

SAMOS LEGAL CENTRE NEWSLETTER

A quarter of change on Samos

Between **April and June 2026**, the asylum context in Greece underwent a period of significant transition. The quarter culminated in the entry into force of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum on 12 June, bringing new screening requirements, accelerated procedures, expanded detention provisions and reinforced return mechanisms.

While arrivals on Samos remained relatively low compared with previous years, procedural changes had a much greater impact on people seeking protection. Shorter deadlines, fast-track procedures and evolving administrative practices made access to timely legal assistance increasingly important.

For the Samos Legal Centre, this meant adapting quickly while maintaining our core services: legal information, individual consultations, interview preparation, legal clinics and support for people in vulnerable situation

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

Adapting legal assistance to accelerated procedures. The implementation of the new framework has already changed the way legal assistance needs to be delivered.

As asylum procedures became increasingly accelerated, the Centre frequently organised interview preparation sessions at very short notice. The team also maintained its legal hotline, walk-in consultations and legal clinics, providing support to people at different stages of their asylum procedures.

Legal clinics remained an important way of bringing legal information outside the office. **During the quarter, legal sessions were organised in collaboration with Samos Volunteers at Alphaland and Skills Factory, reaching 162 participants in several languages.**

The reduced time available to prepare applicants for interviews has made flexibility increasingly important. The team responded by organising both individual and small-group preparation sessions whenever appropriate, helping applicants understand the procedure and present their claims despite increasingly restrictive timelines.

10 YEARS OF THE EU-TURKEY AGREEMENT

In October 2015, the Republic of Turkey and the European Union agreed on an **“EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan”**, which was officially published on March 18, 2016, as a press release on the website of the Council of the European Union.

This political agreement revealed from its inception a clear objective: to legally return individuals who have entered the territory of the European Union irregularly back to Turkey.

Thus, it clearly states that “the EU and Turkey have decided [...] to put an end to irregular migration”, leading Turkey to “take back all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters” without any form of distinction between asylum seekers and other people on the move, all of them equally unable to travel through legal pathways.

The deal also established a **“one-for-one” mechanism**, asserting an intention to resettle one Syrian in the EU for every Syrian returned to Turkey. This pre-established system of returning nearly half of Syrian asylum seekers to Turkey allegedly raises doubts whether asylum services would be truly taking these applicants’ individual circumstances into account.

A new framework for asylum in Greece

From the beginning, this agreement marked a new era within the asylum reception system in Greece, as its implementation required deep modification of the Greek legislative framework. One of its most significant consequences is the incorporation of the **“safe third country”** concept. According to this new legislation, an asylum claim can be considered inadmissible if the asylum seeker could have received international protection in an allegedly “safe third country”, which in this case would be Turkey.

The initial scope of this policy has expanded considerably with the establishment in 2021 of a list of different nationalities subject to the “safe third country” procedure, notably **nationals of Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Somalia**. As a result, nearly 10,000 asylum claims were deemed inadmissible on this basis between 2021 and 2023 alone.

NGOs on the ground have criticised the lack of individual assessment of these decisions as well as the ineffectiveness of the appeals process. Indeed, the decisions issued by the Greek asylum authorities, particularly regarding Syrians, systematically fail to take into account their vulnerabilities, or their place of residence in Turkey, where certain territories are considered war zones.

The EU-Turkey deal therefore produces tangible legal consequences on the lives of asylum seekers in Greece, who find themselves in a situation where their international protection claims cannot be substantively reviewed.

An ambiguous nature in the favour of this agreement

However, the uncertain nature of this agreement has been preventing any form of legal action against its implementation.

Three actions for annulment were filed with the General Court of the European Union, which declared itself without jurisdiction to review the agreement's compliance with primary EU law. The case was referred to the CJEU, which in 2018 also declined to address this substantive issue, focusing instead on the formal grounds for the action's inadmissibility.

The Court's rhetoric considering the EU-Turkey solely as a political agreement without any commitment on the part of the European Union lacks credibility. Especially since EU funds are directly mobilised to implement this agreement, with an allocated budget of 12.5 billion euros spent on refugee assistance in Turkey since 2011.

Turkey as a “safe third country”?

This lack of legal safeguards regarding this deal is all the more serious considering that in practice, Turkey is not a safe country for asylum seekers.

Indeed, in recent years, Turkey has undergone an authoritarian shift driven by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which reached its peak with the March 2025 arrest of his main opponent, Ekrem İmamoğlu, then mayor of Istanbul. This anti-democratic drift has been accompanied by a general erosion of the protection of fundamental rights, with political rhetoric targeting numerous minorities deemed undesirable by the regime, notably Kurds and Yazidis, religious minorities including Alevis, LGBTQI+ individuals, as well as the many refugees and asylum seekers present on its territory.

As a result, there has been an increasing number of reported cases of human trafficking, which can take the form of sexual or labor exploitation, with nearly **1,500 victims identified between 2019 and 2023**. Adding to this dark reality, the deportation of Syrian and Afghan nationals is widely practiced in Turkey.

Following arbitrary arrests, or interceptions at the Turkish border, asylum seekers, and in some cases even beneficiaries of temporary protection, are taken to closed centers where they often undergo inhumane conditions and mistreatment.

They are then forcibly returned to neighboring countries in blatant violation of the fundamental principle of non-refoulement, which is protected internationally as a customary norm. In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights ruled on the systemic nature of this practice with regard to Syrian asylum seekers in the case of *Akkad v. Turkey*.

Ten years later a continuing legal challenge

Although the actual returns of asylum seekers who arrived on Greek territory to Turkey have, in reality, been carried out only rarely, as **Turkey has suspended readmissions** to its territory since 2020, the impact of the agreement continues to this day to extend beyond European borders.

Indeed, the massive investment of European funds in implementing this externalisation policy has helped finance numerous structures in Turkey designed to crack down on asylum seekers. Quoting Emma Sinclair, director of the NGO Human Rights Watch in Turkey: *“The EU is indirectly facilitating forced returns. They subcontract human rights violations to third countries”*.

Yet, despite the established violations of asylum seekers’ fundamental rights, the EU-Turkey Statement remains to this day “the foundation of the migration partnership” between Turkey and the EU according to the European Council.

It was therefore **renewed on April 6, 2021**, during a meeting in Ankara between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and European Council President Charles Michel.

These massive and systemic human rights breaches occurring in Turkey have led the highest Greek administrative court to issue a ruling in March 2025, declaring the Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) designating Turkey as a safe third country to be illegal.

This decision has not been implemented by the Greek asylum services, as a new JMD was issued on April 9, 2025, maintaining their position by once again designating Turkey as safe, and therefore restating the reviewing of the “safe third country” for asylum seekers during a merged interview together with their substantial asylum claim.

The lack of compliance of the Greek asylum services with national court decisions has led the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) and Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) to file a judicial review before the Greek Council of State for the annulment of the latter ministerial decision. This action is still pending today.

Conclusion

In summary, since its adoption, this alleged political agreement has led to systemic violations of the principle of ***non-refoulement***, putting asylum seekers at a high risk of persecution in the event of forced return, and documented acts of torture. This places the European Union in a position of dangerous complacency against the system of human rights protection that it claims to defend, violating the fundamental principles of its own founding treaties.

The lack of ethical funding for European migration policies is therefore an integral part of the EU’s responsibility, and a lack of respect for the rule of law which is compromised at every stage of the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement. Since 2016, the deal has relied on the Greek and European authorities’ exploitation of the concept of ***“safe third country”*** to advance a policy of externalising the processing of asylum claims. It highlights the absolute territorial sovereignty of Member States, which circumvents respect for the most fundamental human rights.

The legal ambiguity surrounding both the application of the “safe third country” concept and the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement makes these mechanisms particularly malleable to security policies, a trend reinforced with the recent implementation of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which took full effect on June 12, 2026.

THE PROJECT IN FIGURES

Field Team 

6

sessions to provide legal information were organised

162

Asylum seekers attended legal workshops

25

volunteers from non-legal organisation participated to our online workshop

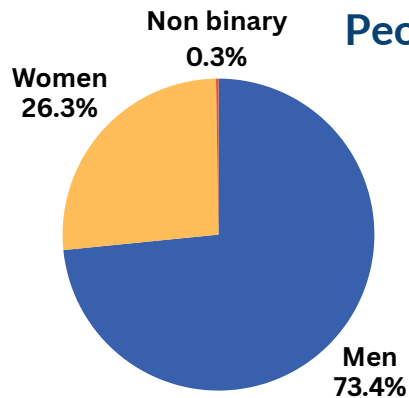
Between April, May and June, we worked with:

1 project manager

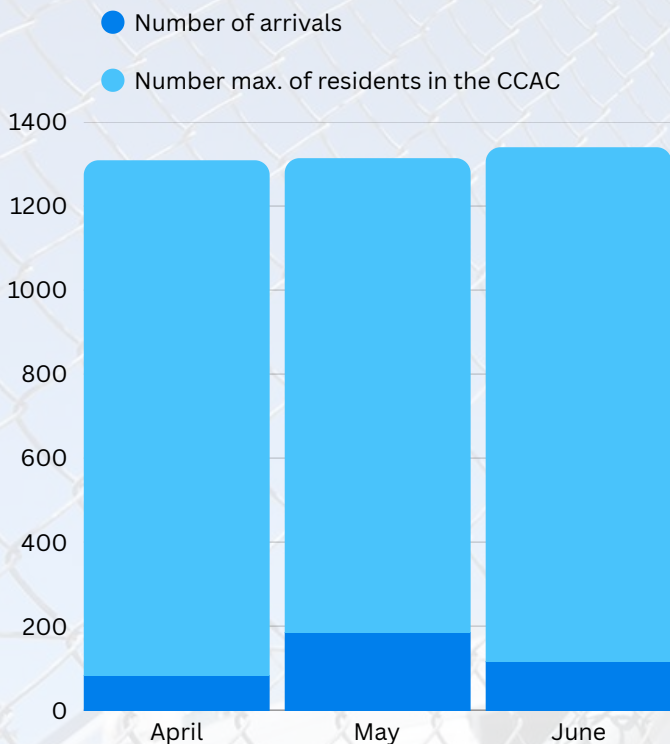
2 caseworkers

1 greek lawyer

5 interpreters



Out of the 170 new applicants actively followed over the reporting period **10%** of the people we met have declared having survived from SGBV, human trafficking or inhuman treatment.



*Data from the Greek Ministry of Migration

individual preparations for asylum interviews

53

requests sent to the authorities

42

Interview accompagnements

2

An average of **19 conversations** to answer to every morning. Messages received in around **7 different languages**. In total **1053 messages** in this period.

170 new numbers contacted us on our hotline.



These past months, we also met a woman from Cameroon.

During the interview preparation with her, we noticed how vulnerable she was due to the many hardships and struggles she had faced before arriving to Greece. She was victim of child prostitution and later on was sexually abused by the father of her children and his friends for years. She was never able to report this to the police, as some of them were police officers.

She was also victim of sexual trafficking in Turkey, as many West African women that pass through Turkey to join Europe. Because of how traumatizing her journey was and of the several SGBV she faced in her life, we ensured our lawyer was present during her two interviews to support her. We also made sure she received the necessary psychological support she needed and collaborated with MSF on her case.

She has now received a decision granting her refugee status, a month and half after her final interview. We are now in contact with the Red Cross tracing staff to try to localize her two missing sons.

SOME MORE STORIES & GOOD NEWS!

*We met a **young man from Syria**. He has experienced persecutions in both Syria and Turkey because of his sexual orientation.*

To have a better life, he decided to flee to Greece despite the dangers.

On his way to Samos, he experienced violence from Turkish coastguard, but we managed to escape. Upon entering Greek territorial waters, he was intercepted by a vessel; the people on board were masked and armed. They circled the boat and tried to stop it, even firing at the engine. In those moments, he felt like “he was going to lose his life”; he imagined the boat sinking or that he would be sent back to Turkey, where he feared imprisonment.

Finally he managed to reach Greece but suffered from severe panic attack. Despite the doctors' notice to see a psychiatrist, he received no follow-up treatment as no psychiatrist are present in the CCAC.

In the CCAC the living conditions were also extremely poor: “water was only available for a few hours a day, and we had to wait in long queues for food, which was often of poor quality or past its sell-by date. The accommodation and bathrooms were also unclean, and theft was rife within the camp; all my clothes were stolen.”

During his time in the camp, he also faced harassment and threats because of his sexual orientation. Some people threatened him directly, and he was also subjected to an attempted sexual assault. Unfortunately, no real measures were taken to protect him within the camp, and it was difficult to file a complaint without paying money, which increased my sense of insecurity.

*After about a month, his interview was scheduled, and we provided him legal support. We helped him prepare for the interview, particularly regarding his situation due to his sexual orientation. **He managed to pass the interview successfully and was recognised as a refugee after six months.***

UPDATES ADVOCACY

Working together to protect access to rights

Alongside individual legal assistance, the Samos Legal Centre continued to work with other organisations on the island and at national level to document rights violations, exchange information and develop joint advocacy strategies.

Documenting detention and conditions in the CCAC

In April, the Centre worked with **Human Rights Legal Project (HRLP)** to finalise a joint submission to the **UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR)** focusing on the **unlawful detention of foreign nationals, including unaccompanied children, in the Samos Closed Controlled Access Centre between 2023 and 2025**. The submission drew on first-hand information and data collected through the Centre's work.

The Centre also continued collaborating with the **Aegean Network** on the network's quarterly monitoring of conditions and procedures in Closed Controlled Access Centres on the Greek islands.

Building collective advocacy on Samos

Throughout the quarter, the team participated in the Samos Advocacy Group, working with other organisations to identify common concerns and coordinate advocacy strategies.

In **April**, discussions focused in particular on preparing a joint complaint concerning access to medical care on the island. In **May and June**, the group continued developing collective advocacy strategies, including the collection of joint testimonies on different issues affecting people seeking protection.

The Centre also continued working with other NGOs present at the island on fingerprinting practices, collecting testimonies and documenting individual experiences as a basis for future advocacy and potential complaints.

Engaging with decision-makers and partners

The Centre participated regularly in the **Protection Working Group, Legal Aid Network, Aegean NGO Network and local multi-agency meetings**, allowing the team to share information, coordinate referrals and contribute to collective responses to developments affecting asylum seekers.

In **May**, lawyers working on Samos also met with **Members of the European Parliament** ahead of their visit to the CCAC to share information about the situation on the island. The lawyers subsequently requested to accompany the MEPs during their visit but were refused access to the CCAC.

In **June**, we participated in a meeting with IOM on the possible *reactivation* of the **HELIOS programme in Samos**, and with organisations in Lesvos to explore future cooperation and joint resources.

To read more in details about these advocacy effort, feel free to consult [linktree](#) where updates and full statements are regularly posted.

TEAM UPDATES

A meaningful experience for Yasmine and Eloïse

The first months of 2026 also brought another transition for the team. From January until the beginning of June, we had the pleasure of working alongside Yasmine and Eloïse, two caseworkers who brought their commitment, energy and previous experience in human rights and migration to the Samos Legal Centre. During their six-month placement, both made a meaningful contribution to the team and to the people we support.

*For **Yasmine Khattari**, joining ASFF was an opportunity to get closer to the realities of the field after several years studying migration, international law and asylum. Working directly with asylum seekers allowed her to put faces and personal stories behind conflicts that can sometimes feel distant or abstract. She particularly highlighted how the experience taught her that legal knowledge alone is not always enough: working in asylum also requires creativity and the ability to find ways forward despite the many limitations of the system. The experience also helped her focus her energy on what is actually within her hands and on the difference that even small actions can make.*

***Eloïse Heumez**, who also brought previous experience in human rights work, described her six months at the Legal Centre as an incredibly enriching and formative experience. Working directly with asylum seekers allowed her to deepen her understanding of their circumstances and to provide legal assistance adapted to their individual needs and vulnerabilities. She particularly emphasized the importance of ASFF's work in a European asylum system that remains complex and increasingly restrictive, highlighting the role of free and independent legal assistance in ensuring that people can understand the procedure and effectively access their rights.*

Both Yasmine and Eloïse also emphasized the importance of the team they joined, describing their colleagues as deeply committed to protecting the rights of asylum seekers. Their reflections are a reminder of why the work of the Samos Legal Centre remains so important: even within a system marked by complexity, uncertainty and increasing restrictions, providing people with information, legal support and a space to understand their rights can make a real difference.

We are very grateful to Yasmine and Eloïse for the energy, commitment and care they brought to the project, and we wish them both all the very best for their next steps! We are happy to have shared this important stage of their professional journeys and hope that their experience in Samos will stay with them as they continue their work in the field of human rights and migration.



SUPPORT THE PROJECT

A HEARTFELT THANK YOU – AND A CALL TO KEEP GOING TOGETHER

First and foremost: **THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!**

Whether you've been following us since the early days or just recently joined our community, your support and encouragement mean the world to us. This project has only been possible because of the solidarity and trust of people like you, who believe (like we do) that everyone deserves dignity, information, and access to their rights !

Today, we face a new chapter. Resources are shrinking, needs are growing, and we are doing our best to adapt. To keep going, we have launched a fundraising campaign on **HelloAsso**. This campaign is not just about covering immediate costs; it's about building the foundation that will carry us into the future.

If you can, we invite you to support us once more:

- by making a contribution, no matter the size,
- by sharing the campaign with friends, colleagues, or networks who may want to help,
- or simply by staying connected and spreading the word.

Every gesture makes a difference. Together, we can ensure that this project continues to stand by those who need it most.

Thank you for walking this path with us.

**Support the Samos
Legal Centre Project !**



Direct link to our
Fundraising campaign

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