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HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

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*Re: Protecting Human Rights in Greece*

Dear Prime Minister Mitsotakis,

On behalf of Human Rights Watch, I would like to extend my congratulations on your swearing in as Prime Minister, following Greece's national elections.

Human Rights Watch is an independent non-governmental organization that monitors human rights in over 90 countries around the world. We have worked on human rights in Greece for more than a decade, on issues ranging from the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, including unaccompanied migrant children, to protection of children and adults with disabilities and women's rights.

As you assume leadership in Greece, we are writing to draw your attention to some key human rights challenges facing the country that we hope your government will address as a priority.

**Detention of Unaccompanied Migrant Children**

In recent months [the European Court of Human Rights has twice ruled that Greece is in violation of its international human rights obligations](#), by detaining unaccompanied migrant children in so-called "protective custody" in police station cells and pre-removal detention centers across the country. A growing number of detained unaccompanied migrant children are [forced to live in unsanitary conditions, often alongside adults they do not know](#). Children are often unable to receive medical treatment, psychological counseling, education, or legal aid. Few even know why they're detained or how long they will be behind bars and have little chance of challenging their detention.

Our understanding is that the many police leaders recognize that this situation is untenable. We urge you to end this practice immediately and find space for those unaccompanied children currently in custody in open facilities with decent living conditions, where they can receive care and counseling, and have access to legal aid and other basic services.

## **Institutionalization of Children with Disabilities**

Children with disabilities in Greece are not receiving the care they need to protect their rights and wellbeing. Many are often [forced to live in institutions, sometimes kept in cage-beds and/or tied to their beds, showing little respect for their rights, dignity, and overall wellbeing](#). A lack of support to ensure children with disabilities can live independently in the community means that children with disabilities remain in institutions when they become adults and in most cases all their lives.

We urge you to focus your efforts to a systematic shift from institutionalization to family-based care and independent living, through the development of support services to children with disabilities and their families, a fully functioning and well-resourced foster care and adoption system, a strong independent mechanism to monitor and assess the effectiveness of community-based support services, and a deinstitutionalization strategy.

## **Unlawful Pushbacks of Asylum Seekers to Turkey**

Greek authorities in Evros continue to [unlawfully and summarily force back asylum seekers to Turkey](#), without first considering their international protection needs. In some cases, these pushbacks involve ill-treatment. Accounts gathered by Human Rights Watch are consistent with the findings of other nongovernmental groups, intergovernmental agencies, and media reports. UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, has raised similar concerns.

We urge you to order an immediate halt to pushbacks and other summary returns to Turkey from the Evros region and to launch a formal investigation into the practice.

## **Asylum Seekers Trapped on the Aegean Islands**

Since 2015, Human Rights Watch has conducted numerous research missions on the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros, the locations where most asylum seekers enter Greece. We have consistently found that [thousands of asylum seekers trapped on the Aegean islands, most of them living in the so-called refugee “hotspots,” face appalling conditions that expose them to inhuman and degrading treatment](#), and prevent them from accessing education, healthcare, and other basic services.

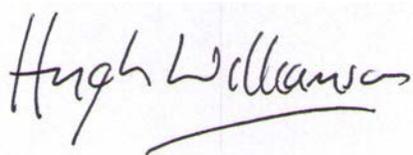
We urge you to put an end to the ongoing “containment policy” of asylum seekers on the islands, in accordance with the 2018 ruling of the Greek Council of State, and to immediately transfer asylum seekers to the mainland and meet their protection needs by providing access to fair and efficient asylum procedures and social services while their claims are pending.

During your campaign, you said you wish to turn processing centers on the islands into detention centers and speed up asylum procedures and returns to Turkey. The only way to increase the number or speed of returns to Turkey would be by weakening the safeguards in the process and thereby create a real risk that asylum seekers would be returned to abuse in violation of Greece's obligations under European Union (EU) refugee and human rights law. Establishing a detention regime on the islands, along the lines mooted in the election campaign, would also be a violation of Greece's international legal obligations.

We recognize that Greece faces a significant and disproportionate responsibility among EU member states due to the Dublin Regulation, and have repeatedly called on EU institutions and member states to set up and implement a meaningful responsibility-sharing mechanism. Nevertheless, this situation does not relieve Greece of its obligation to protect the human rights and dignity of everyone in Greece, irrespective of their migrant status.

Throughout the years, we have closely worked with Greek authorities to advance human rights in the country. We look forward to working with your government on these important issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hugh Williamson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

Hugh Williamson  
Director, Europe and Central Asia Division  
Human Rights Watch