In plain sight

The Human Cost of Migration Policies and Violent Practices at Greek Sea Borders
A crisis is brewing across Europe today, brought on by the erosion of humanitarian values and by Europe’s failure to show solidarity with and provide assistance to people seeking safety and protection. This report, which draws on MSF’s operational experience in Greece, presents first-hand accounts of violence experienced by people seeking protection in Europe, and of the humanitarian and medical consequences of this violence, which causes avoidable and unacceptable suffering as well as loss of life.

As a medical and humanitarian organisation, we could not stay silent in the face of the exceptional scale and severity of the violence reported to our teams on the islands of Lesvos and Samos over the past two years. In a climate where violence at Greece’s borders happens with impunity, our actions are motivated by MSF’s founding principles, at the core of which are our medical mandate and our willingness to bring to light the painful realities reported by our patients.

People seeking protection in Greece, many of whom have already faced innumerable hardships to reach the shores of Europe, are bearing the brunt of political efforts aimed either at deterring them or containing them – often violently – on their arrival. Such violent border management policies and practices are unjustifiably endangering their lives and their wellbeing.

Over the past decade, we have seen the Greek Aegean islands become emblematic of the failure of the European Union and Greek authorities to place the wellbeing of individuals at the heart of their response to migration. The personal accounts presented in this report are not isolated incidents. They reflect a dangerous disregard for the health and safety of people seeking protection at other EU borders – including those of Italy, France, Belgium, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria, where MSF teams have been treating the medical and humanitarian consequences of violent border management practices.

The current situation at Europe’s borders is the result of EU policies that condone and enable continued violence against individuals in need. To address this, we call for a collective and urgent commitment by the EU and Greek authorities to uphold the fundamental principles of human dignity and of people’s right to safety, health and protection. We hope that this report will highlight the need to receive people seeking protection with solidarity and humanitarian assistance, rather than turning them away with violence. We are committed to ensuring that the human cost of EU migration policies does not go unnoticed or unaddressed.

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“Other people had already warned us; that Europe is not far, but that the sea is very, very dangerous.”

Alika*  

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**MSF IN GREECE**

- Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) is an international humanitarian organisation providing emergency medical aid to populations in distress or affected by armed conflict, epidemics, natural disasters or exclusion from healthcare. MSF aids people based on their needs, irrespective of their race, religion, gender or political affiliation. MSF’s actions are guided by medical ethics and the principles of independence, neutrality, impartiality and accountability.

- Operational in Greece since 1991, MSF currently provides medical care and mental healthcare to asylum seekers, migrants and refugees in Athens and on the Aegean islands of Lesvos and Samos. Our services include primary healthcare, sexual and reproductive healthcare, treatment of chronic diseases, care for survivors of sexual violence, clinical psychological care and health promotion activities, as well as social and legal support. On Samos and Lesvos, we also provide emergency medical assistance to people in distress who have arrived by boat from Turkey. In 2022, MSF teams in Greece provided 22,500 emergency medical assistance to people in distress or affected by armed conflict.

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**GLOSSARY**

Asylum seeker: A person who is seeking international protection from persecution or serious harm in a country other than his or her own, who has applied for refugee status and awaits a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments, or who has not yet submitted an application but may intend to do so.*

New arrivals: People who have recently arrived on the Greek islands and who have yet to apply for asylum.

NB: MSF does not distinguish between people based on their legal status. Our assistance is based on medical and humanitarian needs alone. Generic legal terminology will never sufficiently reflect the complexity of our patients’ migratory movements, the trauma they have suffered along the way, and their need for protection and assistance. The terms used in this report are used without prejudice to these realities.

Uniformed officers: As a medical humanitarian organisation, MSF is not in a position to identify or differentiate between the various branches and personnel of Greek law enforcement mentioned in the testimonies of our patients. Thus, “uniformed officers” is used in this report as a generic term.

Unidentified masked individuals: Used here to refer to people wearing a mask to (fully) cover their faces, as described in the testimonies of MSF patients.

Closed-controlled access centres (CCACs): New high-security reception and identification centres planned and/or opened on Samos, Kos, Leros, Lesvos, Chios and Makasa (north of Athens). Also known as ‘multi-purpose reception and identification centres’.9

Non-assistance: Used here to refer to situations where authorities fail to provide necessary aid, support, or protection to asylum seekers on their arrival in Greece, either on land or at sea. This includes failing to provide medical care, failing to implement search and rescue activities at sea, and failing to facilitate access to protection for individuals who are in distress.

Pushbacks: Used to describe a collection of coercive and often violent practices employed by states to either refuse entry to people seeking international protection, or forcibly remove them from the state’s territory. In this report, MSF uses the definition of pushbacks by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants:10

Various measures taken by States, sometimes involving third countries or non-State actors, which result in migrants, including asylum seekers, being summarily forced back, without an individual assessment of their human rights protection needs, to the country or territory, or to sea, whether it be territorial waters or international waters, from where they attempted to cross or crossed an international border.

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* MSF patient testimony, January 2023, Alika.

9 European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, New multi-purpose reception and identification centres on Samos, Kos and Leros.

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 Lesvos, MSF has recorded an increasing number of arrivals, with approximately 500 people having lost their lives on the islands, on 14 June 2023, in which approximately 2000 other people, predominantly women in advanced stages of pregnancy, new-born babies, unaccompanied minors and elderly people, were never located.

On Samos and Lesvos, 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 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, including the conduct of the Hellenic Coast Guard. Since August 2023, MSF teams on Samos and Lesvos 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 repeatedly continue to this day.

The majority of MSF patients who gave their testimonies described 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, reported by uniformed officers and/or unidentifiable masked individuals. At sea, accounts describe the forcible 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 Lesvos, 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 reported- by the elements and dangerous terrain. Between August 2021 and July 2023, MSF treated 557 patients with injuries reported- ly 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 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 8,621 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 instil vulnerability, leaving long-lasting emotional traces.

MSF teams continue to provide emergency medical care to newly arrived people on Samos and Lesvos, 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.

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IN PLAIN SIGHT
1. INTRODUCTION

As a medical humanitarian organisation responding to the needs of people arriving at the shores of the Greek Aegean islands to seek asylum in Europe, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) has provided emergency medical assistance to 7,904 individuals over the past two years. Our teams have witnessed how people reach Greece exhausted and in a state of shock. Reportedly, prior to their arrival, many have already been through multiple cycles of attempts to reach Europe – attempts which have included violent pushbacks, perilous sea crossings, detention, prolonged exposure to harsh weather conditions, and periods of hiding in woods and mountains, fearing to be caught and pushed back. Some arrive with acute medical needs due to past experiences or incidents during their journeys; others have lost relatives along the way. All require immediate humanitarian and medical assistance, and access to reception facilities, asylum procedures and protection – essentials which largely remain out of reach for those trapped in cycles of violence on arrival.

This report details how non-assistance, violence and pushbacks have become part and parcel of a system of border management on the islands of Samos and Lesvos that is financed and legitimised by the European Union,1 with a devastating impact on those attempting to seek protection in Europe. The forms of violence and the impact of the violence detailed in this report are not accidental but the result of recurring hostility towards asylum seekers arriving in Greece and those assisting them. Over the past decade, migration management tactics in Greece have increasingly been predicated on endangering practices and denial of protection, as well as physical and psychological violence towards those seeking protection.

Although states have a duty to render assistance at sea, individuals crossing the Aegean seeking protection have been regularly met by non-assistance and violence in Greek territorial waters, while restrictions on civilian search and rescue have left a vacuum of scrutiny and assistance, enabling pushbacks and violence at sea to take place largely out of sight.2 With some maritime zones off-limit to non-military and non-Coast Guard oversight, pushbacks have ‘become a de facto general policy’ with ‘systematic characteristics’,3 as has already been widely observed. This practice has reportedly been carried out at sea for years from within Greek territorial waters or from the Greek search and rescue zone. The Hellenic National Commission for Human Rights, among others, has pointed to the ‘gradual but steady consolidation of the characteristics of the phenomenon of reported informal pushbacks as well as of their repeated methodology’.4

Pushbacks have also reportedly taken place after people have landed on the Greek islands,5 within a ‘recurring organised operational framework’,6 which frequently involves deception, informal detention and the use of violence, culminating in individuals and groups being forcibly placed on life rafts and left to drift back to Turkish waters.7 The lack of assistance available to people landing on the shores of Samos and Lesvos has further contributed to rendering invisible the violence to which people seeking protection are subjected. The ever-shrinking humanitarian space and increasing criminalisation of civil society groups8 have resulted in a situation where MSF is currently the only independent organisation providing humanitarian and medical assistance on-site to new arrivals on Samos and Lesvos. With rising alarm, MSF teams have repeatedly heard and recorded our patients’ experiences of violence on route to and on arrival in Greece. Over the past two years, MSF has witnessed and documented the immediate repercussions of violent practices and dangerous passages on people’s health and wellbeing. Drawing on medical data and patient testimonies, this report aims to expose the physical, psychological and human consequences of the violent and dehumanising practices that have been inflicted on our patients on Samos and Lesvos.

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1 UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of migrants, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 2022, Human rights violations at international borders: trends, prevention and accountability, p.7; the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022, Migration Key Fundamental Concepts, p.7.


3 Council of Europe Commission for Human Rights, 2022, Concluding observations on the report submitted by Greece to the Committee of Ministers, CMS/CM/Inf/130/C(2022)1.


7 UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of migrants, Case No OC/20/2043/1, 2021.


9 Under article 40 of law 4825/2021, there is a clear description of the conditions under which civil society organisations should operate in rescue activities that fall under the responsibility of the Hellenic Coast Guard and only in coordination and on prior authorisation of the competent authority for conducting search and rescue activities.

10 Reported by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of migrants, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, 2022, Human rights violations at international borders: trends, prevention and accountability, p.7.
2. METHODOLOGY

This report draws on medical and operational data from MSF’s activities on Samos and Lesvos between August 2021 and July 2023. On both islands, MSF deploys mobile teams who provide emergency medical assistance to newly arrived people in distress. Additionally, MSF runs long-term programmes offering primary healthcare, sexual and reproductive healthcare, mental healthcare, and a package of comprehensive care for people who have experienced sexual violence, through mobile clinics in the CCAC of Samos and in the MSF Day Care Centre on Lesvos. MSF medical teams are supported by a socio-legal team, health promoters and intercultural mediators, who speak various languages and are trained in interpreting and ensuring cultural sensitivity. The data from the medical activities is aggregated, monitored and analysed regularly.

Having medical teams present both at point of arrival and during the subsequent reception and asylum process allows MSF to follow up with people after arrival and to treat health conditions that were not immediately disclosed during the emergency response, such as psychological trauma, sexual violence, non-communicable diseases and communicable diseases. This continuity of care also gives MSF insights into the physical and mental consequences of incidents that people suffer during their journeys and as a result of harmful border management practices.

In addition, specific monitoring and reporting tools were put in place to gather relevant operational and medical data. All the data was then encoded and analysed by trained MSF staff and triangulated with information obtained through individual interviews. The report also draws on direct observations from MSF teams on the ground and accounts from MSF staff throughout the data collection period. Continuous context analysis was carried out, and the medical data, operational data and patients’ accounts contained in this report are further amplified by secondary sources of information referenced in footnotes.

During consultations and the routine provision of medical and humanitarian assistance, people spoke quite frequently about experiences of violence and pushbacks while attempting to reach Greece. MSF patients were made aware of the chance to discuss with a specialist non-medical staff member for the purpose of documentation and better understanding. As a result, 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2022 and July 2023 on Samos and Lesvos. 6 of the 50 interviews were conducted with couples; therefore, MSF spoke to a total of 56 people. The entire interview process was strictly guided by a trauma-informed ‘do-no-harm’ approach and with informed consent. Conversations were held confidentially, and the aims and process were explained extensively. Participants were assured that they could refuse to be interviewed, decline to answer any questions, or terminate the interview at any point. To protect people’s identity and safety, all interviews were conducted anonymously, and each person chose the pseudonym with which their testimony is associated in this report. Interviews were carried out either in English or in the language of the person interviewed, with their words translated by MSF intercultural mediators. For further protection purposes, the exact dates and locations of incidents or events have been deliberately omitted from this report.

Many people were reluctant to speak out about their experiences on Greece’s borders for fear of repercussions and negative effects on their asylum procedures. This report, therefore, presents a descriptive analysis of the consequences of violence and pushbacks as experienced by the patients who were willing to talk to us and share their stories. Hence, it neither accounts for the full scale of the violent incidents taking place at Greece’s external borders, nor does it aim to generalise the experience of all people attempting to seek protection in Greece.
3. HEALTH AND VULNERABILITIES: WHAT MSF WITNESSES

3.1 MSF emergency medical assistance on Samos and Lesvos

As a humanitarian organisation with expertise in responding to medical emergencies, MSF plays a critical role in ensuring that people arriving on Samos and Lesvos receive the urgent medical care they need. This involves setting up mobile medical check-ups and triage, and either first aid on-site or referral to a hospital on the island; it also includes psychological first aid and people are given food, water and dry clothes.

From August 2021 to July 2023, MSF provided emergency medical assistance to new arrivals on the islands of Samos and Lesvos on 533 occasions, assisting 7,904 people in total.13

The following example outlines the usual steps of MSF’s emergency response:

- **Organisations** which have a publicly available hotline phone number are often contacted by people who have recently arrived on Samos or Lesvos and are in distress.
- **The organisation** issues an emergency alert outlining the situation. This is sent simultaneously to Greek competent authorities, FRONTEX, and MSF, among others. Alerts usually include the following information:
  - A reported pin location of the group of people
  - A contact phone number of at least one person in the group
  - A specific vulnerability, such as pregnancy
  - Women, children and people with medical needs

In compliance with all relevant procedures and legislations, MSF only acts on emergency alerts sent simultaneously to the Greek competent authorities, including local police and coast guard, and always informs the local authorities prior to sending a team to provide emergency medical assistance. Particularly since the beginning of 2023, a collaborative engagement by local authorities on the ground has enabled MSF to efficiently deliver medical assistance, and sometimes even lifesaving support, to many of those seeking protection in a new country or on their journeys. Many MSF patients said that they were subjected to previous violence and traumatic events including torture, sexual violence, trafficking, forced sex work, the deaths of loved ones, kidnapping and incarceration. On Samos, 67.2% of new patients seeking mental healthcare told us that violence was the precipitating factor in their mental health distress.22 Between August 2021 and July 2023, MSF teams on Samos and Lesvos treated 467 survivors of sexual violence and 88 patients who had survived female genital mutilation in their country of origin. Many of these women and girls were also suspected survivors of trafficking en route and some were pregnant or had given birth to children as a result of rape. Women travelling alone are particularly at risk — 91% of female survivors of sexual violence supported by MSF on Samos between January and September 2022 told us they were travelling alone.

Aminata was kidnapped in her home country to force her to undergo female genital mutilation. She escaped with her husband and fled to Iran, but was trafficked into forced labour, where she survived sexual assault whilst pregnant:

- “Due to what they did to me, I was shouting at night… I had nightmares; I saw them running after me… Sometimes I woke up with tears on my face […] Always the same dream: seeing myself running, people coming after me, some of them with a knife.”21

Tarib, from Iraq, receives regular care from MSF’s mental health team to treat his insomnia and state of constant hypervigilance, which was exacerbated by the violence he experienced at EU borders after reportedly being pushed back three times. Tarib decided to leave Iraq out of fear for his safety:

- “Daesh attacked the building of the company by shooting at our windows. […] I received a call from colleagues and acquaintances: they told me that they had information, I was identified and that they were coming after me. They told me to leave fast and that my life was at risk. I packed and left Basra the day after. I had to move from multiple cities to be safer: I moved to Baghdad, where I stayed until the place felt unsafe, then I went to Erbil. I tried to move from there too, I sought to get a visa, but I failed. I had to find a way to leave and go to Turkey.”44

13 On Samos, MSF started emergency response activities in August 2021, suspending activities for a four-month period between October 2021 and January 2022, and restarting them in February 2022. On Lesvos, MSF started emergency response activities in June 2022.

21 This could be any form of violence, experienced in their country of origin, on the journey, or on arrival in Greece.

22 MSF patient testimony, Aminata.

44 MSF patient testimony, Tarib.
4. Pushbacks as Routine Practice

The expanding use of pushbacks has been extensively documented and denounced by the Council of Europe (CoE), United Nations (UN), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the media, and even EU institutions. Accounts by MSF patients and data from medical consultations, as well as MSF operational experience on Samos and Lesvos since 2021, hint at recurrent pushback practices against people attempting to reach Samos and Lesvos.

**Records and documentation of pushbacks in Greece**

It is impossible to reliably quantify the numbers of people pushed back to Turkey across the eastern Aegean as no independent monitoring mechanism exists. As outlined by the Council of Europe, pushbacks involve criminal activities: “Pushbacks generally involve multiple violations of human rights, including the violation of the prohibition of refoulement and collective expulsion, the prohibition of torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” In February 2022, UNHCR reported alarm at “recurring and consistent reports coming from Greece’s land and sea borders with Turkey,” with records of 540 incidents of informal returns by Greece since 2020.

More recently, the Greek National Commission for Human Rights reported 50 incidents of informal forced return from Greek territory between April 2020 and October 2022. In July 2023, in its Special Report on the Return of third country nationals, the Greek Ombudsman highlighted the guidelines prepared by the Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Commission for the need for independent national border monitoring mechanisms.

It is common for people to report being pushed back multiple times during their journey to reach Europe, in so testimonies (of 56 people) collected by MSF on Samos and Lesvos, a total of 183 pushbacks were reported, with nine testimonies describing being pushed back between 8 and 14 times. Husband John and wife Alexandra told MSF that they had been pushed back nine times, both at sea and from land, first whilst Alexandra was pregnant and later with their newborn baby. Fatima described being pushed back eight times with her husband and two children.

“People had already warned us that the chance is small that we would make it to Greece in one try. But little did I know that so many tries and so much misery would follow.”

**4.1 Pushbacks at sea and from land**

MSF patients’ accounts and multiple other sources describe consistent practices of both pushbacks at sea and from land. During sea-based pushbacks, people attempting to reach Greek shores are intercepted in Greek waters by boats manned by “individuals with covered faces,” as they are frequently described. The group’s boat engine is then either removed or destroyed and the people on board are left to drift or are towed into Turkish waters. People also describe being forced on board a larger vessel, where they are often subjected to physical assault and their possessions are confiscated and destroyed, before they are coerced onto an inflatable life raft and cast adrift.

Pushbacks from land follow similar patterns. After arriving on Greek islands, people describe being chased and apprehended by groups of unidentified people with covered faces, often subjected to physical and verbal assault, and their possessions similarly confiscated or destroyed. They are then taken against their will to a vessel at sea, then put on life rafts and cast adrift.

*Excerpts from testimonies told to MSF illustrate these practices:*

**Pushbacks at sea**

Alika told us that she was six months pregnant the first time she and her husband attempted to reach Greece.

“We had to walk into the water to enter a small rubber boat. Everybody got wet before we even started. The waves hit us so hard that we couldn’t breathe. It was pitch dark. We were told to turn our phones off so that there couldn’t be any light. We had to remain quiet and invisible. Across from me was a mother who held her hand on her child’s mouth for hours, but then she suddenly screamed herself. A sharp light was shining on us, just as in the mountains on the border of Turkey and Iran. “Stop! Hey! Stop!” There was a grey boat, not so big, and on the deck stood, I think, five men. I couldn’t see them well because of the light and they were wearing dark clothes too.

My body was stiff, frozen, I think I stopped breathing for some time. The boat was coming close to us and was making waves. They had a long stick with a hook and started slamming on the engine. One guy got hurt by the stick. The rubber boat was so close that they tied a rope to it and then started going very fast. We all fell on top of each other in the middle of the boat. I was so afraid for the baby. Because they were going so fast, water was splashing into our boat. And then they stopped the motor, untied the rope on their side and quickly, as if nothing had happened, they left. Everything happened so fast. People started shouting for help as if they had to be silent for so long that they now screamed out all their fears. But it was dark and there was no one.”

After several hours, the group was rescued by the Turkish Coast Guard. Exhausted, dehydrated, and in emotional distress, Alika was taken to hospital by ambulance; she was discharged two days later. She and her husband made another attempt to cross the Aegean and eventually made it to Greece.

The dinghy on which Fatima and her family were travelling was reportedly boarded by an unidentified masked individual who threw the engine into the water and left them to drift at sea.

“A small inflatable boat was floating in the water. I got wet up to my waist. The kids and I sat in the middle together with two other women and their kids. The men sat around us. Then they pushed us off. None of my kids know how to swim. I could see there was land ahead of us: lights of a small city, lights of cars passing... ‘Is this Greece?’ I was wondering. It couldn’t be possible that Europe was so close. But my first encounter with Europe turned out to be very different... The sea is dark and scary in the night...”

“I was thinking about how to save my kids if we would fall in the water. But we never made it far. As soon as we entered Greek waters, at least I think that was the case, a small grey boat came in our direction, as if they had seen us coming in the night. They came very close, and a man dressed in all black with a covered face jumped on our boat. Everybody was screaming. You know, still when my son sees someone in, for example, a black hoodie or a black big jacket, he gets scared. The man jumped in our boat; he had a stick in his hand and started beating the person in front of him. Then he pulled off the engine and dropped it in the water. He beat two more people. I was trying to cover the eyes of my kids. Then he went back to his own boat and they drove away fast. We were left in the middle of the sea with no engine.”

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*Council of Europe, ‘Pushbacks beyond the limits: four areas for urgent action to end human rights violations at Europe’s borders’, 2022.
*UNHCR, ‘UNHCR flushes out Greece’s secret pushback centres’, July 2022.
*UNHCR, ‘UNHCR warns of increasing violence and human rights violations at European borders’, February 2022.
*UNHCR, Greece: Abandoning Greece as a place of safety, February 2021, in its Special Report on the Return of third country nationals.
*MSF patient testimony, Fatima.
*MSF patient testimony, Alika.
Pushbacks from land

Adele was heavily pregnant and in need of medical attention when she and her husband were reportedly taken out to sea and put on an inflatable life raft:

“The first attempt was [when] I was about seven months pregnant. We crossed the sea without being seen by any coast guard. As soon as we made it to land, the group split up. My belly was hurting badly, and I was seeing blurry and feeling dizzy. Maybe it was because of all the stress? We hadn’t eaten well either for so many days. My husband and I decided to start walking to the closest road to look for a taxi or for someone to call an ambulance to bring us to a medical centre. At our surprise a car stopped, and the driver said ‘Police’. No, no police, I answered. ‘Have to go to the hospital, I am in pain.’ Then I discovered that the guy was a cop in a normal car in undercover clothes. He took us in his car, saying that he would help us. But instead, he drove us to another place – it looked like a military base or something – where we saw the people from our boat surrounded by several men dressed in black and carrying weapons. They said: ‘Don’t worry, the ambulance is on its way.’ But the ambulance that came was a pick-up truck that took us all to the shore where a small boat was waiting. We were forced to embark. The small boat brought us to a big white boat. [We] saw that they were preparing inflatable baskets on the deck of the big boat, which they then threw in the water and tied them with a rope to the small boat. They told us to stand up on the boat. We asked for one of us to belong in our steps and stop into the baskets. They started driving on high speed further into the sea. I think that we were stacked on top of each other. The boat was rocking, and I thought the boat would capsize. But the boat stayed upright. We arrived and we were pushed inside it, in the back, on top of each other. I could barely breathe. They drove fast, over many bumps and through many turns. We stopped. ‘Out, out’, they lined us up. We were chased away from the boat. From that moment forward, I didn’t see the boat. I saw the ground, who explained that it was a military zone. None in group assisted

MSF informed the officers guarding entry to the area that there were 25 people, including three children, in the group and that they were afraid and hiding from uniformed officers. None of the group members were assisted by MSF.

Only part of group found

MSF received an alert calling for medical and humanitarian assistance for a group of 46 people in distress. Two MSF vehicles carrying humanitarian aid items and medical equipment were stopped by the Greek authorities on that day for 35 and 40 minutes respectively before being allowed to depart. The MSF team reached the location and started calling for the group to come out of hiding, explaining that the team was there to assist them and provide them with aid. Here is MSF’s internal report of that day’s response:

‘MSF team when arrived at the location have first encountered a group of seven. The group reported that they were part of a boat of 46. The group communicated to MSF that other people that arrived with the same boat were stranded in the surroundings […] MSF team has found a group of 36 in the surroundings and is providing non-food items and medical support. NB, a member of the group, reported a swollen eye and wounds on his face. He communicated to MSF team that two more people were hiding with him and he was afraid of their whereabouts. He reported that what he described as a ‘group of armed men with covered faces’ have tried to abduct them. He reportedly managed to escape and was pushed with his face on a rock by the said people, for which he retained his head injury. He reported that when running away he heard two gunshots and the two other co-travellers reportedly being assaulted. He managed to re-join the current group only lately and could not establish any contact with the two people he was travelling with. MSF was unable to retrieve.’

On that day, the MSF team provided medical and humanitarian aid to 44 people and treated the man referred to above for facial injuries. Two members of the group, who were reported missing by the other group members, were never located or assisted by MSF.

None in group assisted

MSF received an emergency alert about a group of seven people who had arrived early in the morning and were reportedly in a wild, mountainous location inaccessible by car and in need of medical assistance. After parking at the nearest road location, the MSF team was prevented from reaching the group’s reported position by authorities present on the ground, who explained that it was a military zone.

The MSF team established contact with the group using the telephone number shared with all actors and competent authorities via the emergency alert, who said there were several authorities in the area, including one woman who was injured, bleeding and in need of medical assistance. They told MSF that they were afraid and hiding from uniformed officers who were searching the area. They shared their WhatsApp pin location, which showed them as 350m away from the MSF team.

4.2 People missing and unaccounted for

MSF receives official alerts, simultaneously with authorities, when people arrive on Samos or Lesvos in need of urgent medical care.42 These alerts include the reported number of MSF receives official alerts, simultaneously with authorities,43 MSF only acts on official alerts, simultaneously sent to authorities. MSF’s medical intervention follows the framework described in section 3 of this report.

42 MSF patient testimony, Mariam.

43 MSF only acts on official alerts, simultaneously sent to authorities. MSF’s medical intervention follows the framework described in section 3 of this report.

4.3 Violence and inhuman treatment

Drawing on patients’ descriptions, violence and inhuman treatment appear to be consistent features of pushback operations at the Aegean border. Testimonies given to MSF staff describe similar patterns of violence carried out by uniformed officers and/or unidentified persons with covered faces during pushbacks.44 The most frequent violent practices reported by MSF patients included beating, kicks, physical assault, strip searching including intrusive body searches, confiscation or destruction of personal possessions, humiliation and verbal violence.

44 MSF’s findings are corroborated by documentation and reporting by human rights bodies and civil society, including the Council of Europe: ‘There have been numerous and consistent allegations of pushbacks from Greece to Turkey for several years now, with the Commissioner [joined many other international bodies and civil society in calling on the Greek government to put an immediate end to this practice, which is also frequently accompanied by allegations of violence], Council of Europe, ‘Beyond the latest flare-ups: the impact of pushbacks and human rights violations at Europe’s borders’, 2023.
4.3.1 Handcuffing, immobilisation and abduction

Reports of handcuffing, immobilisation and abduction of people from Greek soil appear to be a defining feature of pushbacks from land. People repeatedly describe being apprehended by individuals with covered faces or full-face masks, in black or civilian clothes. Soon after arriving on Greek islands, they often report being chased, and some recort being informally detained in a container or room for several hours or days before being pushed back. In eight accounts given to MSF, patients describe the shooting of firearms as a practice of intimidation before interception at sea or abduction of stranded groups on land. Other accounts by MSF patients detail elements of deception, with people they met deliberately providing them with false information, promising that they would be taken to a camp or to hospital, when instead they were eventually pushed back from land without ever receiving medical assistance.

Tarib reported being abducted along with 27 others and pushed back at sea:

“One of the officers that blocked us lifted me up and put a metal handcuff on my wrist. He tied the second handcuff to the wrist of a (...) man that was with me on the boat and followed me after we split up. They wanted us to be tied together and walk. I asked them to lie and rest, I explained I had a heart issue and I was feeling the fatigue. They beat me again and pushed the (...) man to keep walking so I was forced to walk along. They brought us close to a dock where a boat of the coast guard was waiting for us. They drove us to the middle of the sea and left us in a life raft….”

On the second occasion, the MSF team responded to an official alert of a group immobilised by the use of plastic handcuffs.

Nour told MSF he had survived 11 pushbacks. He described one of the occasions:

“We were already surrounded by officers of some kind, three, four men and a woman. The men were wearing dark clothes, the woman normal clothes. I don’t even know if she was police. ‘Are there any more people?’, one of them asked in English. They were friendly. The woman smiled at one of the kids, ‘Camp, camp’, they were saying. We were ordered to follow them, which we silently did. Then a small bus came and we all had to get in. It stopped by a few white buildings with a wall around it. The same officer from the beach opened the door of the van and ordered us all to get out. We were brought to one of the buildings; he opened the door of a room where there was nothing else than a dirty cement floor and in the corner a door to a small bathroom.”

The group told to MSF that, shortly before the arrival of the MSF team, seven to eight people wearing dark clothes and with their faces covered had approached them, presenting themselves as doctors. The group also told that, as they tried to run away, some of them were violently beaten and three people had their wrists tied with plastic zip-ties. The masked individuals ran away when they heard the MSF team approaching the location and calling to the group through a megaphone.

On the second occasion, the MSF team responded to an official alert and found a group of four people who had reportedly been handcuffed with zip ties, beaten and electrocuted with a taser. When the MSF team approached, they saw that the people were clearly in distress. One had marks and bruises on his wrists and ankles. He reported to our staff that approximately 15 minutes before the MSF team’s arrival, a group of unidentified individuals had secured his wrists using black plastic zip-ties, cutting him free violently with a knife as the MSF team approached. The MSF team found the plastic zip-ties that had reportedly been used to immobilize him. An MSF doctor provided him with wound care. The group reported that two others had also been handcuffed with plastic zip-ties before being released.

Violence and handcuffing

Accounts by MSF patients refer to being handcuffed prior to being abducted and pushed back. Handcuffing — especially the most rudimentary form of handcuffs using excessively tight plastic zip ties — often results in bruising, bleeding and in some cases in deep cuts.

During two emergency interventions, MSF medical teams have found people handcuffed with plastic zip ties or found evidence of such handcuffing and provided medical care to people with wounds and injuries on their wrists. The handcuffing involved immobilising wrists or ankles with plastic zip ties to prevent people from moving or escaping. These events were consistent with patients’ reports of being apprehended by individuals with covered faces or full-face masks, in black or civilian clothes. Soon after arriving on Greek islands, they often report being chased, and some recort being informally detained in a container or room for several hours or days before being pushed back.

On the first occasion, MSF received an official alert of a group of new arrivals who were stranded and in need of emergency medical assistance. When the MSF team arrived at the indicated location, they heard screams and shouts and found a group of 22 people on the ground, in emotional distress, including three people tightly handcuffed with plastic zip-ties. The MSF team cut the people free from the zip-ties immobilising their wrists.

The group told to MSF that, shortly before the arrival of the MSF team, seven to eight people wearing dark clothes and with their faces covered had approached them, presenting themselves as doctors. The group also told that, as they tried to run away, some of them were violently beaten and three people had their wrists tied with plastic zip-ties. The masked individuals ran away when they heard the MSF team approaching the location and calling to the group through a megaphone.

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4.3.2 Physical assault and verbal humiliation

MSF has documented multiple testimonies of physical assault during claimed pushbacks, including beatings with sticks, slapping, kicking and punching of men, women, pregnant women and children. During emergency interventions, MSF has also medically treated at least 15 people for injuries reportedly caused by physical assault by uniformed officers and/or unidentified masked individuals on their arrival on Samos or Lesvos. It is possible that the actual number of such injuries is higher, as people do not always disclose the reason for an injury during medical consultations.

According to patients’ accounts, MSF teams have on several occasions interviewed uniformed officers and/or unidentified masked individuals from beating people by arriving in the area to provide emergency medical treatment. MSF has witnessed people running out of the forest screaming, crying and reporting being beaten, and MSF medical staff have treated people on the spot for suspected violence-related injuries. In January 2023, four groups assisted by MSF reported having been subjected to physical violence perpetrated by uniformed officers and/or unidentified masked individuals on land just before the MSF team arrived at the shared pick location. In addition to physical assault, people reported having been verbally harassed, humiliated and shouted at by uniformed officers and/or unidentified masked individuals. Out of 50 testimonies collected by MSF on Samos and Lesvos, 29 reported being subjected to verbal violence.

Zuri, an MSF patient who reported four pushbacks before making it to Greece, described being beaten whilst pregnant:

“They caught us when we were running… They beat my husband; they beat me also. They took us to a container; they gave us food, we ate, changed our clothes… At night… They said they would take us to the camp. What we see? Water? They pushed us back. That night I was very sick. Very sick. I couldn’t stand; I was tired; when I was walking it was as if my bones were like this [makes happy moves]. Still I am feeling that pain… from the kick. They kicked me. It was the coast guard, at least, if my bones were like this [makes floppy moves]. Still I am feeling that pain…. From the kick.”

An MSF doctor on the scene reported that the patient’s injuries were consistent with their descriptions of events:

“People were arriving in small groups, holding each other up and in clear panic. Some were falling to the ground, others were crying, praying, kissing the ground. ‘They beat us, they beat us.’ One woman had a bruised eye and a bleeding cut above it: ‘They beat me, it just happened, they just left.’ [Men] shaved small wounds on their wrists and one woman said she was handicapped as well. They handcuffed us like this [linking wrists together in front of body] and then started beating. ‘They were beating with their hands and also with batons, they were also kicking some of us with their feet and knees.’ They had guns. One told me to do what he said otherwise he would use his gun.”

Several weeks after the incident, a survivor told MSF about what had happened that day:

“They dragged her, yes, on the ground. They were in front of me, in front of [u.] They tied them like this [linking wrists together in front of body] then the pregnant woman was there, they also tied the pregnant woman. It’s seven people they caught. [u.] There was a big rock in front of us from where we could see all their actions, everything, but they couldn’t see us, we were hidden… [They were so angry]! Don’t even touch her head down, malak! They even stopped on the other lady’s stomach, beating her.”

4.3.3 Strip searches and intrusive body searches

Several MSF patients have also mentioned being subjected to non-consensual strip searching36 and intrusive body searches during repeated pushbacks, a practice consistent with existing report on the occurrence of violence, with the risk of potential harmful health consequences such as cross-infection.

Sahar told MSF staff that she was stripped of her clothes and intrusively body searched three times before being pushed back at sea:

“They searched us all, multiple times. When they search our body, the officers are all male and police and they are touching us in a bad way, they touched us inside… They asked us to get naked, they wanted to see if I was hiding anything inside the bra and inside my panties. I was searched three times, they searched my body once in the jungle, once on the big boat where they put us, and one final time on the life raft in which they put us. They touched us all with the same gloves, men and women, and it seemed to me they have not changed them between us. After I even asked support to your midwife because of what happened.”

Julie-Rose told the MSF team that she and the entire group of people she was travelling with were strip searched in a violating manner before being pushed back at sea:

“We all got on the boat. They searched us all down and started with the bags. [u.] They undressed us, women. They undressed all of us, men also were undressed, kids were undressed, they took out babies’ diapers to search for money. There was a woman who wore gloves to search us. There was also a man with gloves who searched the men’s bottoms. [u.] We were more than 10, at least 15 women, and the woman who was searching our private parts searched all of us without changing gloves. She was even using the same gloves on the children.”

Eleonora told MSF about four separate incidents of these violent ‘searches’, she described three of the occasions:

• They searched every one of us, the women inside the vagina, the men inside the anus, they told them to bend over…They touched my whole body, my breasts, my anus, I had put my underwear in. You knew that many African women wear a wig. They pulled it off, searched, found it…”

• “They searched every one of us, the women inside the vagina, the men inside the anus, they told them to bend over…They touched my whole body, my breasts, my anus, I had put my underwear in. You knew that many African women wear a wig. They pulled it off, searched, found it…”

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46 Physical assault can be understood as intentional use of physical force or violence against another person without their consent, resulting in bodily harm, injury, or pain. Physical assault can take various forms, including hitting, punching, kicking, slapping, strangling, and using objects as weapons to cause harm. This act violates an individual’s basic human rights, particularly their right to personal security, physical integrity, and dignity. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 3, Art. 5, Art. 8, European Convention on Human Rights, Art. 3.

47 Strip searching can be defined as the process of requiring an individual to remove their clothing for the purpose of inspecting for prohibited or illegal items, and usually conducted by law enforcement officers. As such, individuals who are strip searched are subject to specific legal safeguards to protect the individual’s rights and dignity: OHCHR, Human Rights, https://www.ohchr.org/en/special procedures/pics/hrp/documents/HRP-GCM/WGC/9/ Vol. 3  para: 8. As far as personal and body search is concerned, effective measures should ensure that such searches are carried out in a manner consistent with the dignity of the person being searched, April 1988.

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37 Personal testimony, Adele. 38 Personal testimony, Adile & Pierre. 39 Personal testimony, Eleonora. 40 Personal testimony, Pierre. 41 Personal testimony, Julie-Rose.
4.3.4 Possessions confiscated and/or destroyed
People repeatedly report the confiscation and/or destruction of their belongings, including money, mobile phones, clothes and other personal items. Of the 50 interviews conducted by MSF in Samos and Lesvos, 28 people have reported having their personal belongings stolen during a pushback. Such practices have also been outlined in the media and, in a recent case, border guards were arrested and found with thousands of euros.

Malik described having his possessions confiscated during a pushback at sea: “We had to hand in anything we had: phones, money, even personal things such as photos.” During a pushback at sea, Eleonora described to us: “They took everything: my phone, my bag, my medicines, my clothes and other personal items. Of the 50 interviews conducted; they do not know if I am safe or not…”

Concerningly, people have also described medicines and baby milk being taken. “He grabbed the plastic bag with powdered milk I had prepared and threw it in the water. It was baby food.”

Being deprived of their belongings is an additional stressor for people on their migration journeys. Most people rely on mobile phones for communicating with family members and loved ones in their countries of origin and countries of destination, to make sure their family and friends know they are safe. Mobile phones serve the practical purpose of keeping in touch with doctors and other service providers on the islands, and for day-to-day endeavours. Taking away people’s mobile phones can create anxiety, undermine independence and sever an individual’s ties with their support network.

Mazowa, who travelled alone to Greece, reported that uniformed officers confiscated his belongings, including more than €600 and his mobile phone. He described to MSF staff his concern of being unable to retrieve his belongings: “I can only communicate through the phone of the person with whom I share my space in the camp. I must rely on his phone number even for MSF to contact me. I have all my numbers and contacts on the mobile phone they took away from me. Without the numbers, I cannot get in touch even with my family back home. I cannot even tell them that I arrived; they do not know if I am safe or not…”

5. THE CONSEQUENCES: LIVES ENDANGERED AND HARMED
5.1 Loss of life at sea

Violent and harmful border management practices that do not allow safe ways for people to seek asylum, or that do not ensure adequate assistance and humane reception conditions on arrival, have wide-ranging and severe consequences on people’s wellbeing and dignity. The most immediate risk is exposure to hazards on land and at sea that endanger people’s lives and cause harm to their health.

Within the framework of its emergency medical activities, MSF teams responded to the needs of 109 survivors of shipwrecks off the coasts of Samos and Lesvos following four tragic events that took place between September 2022 and March 2023. A total of 23 people, including children, lost their lives. In one of these instances, which took place in 2023, MSF provided assistance to 34 survivors of a shipwreck off the coast of Lesvos. The team arrived to find people in shock, exhausted and drenched after spending almost 10 hours in the forest in sub-zero temperatures and windy weather conditions. MSF made multiple referrals to hospital for people in a critical condition due to hypothermia, while three drowned bodies were retrieved from the water by competent authorities.

Shipwrecks off Samos and Lesvos assisted by MSF team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of survivors of shipwreck</th>
<th>MSF provided emergency medical assistance to on Samos and Lesvos islands</th>
<th>Number of fatalities having occurred during those shipwreck</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2022</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2022</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2022</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2023</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On one occasion, MSF assisted survivors of a shipwreck whose boat had capsized after hitting a rock close to the shore, which left a young child missing. MSF patient Mariam was on the boat and described the experience:

“We were on the water for many, many hours. We all got wet. There were waves […] we got close to mountains. And a beach. But instead of going straight, the boat was shifting to the right […] And then, under us, boom! We hit a rock. The boat got stuck and tilted over. Some people fell in the water. Others were holding on, screaming. I say, SCREAMING, […] I was not thinking, all I could see was how to get on land. And I jumped, honestly. I don’t know how. I saw many people managed but I didn’t know if everybody managed. You have probably heard about the woman in the camp who is still missing her daughter? How can a mother live with that? How can a mother have so much pain?”

The body of the girl was recovered two months later.

An MSF team responded to assist a group who had survived a shipwreck in which a two-month-old baby died. MSF’s doctor arrived at the site to find the baby’s body without a pulse:

“A group appeared, walking on the small dirt road among the olive groves. They said that people with black masks took others from the group minutes before MSF arrived. In front of a tall figure, a man, holding a blanket in his hands, and a few other people following him close behind. Some were limping, some were not wearing shoes, all were crying. The tall man handed me a blanket with his two-month-old son’s body. He was crying in shock and could barely form a sentence. He kept saying: ‘My son drowned and they took my wife, I don’t know where she is.’ We were in communication with the authorities, the hospital, the ambulance call centre, and providing medical and psychological first aid to the rest of the group. We continued CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) until we had clear instructions from the hospital to stop. The baby did not survive. The team was devastated, some had to take breaks and cry behind our car. The father’s words, the baby’s face, the feeling of my fingers, compressing his cold chest, the emergency blanket covering the body and it being taken away in a hearse, all stayed in my mind for days. I felt helpless and left completely alone, everyone turning a blind eye to our borders that have become graveyards. As the sun was setting behind the olive trees, nothing from the surroundings could suggest what had just happened there. I will never forget the screams and tears from the group, the blood mixed with dirt under their feet, and the words of our psychologist: ‘He came to find a better life and lost everything.’”

After experiencing multiple pushbacks, and with the route becoming perceived as too risky given the possibility of exposure to violence on arrival in Greece, people have started undertaking other longer and more perilous routes at sea. These sea crossings usually take place on small, overcrowded and unseaworthy boats, often in hostile weather conditions. Being compelled to take such risks may lead to more tragedies and a high death toll at sea, especially considering the restrictions on search and rescue operations in Greek waters.

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72 MSF patient testimony, Eleonora.
73 MSF patient testimony, Malik.
74 MSF patient testimony, Adèle & Pierre.
75 MSF patient testimony, Mozawa.
77 Reuters, At least 18 migrants dead in shipwreck off Greece’s Lesbos, October 2022.
78 MSF patient testimony, Mariam.
79 Reuters, Three drown, many feared missing in migrant shipwreck off Greece, February 2023.
80 Forbes, Migrants are taking ever more dangerous routes to get to Europe, January 2022.
5.1.2 Death during pushback

Testimonies collected by MSF show how attempts to push people back to Turkish waters have endangered people crossing the Aegean, and in some cases have led to avoidable deaths at sea. Some testimonies of patients and media coverage of other shipwrecks describe the towing of boats and dinghies with ropes tied to larger vessels as a particularly hazardous practice. On Samos and Lesvos, MSF teams provided medical care to two survivors of the same pushback event at sea that reportedly led to the death of two adults, including a pregnant woman. Tombo recited his memories of the event as follows:

“On my seventh attempt, I was on a boat with many people [...] We were seeing lights and rocks near the island of Samos. We wanted to slam on the rocks to be able to get out of the boat, but at four or five in the morning, a boat of the coast guard arrived towards us, together with a small boat. There were four people from the coast guard on it. They screamed: ‘Malaka, drop the machine/engine!’ So our boat no longer had an engine and we could not escape. One of them was putting down the Greek flag from the boat, like to hide it. They asked us to pass all our phones and money and they took them [...] They tied our boat and started accelerating. Their boat was tied so tightly to our dinghy that the dinghy started jumping left and right, almost capsizing [makes hand gestures]. We screamed ‘Please stop, please stop!’ They answered: ‘ Shut up, shut up or we will kill you.’ There were children with us, 15 maybe in total. The pressure amongst us was too strong, people were pressed over one another, and the pressure killed them. Two people died on that boat, one pregnant woman [...] The boat was very fast and shaking. The two dead bodies were inside our dinghy for all the duration of this terrible time [...] At one moment they stopped. They shot in the air twice to scare us, and they untied the rope. They left us in the middle of the sea and went away.”

Elizabeth, who was on the same boat, also described the event to MSF staff-members:

“It was a few days before Christmas. We came to Samos, we were facing the island, and then we met with one ship. We wanted to land but the ship was [...] blocking us from landing on the shore. Then we saw another ship coming from our back. It was about four o’clock in the morning. They tied the boat and they said: ‘Go back to Turkey.’ [...] We were trying to plead them, we begged them, we talked to them. They said we had to dump the engine in the water. There was no choice, they took out their gun. They opened a bright light on us. One of us dropped the engine in the water. They said: ‘Bravo!’ [...] Then they started pulling us and with the motion water was coming inside our boat. People were being squeezed at the end side [...] people were shouting: ‘We will die, we are dying.’ Then the guy took his pistol and shot: ‘I will kill all of you if you shout here, keep quiet, malaka!’

By that time, you could see the men in our boat climbing on top of the women, who were sitting in the middle, to save their own lives. People were climbing on the back of other people, our own people. Even me, there was a man who sat on my chest, I couldn’t protest, I couldn’t say anything. The boat was full of water [...] I didn’t say a word, until he turned and looked at my face. I was silent, there were only tears coming from my eyes. That’s when the guy came down and said sorry. He didn’t raise me up, he just came down and found another way. There were two people already dead in our boat.

[... Close to a small island, it was just a big rock, they cut the rope and they left us. At first, we were trying to paddle to reach the rocks, but the boat was already under [...] one corner of it had sunk. We were in the water for six or seven hours, until broad daylight. They said they found the women lying down on the bottom of the boat, people were stopping on them, but they were already dead. We didn’t know about that until we came back to Turkey [...]”

The group were eventually found and rescued by a Turkish Coast Guard vessel. According to patients’ accounts, two dead bodies were retrieved that day. Both Elizabeth and Tombo reached Greece, respectively Samos and Lesvos, several weeks after the described event.29

5.2 Family separation

During the extreme stress and confusion of arriving on Greek shores, of hiding, of being chased or apprehended by uniformed officers and/or unidentified masked individuals, and of being put on life-rafts back at sea, newly arrived people often report their group getting separated, sometimes resulting in the separation of families. This includes reports of situations where some family members have been forcibly returned to Turkey while other family members remain on the Greek islands. MSF has provided medical assistance to nine families who told us that they were separated during a pushback.

In several instances, people who travelled from Turkey with their spouse, relatives or children lost contact with each other in the panic of finding a place to hide after arriving on Samos or Lesvos. Other people told the MSF team in high emotional distress that unidentified individuals wearing black masks had apprehended them and taken away their spouse, relatives or children. After being transferred to the relevant reception facility, some families have reported to MSF that they were unable to trace their relatives and spent days not knowing if their family members were alive, safe, lost in the mountains or back at sea and drifting towards Turkey. The lack of knowledge about the whereabouts of family members was exacerbated by people’s mobile phones having been confiscated, destroyed or lost at sea.

Concerning, MSF teams have also encountered several minors who were left unaccompanied after reportedly being separated from their mother or father after arrival in Greece. MSF teams immediately referred them to the relevant organisations and authorities to ensure their protection and safety, and to trace their parent(s) and/or family. Losing contact with a family member in such an adverse environment has consequences on people’s wellbeing, especially on children. Even if they are able to establish links with their lost family members, people are then compelled to go through lengthy family reunification procedures.

81 Ekathimerini, Greek shipwreck: up to 100 children were below water, survivors say (June 2023).
82 MSF patient testimony, Tombo.
83 MSF patient testimony, Elizabeth; MSF patient testimony, Tombo.
84 The Guardian, Greece shipwreck: up to 100 children were below water, survivors say (June 2023).
5.3 Serious harm to people’s health

5.3.1 Dangerous terrain

Once people reach the shores of the Greek islands, they run and hide in the mountains and forests, terrified of being found by authorities and pushed back to Turkey. This often results in direct injuries and exposes people to harsh weather conditions, including fatal falls, which can occur in particularly rainy weather. Fleeing the police’s presence is dangerous, with people often pushing through dangerous terrain. An MSF doctor treated a woman for severe dehydration due to her efforts to escape the police.

MSF referred 10 people in total to hospital. In May 2023, MSF also provided emergency medical assistance to a group of people who were chased by uniformed officers and had fallen down the cliffside. Some reported being beaten. MSF treated two people with suspected fractures due to their falls, another with a dislocated shoulder, and a woman who had suffered a suspected epileptic episode, according to MSF staff on the scene. Three pregnant women were amongst the group. MSF referred 10 people in total to hospital. In May 2023, MSF also provided emergency medical assistance to a group of people who had climbed a very steep and dangerous hill after being chased.84

During another emergency response, the MSF team arrived at the edge of a steep slope to find 25 people on the ground in an extreme state of panic, many vomiting and in urgent need of medical assistance. People were reported injured, with some struggling to move. MSF treated two people with suspected fractures due to their falls, another with a dislocated shoulder, and a woman who had suffered a suspected epileptic episode, according to MSF staff on the scene. Three pregnant women were amongst the group. MSF referred 10 people in total to hospital. In May 2023, MSF also provided emergency medical assistance to a group of people who had climbed a very steep and dangerous hill after being chased.84

During another emergency response, the MSF team provided assistance to a group who ventured onto rocky and dangerous terrain. An MSF doctor treated a woman for severe head and face injuries sustained in a rockfall. Her husband, who was also treated by MSF, described the events:

“We tried to climb up the hill and, as we were climbing, the terrain broke and a big rock fell on the face of my wife, followed by a rain of stones that fell on her head. She was injured and bleeding from her head. I told her to sit while me and two of my children were trying to climb up the mountain to find someone of the other group to come and help us. Her face and head were covered in blood. We climbed 2km for 1.5 hours until we reached a flat place where there was a road passing. We tried to hide as we were very scared the police would pass by the road. I had not [had anything to drink] since Turkey, I was very thirsty and my children too.”

Often people hide in the open for hours and even days in harsh weather conditions, from intense heat in summer, to storms, heavy rain, cold winds and sub-zero temperatures in winter. On Samos, MSF assisted 38 groups of people who re-

ported hiding outside for more than 24 hours without food or water. Such conditions can have serious health consequences. In winter 2022, MSF treated 4 people for frostbite, sustained after being in the open in cold weather for more than two days. MSF has treated large numbers of people for dehydration, hypoglycaemia, heat exhaustion and hypothermia. Extended periods of exposure can exacerbate existing health conditions and can be particularly dangerous for people with vulnerabilities, such as pregnant women, children and people with chronic or infectious diseases. In December 2022, MSF assisted 14 people who had spent the night in the open, including a three-year-old child with signs of hypothermia and a man with type 2 diabetes and a heart condition, who was distressed and suffering from dehydration. His medication had been lost on the journey.

5.3.2 Risks for pregnant women

MSF teams have observed that pregnant women arriving in Greece face specific health risks and consequences, both for their own health and that of their unborn baby. MSF provided first aid in stormy conditions and heavy rain to a group of people hiding in the mountains, including a woman who was six months pregnant and an infant, both of whom were soaking wet, scared, crying and shaking from the cold.85 The pregnant woman was clinically unstable, vomiting, in pain and suffering emotional distress. An MSF doctor stabilised her while other MSF team members immediately called an ambulance.

In another emergency response, an MSF team assisted a group with several pregnant women; one had given birth that night in the mountains and another was in active labour. The group had been hiding in the mountains for two days without food or water. Aminata, the woman who gave birth in the mountains, described the experience:

“We waited. I was thirsty, I was hungry… I was feeling severe pain. I was crying… I was just feeling pain on top of my chest… Sunday night, it got worse. Again, another night, no water, no food. I was so weak, I couldn’t even stand up for a minute. I sat down, I lay down and I shouted, and the baby just came out. Like that. The baby just came out without help, with no medical assistance. The baby came out just like that… I was afraid. When I got up, I felt like falling down. But I said to some people: ‘I will not sit here until my baby dies. I will go down. Even if the police catch me, I want to return me, I will go down.’”

Ariel, who was five months pregnant when she arrived in Greece, told MSF:

“We landed by a cliff. How were we supposed to get out? Some men jumped in the water and climbed up the rocks; they helped everyone, one by one, on land. Some people in the group had been chased by the police and then pushed back to Turkey. And thus we walked, we walked, we climbed a steep mountain. The trees were scratching me, the sun was burning, I had no idea where I was, how this was going to end... we climbed a steep mountain, all the way up... People started to get desperate and scared. That night seemed to have no end. I was thirsty, so thirsty. My stomach was burning because it was empty. When a woman is pregnant, she must eat well. It was hot and I was feeling cold. My clothes were wet and I was shivering.”86

Adele, seven months pregnant at the time, described going into premature labour after being rescued:

“The Turkish Coast Guard only found us the next morning after we had been floating the whole night. I was brought to hospital immediately after arriving to the shore. By that time, I was screaming from pain and terrified. I ended up delivering under turmoil by a hospital after a stay of two weeks.87

5.3.3 Mental health distress on arrival

When MSF teams reach people who have recently arrived on Greek shores, they are usually distressed and fearful of being forcibly returned; some are so severely distressed they are unable to speak or walk. Excerpts from MSF’s internal reports of its emergency responses help capture the severity of people’s fear and distress on arrival:

“As soon as we started calling them with the megaphone, we heard screams calling for help. The area was very forested, and we could not easily spot the people. When they realised our position, they came running down the hill in severe distress... Two small girls were in distress because of splitting from their mum, crying. When the mother arrived and, after some breathing exercises, food, water and clothes, they recovered. A young man was in severe distress that led to a panic attack. Both of his arms were in dystonia [muscle spasms] and he was hyperventilating. After psychological first aid, he slowly felt better and, by the time of the transfer, he had regained full mobility.”88

An MSF team member described assisting a woman who was in psychological distress, wearing wet clothes, was wounded after a fall and was unable to walk; she had been hiding in the open all night out of fear of being forcibly returned:

“As we approached the side of the road, we started shouting, announcing the arrival of medical support. We could see people from for, but they were hesitant, they would not come close to us, they seemed in distress, sceptical, they lacked trust. As time passed, a small group came out of the woods; two men were carrying an old woman who could not walk, I saw them, and I remember assuming she had a problem with her legs. They reached us and I helped them climb down a stone wall on the roadside. She came down and was screaming in pain, she let fully her body fall on mine as I was helping her, she clung on my T-shirt, sobbing, crying and shaking, while the other two laid on the floor resting. As I tried to calm her down, we realised she had broken a wrist, her legs were not wounded, her legs were fine... she was immobilised by fear and panic after hiding in the night, with cold and wet clothes...”89

Most MSF patients in Greece have been subjected to violence in their home country or throughout their migration journey, and often tell our teams that they came to Europe to “seek protection”. In such a context, experiencing violent pushbacks adds a substantial layer of mental health distress to people who have already experienced traumatic events. Most exemplary, an MSF operational report describes the case of a pregnant woman who “showed clear and strong signs of trauma, as she associated the noise of the heavy waves crashing on the rocks to previous pushbacks. She reported nine previous attempts.”90

As well as pushbacks, people’s distress and fear can be linked to hiding in the open for prolonged periods without any certainty of what will happen to them next. MSF teams have witnessed people’s fear and distress on numerous occasions, including on an autumn day in 2022 while providing emergency medical aid to new arrivals on Samos:

“The group was starving, tired and terrified. When they noticed the authorities, they stopped. It took them a few seconds to decide if they will disappear. They said they were terrified to be returned. Some of the group expressed fear that they might be beaten by authorities.”91

84 Extracted from MSF internal report.
85 MSF patient testimony, Ariel.
86 MSF patient testimony, Ariel and Raya.
87 Extracted from MSF medical report.
88 MSF patient testimony, Aminata.
89 Extracted from MSF Internal report.
90 Extracted from MSF internal report.
91 MSF staff testimony.
92 Extracted from MSF report.
5.4 Long-term consequences

The harm exerted by pushback practices on people’s health and wellbeing, as reported above, goes far beyond the acute injuries and distress they experience upon arrival. The accumulated chronic stress of multiple violent and traumatic experiences can have a devastating impact on people’s mental health. With most people having already experienced violence in their home countries and/or on their journeys, the additional trauma and stress caused by reported pushback operations is profoundly harmful.

MSF has documented multiple practices which are abusive and traumatising for new arrivals. These include being physically assaulted, being subjected to inhuman treatment, being chased through mountains, being forced to hide without food or water, having personal possessions taken and destroyed, and being separated from family and loved ones. MSF’s mental health staff observe that most of their patients describe pushback experiences as dehumanising and humiliating, which contributes to weakening people’s self-esteem and their belief that they should be treated with dignity and respect.

Furthermore, MSF teams have observed how the degrading treatment experienced during pushbacks gives rise in some patients to post-traumatic stress disorder. Several months after experiencing a violent pushback, Elisabeth told MSF staff that she still feels scared when people in dark-coloured uniforms come close to her in the camp.

Mental health breakdown diagnosis

Clinical diagnosis of MSF patients in first mental health session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-traumatic stress disorder</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal/self-harm</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosis</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality disorder</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 1512

Sahar is receiving treatment from MSF’s mental health team for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder after being reportedly pushed back at sea nine times. She is staying in a closed controlled access centre (CCAC) on one of the islands, where every day she must face the same sea associated with her traumatic experiences:

“I live in this camp, a camp by the sea. I hate the sea after what happened to me. I cannot even look at it. I fear the water; my arms and legs start shaking every time I think or look at it. I think I am depressed now. At night, or if I sit in dark places, I have constant flashbacks, flashbacks on how I crossed the border. I am scared and saddened by the water, and I am forced to walk by it every day in this camp. When I think of this past, when I think about the sea, my head explodes...”

Even if people receive assistance from MSF and arrive safely at a reception centre, their mental health distress is often exacerbated by living conditions in the new segregated, high security, closed controlled facilities, such as the CCACs on both Samos and Lesvos, as reported to MSF teams by their patients. Long-term medical conditions may also be exacerbated by having experienced violence and being obliged to live in constant uncertainty about the future. Meanwhile, people in CCACs with chronic or infectious diseases may find themselves forced to interrupt their treatment, especially if their medication was reportedly lost or destroyed during a pushback, as there is no easy access to healthcare within the CCACs.

Recurrent pushback practices, as reported to MSF, result in people becoming trapped in vicious cycles of violence, exploitation and danger, as they try again and again to reach Europe. People who have been pushed back and picked up by the Turkish Coast Guard tell MSF that they are routinely placed in prison for several days or weeks. After being released they are often issued with papers requiring them to leave the country within 30 days. Once their status in Turkey is considered ‘illegal’, people are forced into increasingly precarious living situations, exploitative working conditions (especially if their money has been taken during a pushback) and ever-more risky and desperate attempts to reach Europe.

John and Alexandra told MSF that they tried to reach Greece nine times, first whilst Alexandra was pregnant and later with their newborn baby:

“We couldn’t go back to our country and we were not welcome in Turkey either. We had signed those papers that said that we had to leave Turkey within 30 days. We had to leave before the police would catch us... We were living a life in fear. All we could do was to keep going. My belly was growing, our living conditions were not good at all.”

94 MSF patient testimony, Sahar.
95 MSF, Closed centres on Greek islands exacerbate psychological trauma, November 2022.
96 MSF patient testimony, John and Alexandra.
6. NAVIGATING A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

6.1 Shrinking humanitarian space

MSF teams continue to provide emergency medical care to newly arrived people on Samos and Lesvos, despite periods when their work is 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, as outlined by the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders:

“Human rights defenders have found it increasingly difficult to carry out their work, especially in fields that might be considered controversial or geopolitically sensitive. This is particularly tangible in relation to those who defend the rights of asylum seekers, migrants and refugees, including those providing humanitarian assistance, legal aid, participating in search and rescue operations and documenting pushbacks.”

Humanitarian workers and refugees have been prosecuted for either providing essential humanitarian assistance or for seeking safety in Greece. For instance, 24 people currently face charges for having provided humanitarian assistance to people arriving on Lesvos between 2016 and 2018 leading to the closure of operations of the NGO ERCI and suspension of activities of several organisations supporting asylum seekers on the Greek islands. These ongoing measures to criminalise NGOs and civil society have a chilling effect, leading to them reducing and shutting down programmes and maintaining a low profile for fear of repercussions.

The trials that have taken place have been described as an attempt to “deter humanitarian assistance and discourage migrants and refugees from seeking safety on the country’s shores.” Accusatory rhetoric against NGOs and civil society by the Greek government continues to escalate, as does increasingly restrictive administrative and legislative barriers. Several international and European bodies of experts have expressed concerns about the Greek legal framework and have exerted significant strain on MSF’s human resources. Nonetheless, at the time of writing, this Committee has not produced any outputs, thus delaying accountability efforts.

“...human rights violations that ‘never occurred’...”

In practice, while MSF’s cooperation with authorities is positive and constructive, leading to the effective assistance of people in need, MSF teams on Samos and Lesvos were also prevented from providing medical assistance and blocked from reaching the communicated location of the new arrivals.

People also described how they were intercepted after arrival on the islands, reportedly taken by uniformed officers and/or unidentified masked individuals, detained (often unofficially) before being forcibly transferred to a coast guard vessel, transported to Turkish waters and put on a life raft. During these interceptions people describe being beaten, strip searched, subjected to intrusive body searches, detained and abused. Practices which involve removing people from the Aegean islands, whether from sea or from land, are illegal and have dramatic mental and physical consequences, including the loss of life. MSF teams have borne witness to how normalised pushbacks have become, and to the stark absence of protection for people who seek safety in Greece.

Despite external and credible evidence, Greek authorities, the EU and its members states have failed to hold to account the perpetrators of these violations. This climate of impunity helps reinforce and normalise these inhuman practices. As this report details, violent pushback practices inflict intense physical and psychological suffering, with consequences for the health, safety, wellbeing and lives of people attempting to seek protection in Greece.

7. CONCLUSION

From August 2021 to July 2023, MSF provided emergency medical assistance to 7,904 asylum seekers who had recently arrived on Samos and Lesvos. Throughout this two-year period, MSF teams have responded to and collected accounts of violence and pushback practices at the Greek border. Testimonies from MSF patients describe how their lives were put in danger by being forcibly pushed back to Turkey, both at sea and from land. People arriving on the Aegean islands report being subjected to violent practices, including being gunned down, stripped, strip searched, beaten, detained and abused, waves being used to stabilise them, being assaulted by masked individuals, having guns pointed at them, and their dinghies being damaged or towed by rope.

IN PLAIN SIGHT

• 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 activities 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.

• MSF calls on the Greek government to actively build an enabling environment for the protection and wellbeing of individuals seeking protection and safety. Continued impunity for the perpetrators of violence against asylum seekers, migrants and refugees must be countered through effective accountability and independent monitoring, while disproportionate restrictions and the criminalisation of civil society organisations providing assistance to new arrivals must stop immediately.

• MSF urges the European Commission, donor states and other EU member states to use all available mechanisms to ensure accountability and compliance with European and international law.