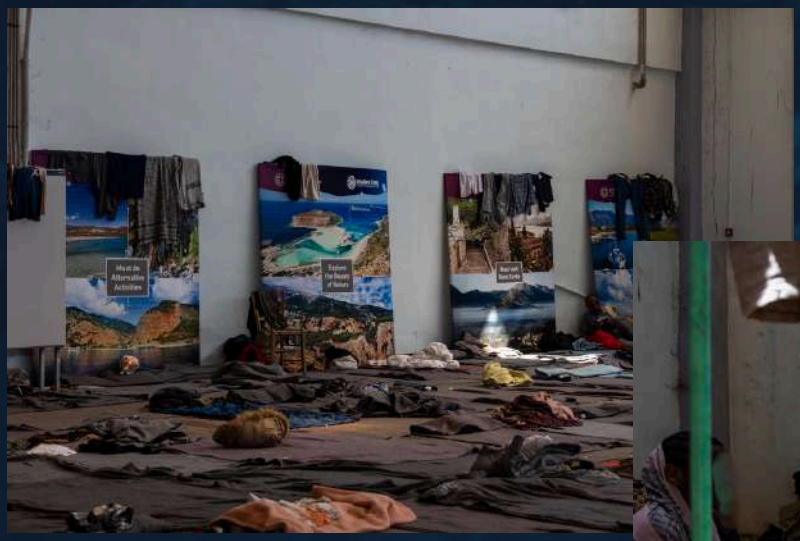
Beyond its impact on people's dignity and health, the lack of adequate access to running water also interfered with their ability to practice their religion. As Ali explained:

"Even for praying, water is required, but we would pray without water. I thought that Libya was the worst violence I'd ever encountered, but when I came to Greece, I realised it was worse."

Sleeping conditions offered little relief. People in both facilities were reportedly forced to sleep directly on the floor, sometimes using thin yoga mats or the blankets they had been provided with as mattresses. Mahmoud, an Egyptian national detained in the Hellenic Coast Guard Security Building in Heraklion in August 2025, explained that **"We had only blankets. We used to use them as mattresses. These blankets caused us skin problems, the skin became itchy."**

During the summer, the extreme heat made these conditions harder to endure. People reported not having access to open air spaces, or air conditioning. In Heraklion, they were reportedly only able to access an outdoor space when going to the toilets. Even then, permission and an escort was required from the facility's guards - granted only, however, depending on their "mood". Youssef raised that authorities would even use violence to hurry people back inside: **"If somebody is slow or sick, they hit them with the baton to go back quickly, they were very rude to us."**

While neither EU nor Greek law includes clear instruction on the conditions of subsistence for people subject to return procedures, the reported deprivation of basic needs risks contradiction with international human rights standards and accompanying safeguards stemming from the European Convention on Human Rights.[2]



Former Exhibition Centre in Chania, August 2025
© Dimitra Margariti



c) A public health disaster

"[The facility was] very disgusting, there were insects everywhere, it looked like a morgue, like where they store dead bodies."
Ali

As their detention continued, people described their health deteriorating. Frequent overcrowding, poor sanitation and prolonged confinement created conditions in which illness could spread easily. Health workers and authorities described the facilities in Chania and Heraklion as a sanitary "bomb". Although medical examinations were reportedly carried out in some cases by the Greek National Public Health Organisation (EODY), and the Red Cross was present in both facilities in Heraklion and Chania, people consistently shared about insufficient and inadequate healthcare provision.

In the Former Exhibition Centre, Nabil shared that he had undergone medical screening upon arrival. Ibrahim, detained in the Hellenic Coast Guard Security Building in Heraklion, highlighted that no medical screening was carried out there. Others also previously detained in Heraklion reported a lack of (specialised) staff, shortages of medication, highly limited interpretation services and strict restrictions imposed by the facility's authorities on access to hospitals.

Accounts of medical staff visiting the facility varied, with reports mentioning "one nurse or first aid person", a doctor and two nurses, or doctors attending once a week. There was general consensus among them that the support they were able to provide was insufficient to meet people's needs. Both Ali and Ibrahim highlighted that people were supplied with painkillers, and could not access other types of treatment, including for chronic conditions. As Ali shared, **"Some people had serious problems, they could not be treated."**

Communication was also an obstacle to receiving care. While Ali mentioned the presence of a Syrian interpreter coming in with the Red Cross, Ahmed explained having to rely on other detainee's English skills to be able to communicate with health actors as well as authorities:

"There wasn't anybody, no translator at all. There was just one person from our own group who spoke English, he was the one translating with the doctor and the authorities."

Finally, Youssef described access to hospitals as extremely difficult to obtain, and granted by the authorities only as a measure of last resort:

"It is very difficult to go to the hospital. If they don't see you fainting on the floor, losing consciousness or about to die, they will not take you to the hospital."

The right to access emergency medical care, necessary treatment or special care for vulnerable individuals in immigration detention pending return is enshrined in both EU and national law. The reported deprivation of healthcare not only risks violating return safeguards, but also various fundamental and human rights, including the right to life, dignity and the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment.[3]

Today, more than a year after Ibrahim, Mahmoud, Nabil, Ahmed, Ali and Youssef were taken out of Crete, the conditions in facilities on the island remain deplorable. In a press release published early September 2026, the Greek Ombudsman describes facilities on the island as "unsuitable" and highlights that the procedure followed "amounts to de facto detention" and is "circumventing the provisions and strict deadlines established by the relevant European Screening Regulation". Throughout October and early November 2026, hundreds of people have been taken to the former premises of the agricultural cooperative AGREX, a warehouse which, like the others, is unsuitable for accommodating people, let alone with dignity. Conditions have been reported as appalling, with insufficient capacity in the building forcing people to sleep in tents outside in cold weather and rains, or under garbage trucks, a lack of hygiene and toilet facilities and bad smell partly leading municipal staff to refuse working in the area.

Invisbility

violence and lack of access to the external world

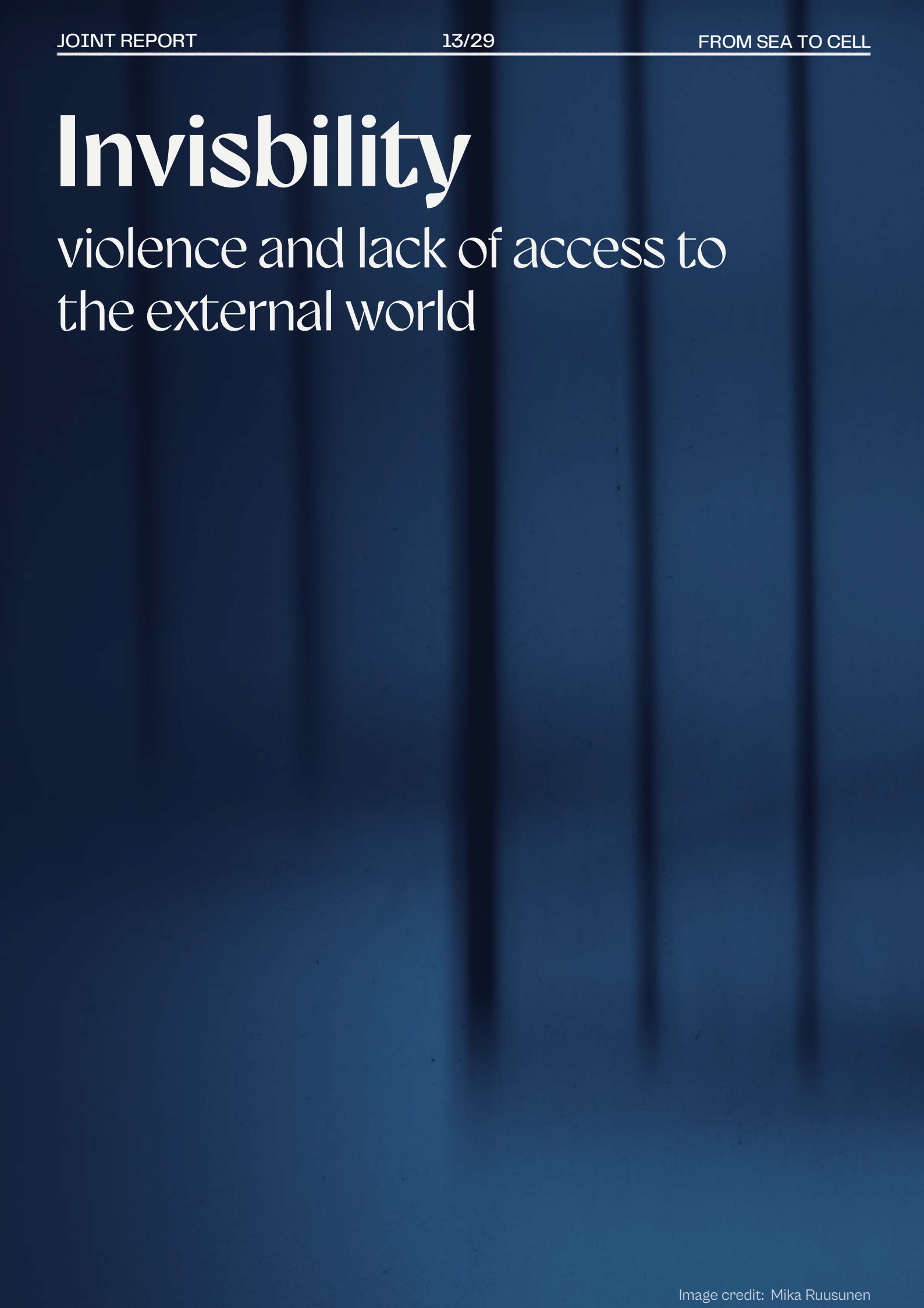


Image credit: Mika Ruusunen

a) Restrictions of access to civil society and lack of information provision

For those we spoke to, their detention was defined not only by poor conditions, but also by isolation. Once inside the facilities, people described feeling cut off from the outside world, unsure where they were, why they were being held, or what would happen next. Their isolation was reinforced by the confiscation of mobile phones, inadequate interpretation services, and restrictions on media and NGO access, also leaving many without access to legal support. Throughout their detention on Crete, people received very little formal information from the authorities. No detention orders were given, and explanations about the reasons for their confinement or information about the next steps in the process were largely absent. Nabil expressed despondency over the situation, saying that:

"[the authorities] took pictures of us, they took our names. We received documents only upon arrival in Sintiki. They took photos with their phones and we didn't ask why as they would not give us any information anyway."

This uncertainty was compounded by growing restrictions on access to the facilities themselves. During the first weeks of summer, access for solidarity actors, including those providing legal support, was inconsistent. Restrictions reportedly intensified after the suspension of asylum applications began in July 2025. At the same time, no alternative arrangements were put into place to ensure people could obtain essential items, legal advice or credible information.

Journalists attempting to document the conditions encountered similar obstacles. Access to several facilities was reportedly denied, while entry to others was tightly controlled, limiting independent scrutiny. Dimitra Margariti, a freelance journalist reporting on conditions in Crete in early August 2025, described both the difficult conditions as well as restrictions placed on accessing them:

"In the three reception sites I visited in Crete, primarily in port areas and improvised facilities, conditions were visibly strained and far below adequate standards for the number of arrivals. Access to the facility in Heraklion was denied, limiting transparency regarding conditions there. In the temporary facilities in Chania and Rethymno, people were held in closed, guarded spaces, most of them sleeping on cardboard or directly on the ground. Access to basic services was extremely limited: in some locations, hundreds of individuals had to rely on just a handful of chemical toilets, while running water, showers, and consistent medical distribution were either insufficient or delayed. There was little separation for vulnerable groups, including women and children. The atmosphere across all locations was one of uncertainty and exhaustion, with people waiting for transfer under conditions that reflected an overstretched and largely improvised reception system."[4]

Where journalists were granted entry, they reported having to respect strict rules. Journalists from various outlets reported that they were not allowed to speak to detainees. In the Chania structure, one also shared that a police officer had warned them to "be careful" because "these are dangerous people". Another reported that the authorities had said, referring to detainees: "Do you see them? They're so stupid. We give them mattresses to sleep on, and they'd rather sleep on the floor so they can cut them up and play games." The "mattresses" in question were thin yoga mats, visible in pictures shared by the outlet.

For detainees, the consequences of their isolation were profound. Several people were initially unable even to identify where they had been detained, and were only able to identify their location after seeing pictures of different facilities. Their accounts reveal not only a lack of information, but the experience of effectively disappearing from public view.

b) Violence, ill-treatment and hate crime

"I thought that in Libya it was horrible, but then it was worse because I thought that when I would get to Greece, I would get human rights."

Ali

Alongside reports of violence during interception and arrival, the isolation of these facilities also meant that allegations of physical violence and intimidation, including against children, remained largely hidden from public scrutiny. Several testimonies collected by BVMN described incidents of violence during detention. Ibrahim recalled:

"We were beaten up by the police multiple times. [...] They did ask for personal information, including age. So, they knew they were minors and still beat them."

Ali pointed out the behaviour of one officer as particularly hostile: **"He was telling us 'This is not your country, you're not welcome here'."** This same officer reportedly reacted with contempt and condescension to a hunger strike initiated by detainees in protest against violence in the facility: **"you guys think that you are smart doing this, but it doesn't matter, it doesn't change anything, we will throw the food anyway, go back to your country'."**

Reflecting on his experience, Ali compared what he expected to find in Europe with the reality he encountered after arriving in Greece:

"I thought that in Libya it was horrible, but then it was worse because I thought that when I would get to Greece, I would get human rights."

One particularly serious incident, documented on Detention Landscapes, illustrates the gravity of the allegations emerging from Heraklion. It recounts that detainees held in the Hellenic Coast Guard Security Building had been subjected to violent beatings by "two men wearing military uniforms" and with covered faces, while praying in the facility. One person described:

"They entered the room. Four people were praying, they were Muslims. They attacked us and beat us with black sticks. They stopped us from praying."

Children were reportedly also targeted:

"We tried to move the kids to the middle so they wouldn't be targeted, to protect them, but they got beaten up anyway."

Following the incident, the authorities allegedly sought to cover up the events, explicitly asking detainees not to disclose the events outside the facility.

While it is important to acknowledge that reports of the event may not include all contextual details, and that no claims can be made as to the exact intentions of the individuals involved in the attack, they indicate that people were allegedly assaulted while engaged in religious worship. Under international standards (albeit non-binding ones), actions motivated by bias regarding a personal characteristic or identity trait, including religion, may constitute a hate crime.[5] While in Greece, "hate crime" is not directly enshrined in law, this incident also appears capable of engaging several legal provisions related to religious freedom, insulting behaviours and bodily harm.[6]

Taken together, the lack of appropriate reception infrastructure, seizure of mobile phones, and restrictions on access for solidarity actors and the media created an environment in which allegations of violence become harder to document and less likely to attract public scrutiny. Rather than isolated measures, these restrictions can be seen as forming part of a broader strategy of invisibilisation that concealed people themselves, and the conditions in which they were being held.

Prosecution

criminalisation and trial monitoring

Thalassa of Solidarity



Image credit: Rascal Zou

The figure of the “boat driver”, charged under Greek law as a human smuggler, is less a criminal profile and more of a legal fiction, a category of systematic convictions by Greece, all part of a punitive border governance regime. Steering a boat is treated by the State and the courts with the same severity as profit-driven trafficking operations, resulting in convictions that span decades and hundreds of thousands, even millions of euros. Organised around the line of questioning employed by the Greek courts in 40 trials in 2025 and 80 trials observed in Crete over the January-July 2026 period by Thalassa of Solidarity and partner organisations, including BVMN, this section exposes a fast-tracked judiciary machine that routinely bypasses fair-trial guarantees, transforming desperate acts of maritime survival into heavily punishable offenses. The data Thalassa collects is routinely cross-referenced with organisations that monitor refugee trials in several locations in Greece, however in some cases the names of the defendants were not available, and/or research into trial results is still ongoing.

a) Identifying the "Driver", Age Disputes, and Flawed Evidence

Who was driving the boat to leave Libya? * How did the transporter leave? * Did he swim? * Who drove you to leave? * What did you do on the boat? * What did the other driver do? * Did another passenger help you drive? * Had he been trained by the smugglers? * Why did they choose him to drive the boat? * Did he pay less than the others, so they put him on the boat first and made him drive the boat?

These interrogations establish the core charge of "illegal transport" (Article 25 of Law 5038/2023), which dominated proceedings in 2025, appearing 178 times and representing 94% of all monitored charges; in 2026 in Crete the situation is no different in the majority of cases monitored. Under Greek law, any person effectively steering a vessel is deemed and penalized as an organised smuggler, leading to 134 guilty or partially guilty verdicts in the monitored dataset[7] in 2025; in 2026, in Crete alone over the first half of 2026, the percentage of guilty or partially guilty verdicts reaches over 80%.

The 2026 trial data highlight how desperate conditions compel individuals to steer a vessels. For example, 18 year-old G. described that he took the wheel only after the original driver could no longer continue,[8] while 26-year-old M. took control because the captain fell severely ill.[9] Furthermore, 18-year-old L. from South Sudan was forced to steer the boat from Libya at gunpoint.

Data also revealed deeply flawed and arbitrary identification practices. In a trial monitored in Chania on April 20, 2026, a defendant was acquitted because the defense exposed flaws in the identification process, establishing reasonable doubt as to the actual identity of the driver. At the appellate level, there is also a glimmer of hope: M. (21) and T. (33) were acquitted in Heraklion after the court recognized they did not play a role in the transfer or facilitation, successfully overturning flawed initial identifications after 1.5 years of postponements.

Age disputes further compound these systemic errors. Minors are routinely tried as adults because courts systematically prioritize highly criticized forensic "medical" age assessments–such as wrist bone X-rays–over original documentation, or reject documents due to a lack of official translation. For example, L. was tried and sentenced as an adult despite turning 18 inside a Greek prison, and G., also 18, received a 25-year sentence. However, there are also instances of successful interventions: during the April 20, 2026, Chania hearings, two defendants were successfully referred to the competent Juvenile Court after defense lawyers raised objections regarding their age.

b) Investigating the "For Profit" Aggravating Circumstance and Massive Fines

How much did you pay to leave? * Where did you pay the money? * In what currency? * How much did you pay? * Do you know how much the others paid?

During our observations, we have come to confirm the findings of the 2025 BVMN report, which finds that financial questioning is aimed at establishing the aggravating circumstance of acting "for profit," an element invoked in 135 cases (71%).[10] The courts' use of the aggravating factor of financial gain triggers massive cumulative fines, as penalties are calculated based on the number of people transported.[11] While not forming part of the dataset from Crete, an extremely high recorded fine reached an extreme €840,500 for an individual tried on Mytilene, Lesvos, demonstrating the egregious yet systematic application of the "for profit" element across islands.

Prison sentences handed down in 2026 further illustrate the astronomical nature of the penalties. Before their successful appeals in Heraklion, a 33-year-old Sudanese named M.F. had been sentenced to 296 years in prison alongside a €4.2 million fine, while T., 33, from Syria had faced an initial conviction of 296 years in prison and 4,2 million as well.[12] Furthermore, testimonies underscore that those accused of smuggling have often paid smugglers themselves; M. had paid 13,000 Libyan dinars to a smuggler before being forced to take the helm.

Despite that, and in the absence of financial gain, courts still systematically convict on the basic transport charge. During the April 2, 2026 hearings in Heraklion, a prosecutor explicitly emphasized that convictions were justified on the alleged endangerment of passengers' lives rather than financial profit, completely disregarding defendants' claims that they were paying passengers themselves, and laying bare the extremely punitive nature of the system.

c) Endangerment of Life, Jurisdiction, and "State of Emergency"

When the coast guard arrived, were you near the coast? * Could you see the shore when the coast guard arrived? * Who notified them that they needed help? * How did they notify them that they needed help? In what way? * Did you notify the coast guard that you were in danger?

These parameters address territorial jurisdiction, sea rescues, and claims of extreme necessity. The critical aggravating factor of "endangering lives" was invoked in 125 cases (66%). Defense attorneys frequently raise procedural objections stating that Greek courts lack territorial jurisdiction because interceptions occurred exclusively within international waters. Notably, even when courts accept these jurisdictional challenges–as seen in multiple cases in Heraklion (April 2, 2026) and Chania (April 20, 2026)–they rarely dismiss the case. Instead, they only reduce the conviction to one they are able to hand down despite the jurisdictional challenge, namely "attempted" illegal transport, which still carries a heavy 10-year baseline prison term per transported person.

Extreme inconsistencies also persist in how courts handle the "state of emergency" defense. In Athens, a judge successfully acquitted M. and his Syrian co-defendant, recognizing a state of emergency because M. only took the wheel to save lives after the captain became incapacitated and called rescue numbers. Similarly, during the April 2, 2026 Heraklion hearings, a state of emergency was recognized for a defendant traveling with his pregnant wife, leading to his acquittal. The Heraklion appeal court also significantly reduced S. and H's sentences–converting the charges from a Kathirixi (felony) to a Filakisi (misdemeanor)–because they took the wheel during a maritime emergency.

Conversely, the court in Chania demonstrated strong resistance to the defense in 2025 and 2026. Prosecutors there have outright rejected such arguments, dismissively rejecting a wife's testimony of hardship and emergency based on her "painted nails".[13] The court completely ignored the emergency context for 18-year-old G., handing down a 25-year sentence despite his actions being a desperate attempt to save his own life and others, and a complete lack of translation during the trial.[14] Similarly, N. and Mo., two 20-year-olds from Sudan, received 10-year sentences in Chania after steering a boat to survive, with the prosecution relentlessly demanding the harshest possible sentence.[15]

d) Passenger Composition, the Absence of Witnesses, and Fast-Track Trials

Was the boat big? * Where were the people on the boat from? * Were they from the same country? * When you were waiting to board the boat, was the other Saudi there? * Did you board the boat alone? * Did you board the boat before the other passengers or during it?

While attempting to map smuggling networks, proceedings are characterized by the total absence of in-depth examination of evidence. Prosecution witnesses were present in only 21 out of 87 hearings (24%) monitored in 2025. When they were called, 25 out of the 29 witnesses were Coast Guard officers, leaving passenger testimonies entirely untested. Courts routinely read out unverified pre-trial depositions by other passengers, despite defense objections that the addresses of those passengers are "unknown" and unlocatable. During the April 20, 2026 Chania hearings, observers noted that no evidence was examined at all –no witnesses were called by the defense, and no additional material evidence was introduced.

Conversely, 2026 data also proves that when witnesses are present, they can effectively unravel the prosecution's predetermined narrative. In the April 2, 2026 Heraklion hearings, privately appointed lawyers brought the wives of defendants to testify as defense witnesses, directly resulting in acquittals. In the case of M., his legal defense secured an acquittal specifically because funds donated through crowdfunding covered the travel costs of bringing a key witness to court to testify live in his favour. This underscores that the usual absence of witnesses can be due to severe financial and structural barriers, and not because there is no evidence that could support the defendants' claims.

Furthermore, these trials are subjected to extreme fast-tracking. In most cases, hearings last an average of just 30 minutes overall, which plunges even further when state-appointed lawyers are involved, with the latter often assigned the case by the court the day of the trial. During the April 20, 2026 Chania hearings, cases lasted between 6 to 10 minutes (maximum 25 minutes), with defendants' final statements restricted to around one minute. This structural brevity reveals a predetermined administrative approach that values procedural throughput over judicial fairness.

e) The "Plea Deal" Trap and Structural Deprivation of Rights

Why do you have 2 numbers on your phone?

A deeply alarming practice in 2025, also present to a lesser degree in 2026, is the proliferation of irreversible plea deals.

Because state-appointed legal aid lawyers are typically handed complex case files inside the courtroom only minutes before the trial begins, they systematically guide vulnerable defendants toward signing pre-drafted admissions of guilt. By signing these deals, defendants completely forfeit their right to a hearing in court, an appeal, and any realistic future path to securing asylum or citizenship. Out of 190 monitored defendants by organizations, 47 individuals were processed through plea agreements, with 43 occurring in Chania alone. This practice heavily preys upon youth, with 42 individuals (89%) under the age of 25. [16]

The latest data exposes severe and ongoing interpretation failures that actively strip defendants of their rights. During L.'s trial in Heraklion, translation was provided exclusively in English, despite many South Sudanese defendants speaking Nuer natively, leaving them with no adequate interpretation from the moment of their arrest. During the April 2, 2026 Heraklion hearings, a Nuer-speaking defendant was forced to undergo "double interpretation" (Nuer → English → Greek) only after objections were raised.[17] In the April 20, 2026 Chania hearings, observers noted an interpreter actively pressuring a defendant to accept a plea deal against his clear refusal, continuing to push the deal until a police officer intervened to stop the interference.[18] In another Chania case, the Arabic interpretation was so confusing that the defendant visibly struggled to follow the proceedings, and his apology was translated in a wholly unclear manner.

Finally, it is also observed that some judicial officers openly abandon individualization with a presiding judge in Chania explicitly telling defense counsel that the defendant "will get what others will get". In 2025, this resulted in 36 of the 43 recorded plea deals (84%) including identical, standardized 10-year prison terms, rendering individual intent, refugee status, or coercion entirely irrelevant.[19]

f) Context of Departure, Motives, and the Denial of Asylum Rights

How long did you stay in the country you left from (Libya)?

Prosecutors frequently deploy extensive questioning regarding transit timelines to undermine defendants' credibility. During the April 2, 2026 hearings in Heraklion, a prosecutor explicitly characterized Libya as a "safe country" to dispute the motives of Sudanese defendants fleeing through it.

Critically, courts systematically ignore the legal right to seek asylum. Under Article 3(3)(e) of the Greek Migration Code (Law 5038/2023), applicants for international protection should be explicitly exempt from smuggling-type criminal liability. Yet, despite being formally raised in 41 separate hearings in 2025, this exemption is almost universally rejected.[20] During the April 2026 hearings in both Heraklion and Chania, defense lawyers invoked this exemption for Sudanese nationals fleeing war, but it was rejected in all cases. Prosecutors in Chania have argued that an asylum application holds "no legal standing" in a felony trial, claiming that recognizing it would allow individuals to evade incarceration.

J's case explicitly confirms the structural denial of this right. Even though J. consistently explained his journey was a direct consequence of war and forced displacement, the Heraklion court explicitly refused to accept his refugee status as a ground for exemption, merely reducing his sentence based on mitigating factors.[21] S., a 19-year-old who fled the deadly conflict in Sudan, faced similar prosecution because authorities disregarded his status as a war survivor. Furthermore, while in 2025 pre-trial detention was ordered in 159 out of 173 first-degree hearings monitored by solidarity organizations and Thalassa,[22] we have noticed a similar trend in 2026 so far: in the case of. M.,'s case notes that he spent almost a year in pre-trial detention when his rights as an asylum seeker should have been recognized and protected. Simultaneously, national asylum services automatically freeze applications while criminal charges are pending, trapping defendants in an administrative limbo.

Detention

transfers and prolonged detention in Sintiki



Image credit: David Grandmou

a) Transfers to the mainland and other islands

"[T]the conditions on board were stifling and inhumane, both for the migrants and the police escorts. The temperature inside the ship reportedly exceeded 43°C, while ventilation was almost non-existent, resulting in intense discomfort for all on board."

Union of Police Officers of Heraklion

Following their detention on Crete, leaving the island marked the start of a further ordeal. Initially, the State had communicated that people were to remain on the island for a maximum of 24 hours before transfer to the mainland. Delays were, however, routinely reported, with multiple reasons cited: ships operating at capacity, increased traffic due to the tourist season, reduced ferry services during the Christmas period, limited capacity in mainland detention facilities, and uncertainty over institutional responsibilities. As new arrivals continued, these delays intensified overcrowding in the facilities on the island, in one case, leaving 342 people held in the Exhibition Centre for more than a month.

When the transfers did take place, people accounts as well as reports from other actors suggest that the journeys themselves exposed people to conditions that could amount to inhuman and degrading treatment. In late July 2025, the Union of Police Officers of Heraklion addressed a letter to the Minister of Citizen Protection, the Chief of the Hellenic Police, the Police Directorate of Heraklion and Members of the Greek Parliament from the Prefecture of Heraklion, to raise the "suffocating and inhuman" conditions in which a transfer from Crete to Kavala took place on July 27, in the hold of a tanker. According to the letter, people spent 35-hours confined in the hold of a tanker, where temperatures reportedly exceeded 43°C and ventilation was "almost non-existent". Photographs from inside the ship published by the media outlet Cretalive.gr reveal shocking conditions, aptly characterised by Esfyn as "worse than those of animals".

Three days later, on the occasion of another transfer, a second statement was published from the Associations of Police Officers of Heraklion, Chania, Rethymnon and Lassithi together. While the statement puts a bigger emphasis on police officers' health, it also confirmed that no medical examinations were carried out before people were transported.

The difficulties continued once people reached the mainland. Mahmoud described onward bus transfers from the port to the mainland detention facilities as taking place in similarly inhuman conditions. He shared that:

"They moved us in mini buses which had cells closed from outside, in each cell they put four persons. The bus trip took around 12 hours, we felt like dying inside until we arrived [...] in Sintiki. The place was tight and small, and during the 12 hour trip people started vomiting. As you know we have been in the sea before, we were seasick and we vomited already before. We were very tired and we were not able to have such a ride or any trip. And we had our clothes for 16 or 17 days. Our bodies rottened after all these days. Personally, I fainted more than one time."

More recently, several transfers were also carried out to the Aegean islands of Leros, Samos, Kos and Lesvos. According to actors on Kos, although the transfers were expected, reception conditions have been limited on the island, with minimal provision of non-food items and hygiene products. After arriving on the island, people remained detained in the Kos CCAC during registration, with the length of their confinement depending on people's nationality and the availability of interpreters.

b) Detention in Sintiki

"We have been tortured in Libya, then we are being tortured here."

Fahim, a detainee in Sintiki.

For most of those transferred, the journey from Crete marked the beginning of a longer nightmare as people arrived in the Special Detention Facility in Serres. Appalling detention conditions, police violence and the anxiety-inducing uncertainty surrounding possible deportation still form part of daily life for around a hundred people detained in the structure.

The facility in Sintiki originally operated as an open accommodation facility, and was partly converted into a closed detention centre in late July 2025 in order to hold people affected by the asylum ban. The conversion was accompanied by increasing security infrastructure and police presence, creating a prison-like environment. Until mid-October, people transferred to Sintiki were prevented from accessing asylum procedures. Despite the lifting of the asylum ban, most, in particular nationals from so-called "safe countries of origin", remained detained and had to go through all stages of the procedures while held in the structure. Procedures were expedited, sometimes lasting just a few days, and legal support was reportedly not provided to applicants. Rejections were massively distributed and, as of November 1st, 2026, 125 people were still detained in Sintiki in appalling conditions, uncertain of their fate.

i. Overcrowding and inhumane living conditions

For detainees, the first days in Sintiki brought a familiar experience: overcrowding. Quickly after the facility started operating as a detention centre, severe and long-lasting overcrowding was reported. Youssef explained initially having to sleep in a container with 3 times as many people as there were beds: **"Some containers had like 9-8 beds. But in my container there were 25 people. [...] then they transferred around 200 people from our group to Athens. Now, you will find maximum 10-11 people per container."**

This situation resulted in people having to sleep on the floor, as was described by Ali: **"Some people sleep on the beds and some people sleep on the floor. Some people sleep on blankets, some people sleep on mattresses, and some people sleep on beds without mattresses."**

People also repeatedly described poor sanitation and inadequate access to hygiene facilities, affecting their physical and mental health, not to mention their dignity. This is a point Ahmed specifically focused on:

"I am also mentally and psychologically affected, because of the bad smell of the space. The space where I stay is not cleaned. [...] There is nobody coming from outside to clean. We do clean ourselves. We don't get items for cleaning the space, we use mostly water, we don't get soap or stuff to clean with. [...] The [medical] paper states that I am not supposed to be in smoky, crowded or dusty places."

Youssef described an insufficient number of showers and toilets - 3 cold-water showers and 5 toilets. In most conversations BVMN held with people in Sintiki, they shared about the lack of personal hygiene items and clothes distributions. Combined with the absence of hot water, lack of proper heating systems and the location of the facility in one of the coldest regions of Greece, this resulted in people experiencing severe hardship during winter months. As in Crete, these conditions created an environment ripe for the development and spread of illnesses, including skin diseases, where some also reported seeing existing medical conditions worsen.

"I never got allergies and rashes, I got this sickness here because it's dirty, some parts are swollen in my body." Youssef





Overcrowded container and shower in the Special Detention Centre of Serres, Sintiki - Detention Landscapes

ii. Lack of access to healthcare

Despite the deterioration in people's health, access to healthcare services in Sintiki has been reported as extremely limited. Youssef detailed the difficulties he faced in treating his condition:

"They never let you see the doctor, in very rare cases they do. [...] It's obvious that I am sick, but they say 'no doctor' or 'tomorrow', but they repeat it everyday until forever."

As a consequence, he explained that he eventually sent pictures of his condition to his previous doctor in Egypt to provide a prescription. He then relied on the goodwill of other people who were able to leave the facility, to buy the medication for him:

"Then I will give this prescription to people who can leave the facility, I give them the money and [the name of the] medicine, and they will go and buy it for me. If there weren't these people, I wouldn't get any medicine."

Mohamed, a Bangladeshi national detained in Sintiki, also highlighted the impossibility of accessing medication apart from painkillers, except if detainees were able to pay for it themselves: **"they were giving free medicine, it was panadol. But for other types of medicines they asked for money".**

Ahmed's situation is also particularly telling of the lack of appropriate medical attention throughout the journey from Crete to the mainland:

"They took me to the hospital once in Sintiki, I fell down, I fainted and I lost control. [...] I met a general doctor who first checked my heart rate and gave me medicine [...]. The medicine is not helping anymore, I think I should have seen a specialist. My condition got worse."

In general, access to the hospital outside the centre was described as very restricted, and when granted, the lack of interpretation services often made it ineffective. For Nabil, the lack of interpretation meant that he could not receive the medical attention he needed, explaining instead that they **"they handcuffed me and they brought me back to the facility."** While sharing his experience of this episode, Nabil shared additional details about the authorities' degrading behaviour towards detainees:

"[the authorities] always use a paper to grab my phone, inhumanely. They disgraced me and made me feel that I am dirty, disgusting. They are afraid to touch me. Outside, it is not allowed to use the phone until you are back in the facility."

iii. State of uncertainty

"They order us to step back and not get closer. They also insult us verbally, they say to us "malaka". [...] The treatment makes you feel that you are disgusting."

Nabil

"When you ask the authorities questions, they don't answer us. They tell us that [...] they are not responsible for answering our questions. [...] Sometimes, they are rude towards the detainees, they insult and they use low vocabulary."

Ibrahim

"If you are asking them how long you will stay, why you are detained, they treat you violently, because they believe you are not just migrants but illegal, a criminal. When asked whether we are [considered] criminals, they say 'yes, you are a criminal'. [...] If you ask [even] for small things, you are sick or feeling unwell, they will make it hard for you. If you say anything back to them, they react aggressively, to the point that they will put you on the floor, and other officers would come. Usually [this] enraged people, they will want revenge, because it is unfair, because you ask for your rights [...]."

Youssef

Generally, requests for information were reportedly either ignored, vehemently denied or sometimes met with threats or violence.

The severe lack of information provision reportedly covered all aspects of the detainees' life, from the length of their detention to asylum procedures. They reported receiving extensions of their detention orders, for varying lengths, and without any explanation provided. Ali described:

"They do not give any reason why I'm here. They keep extending my detention, but not giving me any reason. It feels like prison."

When people were eventually able to apply, even the asylum process remained opaque. Mahmoud explained that an appeal had been lodged on his behalf, without his knowledge: **"They did the appeal on my behalf without asking me or seeing the lawyer. And without me signing the appeal."** Nabil recalled a similar experience, and added that neither legal support nor interpretation had been provided to detainees. Overall, the state of uncertainty in which detainees were in caused severe psychological distress among them, leading to violent protests, hunger strikes and suicide attempts.

"Since we arrived here our situation is getting worse, including psychologically, because we don't know what is going on with the rules, everyday things change, some people get released. It is very stressful."

Ahmed

"We have been in shock since we arrived here. We thought that we left the deprivation and the unfairness in our countries and [that] we have arrived in the human rights countries, to Europe, until we saw the reality here and we had the shock. [...] I was having psychological treatment in my country, in Egypt and I had a relapse because of what I have been through. I just went back to the treatment."

Mahmoud

As conditions persisted, people's frustrations increasingly manifested into protest. Over the past year, several demonstrations and hunger strikes were initiated by detainees, including in August 2025, November 2025, April and May 2026. Reflecting on the extremes people were pushed to inside the facility, Mohamed explained:

"[...] everyday some people are trying to suicide. [...] If you call the police telling what we do, they will not do anything, they did not tell us what is next, what we can do. [...] We did a hunger strike for 4 days. We just had one demand: for the captain to talk with us. But in 4 days, we saw nobody coming to talk with us. 20 to 25 people got sick in 4 days."

Ibrahim also shared about the authorities' forceful response to protests:

"They protested twice, and in both [cases], they threw gas bombs that make your eyes cry. In the first protest, they threw 3, in the second protest, they threw 1. [...] In the first protest, then after they threw the tear gas, they entered the facility and beat a few people. The people who were beaten up were transferred to another facility after this incident happened."

Detainee's demands included dignified treatment, better living conditions and the respect for their rights. During the November protest, tensions reached a peak and 30 people were arrested and charged for insubordination, aggravated property damage and attempted escape. They were initially sentenced to up to three years and seven months of imprisonment and fines of 450 euros each. On appeal, however, 16 of them were eventually acquitted of some of the charges and saw their sentence reduced by one year, with the Court of Appeal (of Serres) recognising the poor conditions inside the facility as mitigating circumstances. Yet, the ruling did not trigger any changes in detention conditions. On 22 August 2026, an umpteenth protest caused violence, material damage, and eventually led to the conviction of 23 defendants for escape, attempted escape, rioting and damage to property, and sentences of two-years imprisonment and 3,000 euros fines. This was followed in the subsequent weeks by further uprisings, including on 8 September and 11-13 September, highlighting the profound distress experienced by detainees, some of whom have spent more than a year in the structure. These episodes revived the debate around the Sintiki structure, with local political actors and religious figures calling for either its closure or its conversion to an open facility.

Between August 2025 and July 2026, MIT received at least 64 enquiries from people detained in Sintiki on its helplines. Throughout communications, lack of understanding and a severe sense of unfairness was visible among detainees. Out of those 64 enquiries, 32 (50%) spontaneously mentioned inadequate to appalling detention conditions, ranging from hardship experienced due to weather conditions to poor quality and quantities of food, lack of hygiene, overcrowding and insecurity. Specifically, 13 people, or 41% of enquiries mentioning detention conditions reported difficulties in accessing proper and adapted healthcare, if at all. In addition, 23 (36%) of all enquiries expressed feelings of psychological torment or distress, and 6 (26%) of those went as far as mentioning suicidal thoughts or attempts.

Conclusion

The stories presented throughout this series span more than a year in the lives of different people. They begin with the decision to cross borders, leave Libya and, continue through the Mediterranean crossing through Crete, follow weeks of confinement in improvised detention facilities, criminal prosecution for some, dangerous transfers to the mainland, and prolonged detention. Although each person's journey is different, their testimonies read together do not describe - and cannot be dismissed as - isolated events, or exceptional circumstances. Instead, they reveal systemic exclusion and exposure to violence, and how a series of policy choices characterised by securitisation and deterrence shapes people's journeys into ones of continuous confinement, isolation and uncertainty.

Rather than prompting a reassessment of these practices, the response throughout 2026 - and the plans beyond - have increasingly focused on consolidating them.

Concerning the Former Exhibition Centre in Chania, authorities have highlighted expanded accommodation capacity through the installation of bunk beds, better access to healthcare via the deployment of a Hippocrates mobile clinic, and the use of chartered maritime vessels to transfer people to the mainland within 2 days of arrival. In reality, however, as reported by the Greek Ombudsman following its visit of the site in July 2026, conditions in the facility remain inadequate and "substantial interventions" are still necessary. At the same time, reinforcing the government's narrative of control and deterrence, the site operates under intense militarised surveillance, is guarded continuously, and is enclosed by a €75,000 NATO-type perimeter fence.

In Heraklion, material conditions at the "Palio Psigeio" makeshift location at the Heraklion port remain deplorable. Meanwhile, local protests and continued municipal indecisiveness have stalled progress on the establishment of a new and more formal structure, with the local authorities having rejected 7 possible locations. At the time of writing, the Ministry had made a decision to establish a new closed facility in the former Skouloudis warehouses in Athanati, in the Heraklion region, despite continued local opposition. The government has nevertheless invited discussion, should the local authorities put forward a viable alternative proposal.
As arrivals continue and the reception and accommodation arrangements remain unorganised, the stories shared throughout this series risk repeating themselves. Rather than addressing structural shortcomings documented over the past year, current responses are focused on expanding the infrastructure of containment, accelerating transfers, and reinforcing security measures.

Looking ahead, without a fundamental shift away from policies that prioritise deterrence, confinement and criminalisation over protection and rights, the experiences documented in these pages will not remain accounts of the past. Instead, they will continue to define the journeys of people arriving in Greece in the months and years ahead.

Therefore, we call on the Greek government to adhere to its legal obligations in domestic, EU as well as international law, and to put an end to the systematic detention and criminalisation of people on the move upon arrival on the territory. We call further on the government to cease use of the Sintiki detention centre, especially for prolonged periods of detention, and to ensure that people are received and treated with dignity in appropriate reception and accommodation facilities, and have unhindered access to their fundamental rights.

Endnotes

1. Directive 2008/115/EC, Law 3907/2011 prior to September 2025, then Law 5226/2025. Such safeguards also stem from the European Convention on Human Rights, are recognised in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (see the ECtHR's Factsheet on migrants in detention), and have been consistently reaffirmed by the Council of Europe's human rights bodies (see for instance the CPT's Factsheet on immigration detention and Greece country reports).

2. European Convention on Human Rights. See also for instance the ECtHR's Factsheet on migrants in detention as well as the CPT's Factsheet on immigration detention and Greece country reports.

3. Directive 2008/115/EC, Law 3907/2011 prior to September 2025, then Law 5226/2025; European Convention on Human Rights, EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

4. See the report from Dimitra Margariti written in collaboration with Sophia Potsi and published by Inkstick Media here.

5. See the standards developed by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation and Europe, as well as the Council of Europe.

6. Those provisions are included in the Greek Penal Code.

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