

## **Testimonies of a persecuted Turkish lawyer and dismissed civil servant who experienced a pushback**

### Information collected by The Arrested Lawyers Initiative

On 29 August 2020 (Saturday), 5 of us, who had been subjected to similar political criminal investigations, came together and set out from Edirne, Turkey to cross the Evros River into Greece. On the same day, we crossed the Evros River and entered the Greek border at around 11 a.m.

When we entered the border, we did not encounter any Greek security units.

With the help of Google maps, we determined that the nearest Greek settlement to our location was "Nea Vissa" (Νέα Βύσσσα) and started walking towards it. Our aim was to surrender to the police in the nearest Greek settlement and submit our request for political asylum to the Greek authorities. We walked 5-6 km from the border and reached the town of Nea Vissa" (Νέα Βύσσσα) at around 17:00 on the same day (Saturday, 29 August 2020). We did not encounter any Greek security officers from the border to this town.

We had previously heard from social media and other media sources about cases of pushback in Greece. As proof that we had crossed into Greece and declared our request for political asylum, after arriving in the town, we were asked to present our case (that we had come to Greece from Turkey for political asylum and that we were within the borders of Greece) in front of the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint George in the town square and in front of the Greek local police office, also in the square. We shot videos in Turkish and English.

Coordinates of the places where the videos were filmed:

Greek Orthodox Church of Saint George:

41.584391, 26.542809

Police Office

41.583656, 26.542711

When we arrived in the town of Nea Vissa, the local police office was closed. Therefore, we sat in the garden of the café in the town square to have a rest and a drink and to decide what to do.

The coordinates of the café and the square are :

(Central square of Nea Vissa / Κεντρική πλατεία Νέας Βύσσσα)

41.584300, 26.542526

Here, after searching on the internet, we found the name and telephone number of a lawyer in Greece. We called the lawyer and told him that we were from Turkey, that we were currently (at the time of the incident) in the Greek town of "Nea Vissa" (Νέα Βύσσσα), that we had been subjected to an unfair criminal investigation in Turkey for political reasons, that there was an arrest warrant for us (there was an arrest warrant for 5 other people in Turkey and we would have been arrested if we had been sent back to Turkey), that we wanted to apply for political asylum in Greece and asked him how we should proceed. The lawyer said that he would take our personal information (name, surname, telephone number) and call the Greek Border Police, who would come and take us to the police station and carry out the necessary procedures for the asylum application. He said that we should not move from where we were. So, we waited in the same place for the border police to arrive.

While we were waiting in the café, a person in civilian clothes came from the next table and asked us in English, "Are you the ones coming from Turkey?". We said yes and he told us that he was a policeman in charge of the police office in the town, that the border police would come and pick us up, that we would be taken to the border police station for the necessary procedures, that there was nothing to worry about and that we were safe.

PART2: We waited for about 4-5 hours and after it got dark in the evening (around 21 pm), 2 men in civilian clothes came to us, they said that they were border police officers and the first thing they did was to switch off our mobile phones and collect them. Then they checked our ID cards. We told them in English that we were seeking political asylum and that we had a lawyer. They said that there was no problem and that they would take us to the police station. The lorry did not have any windows or ventilation openings, so we could not see outside, it was dark inside and we could not see anything.

After travelling for about 10 minutes, the vehicle stopped, and they opened the door. The place we arrived was a dark and deserted place with no settlements around. As we were taken in a closed

environment, we had no idea where we had come from or in which direction.

We were worried about being searched in such a deserted place. When we asked why we were standing there, they started to show harsh attitudes, and when we tried to explain our situation again, they sternly silenced us and prevented us from speaking.

After searching all our belongings and our clothes one by one, they put us back into the closed car and continued on the road. We did not know where we were going and could not see the surroundings. After a while (approximately 15-20 minutes) the car stopped again. When they opened the doors, we realised that we were again standing under a bridge in the middle of nowhere. Here, a bigger flatbed truck was waiting. Around the lorry there were scary Greek soldiers dressed in military camouflage, with their faces covered with ski masks, armed with guns and iron sticks in their hands.

Here again, we tried to explain our situation and that we were seeking political asylum, but they did not listen to us and forced us into another large, closed van.

The first two civilians who picked us up handed the mobile phones they had taken from us in a transparent bag to the soldiers wearing ski masks.

After we got into this lorry, the vehicle moved and after driving on roads we did not know and could not see for a while (approximately 20 minutes), it stopped somewhere. When they opened the doors, it was clear that the place we had come from was the outer part of a military post/unit.

Here, they put another group of people in the same vehicle. From their conversations it was understood that they were asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. There were people of all ages in this group (very young children, women, young people, old people). After putting them in the lorry, they closed the doors and we started to wait. It was dark, stuffy and very crowded inside. People were piled on top of each other. It was hard to breathe, small children were crying.

The person next to us, who we learnt was of Afghan origin and could speak Turkish, told us that they had been kept waiting since daylight hours, that they were going to push us back to Turkey and that

the Greek soldiers were waiting for midnight for this illegal and inhumane push back.

After waiting for a while in these very bad conditions, we set off. From the movement and vibrations of the vehicle, it was clear that it was travelling through very narrow and rough terrain.

After travelling this way for a while, the vehicle stopped, and they opened the doors. The place we came to was dark and deserted. We were surrounded by trees, and it was a secluded place where outsiders could not see us. There was the sound of water. From the sound of water, we realized that we were somewhere on the banks of the Evros River, but we did not know where or at what point we were.

When the doors were opened, we saw that there was another vehicle filled with people in the same way. The Greek soldiers had brought about 100 asylum seekers, including us, very young, babies and children, and women, to the bank of the Evros River to push them back to Turkey.

They took everyone out of the cars and lined them up in groups of 5, one after the other. Since we were Turks, we were put in a separate queue. Although we repeatedly told them that we had requested political asylum, that we were from Turkey, that there was an arrest warrant for us and that we would be arrested and imprisoned if we were sent to Turkey, they did not listen to us and silenced us harshly.

The ranking person next to the soldiers (it was understood that he was the highest-ranking soldier there) said something to us in Greek with insulting and mocking expressions and shouting.

The Greek soldiers persistently and harshly refused to let anyone speak and violently silenced those who tried to say something. It was clear from this behaviour that they did not want anyone to hear or see the unlawful act of pushing back, and therefore they did not want anyone to witness the incident.

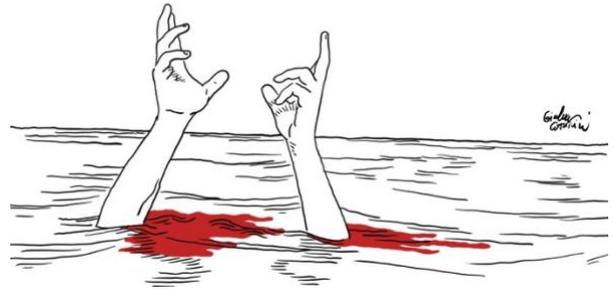
They brought everyone to the riverbank and made them sit on their knees in military order.



Here, the soldiers separated some people from the group, stripped them naked in front of everyone (small children, women) and tortured them with iron rods. The people they beat were writhing on the ground in pain. Then, again, people dressed as soldiers robbed every one of their pockets and bags. They took all the money and valuables from our pockets and bags. They had already taken our mobile phones.



After this extortion was over, they took us one by one into an inflatable boat waiting in the river with a person dressed as a soldier at its head. They were filling the inflatable boat with people far above its capacity. I was seated next to the person dressed as a soldier at the head of the boat. When the boat reached the middle of the river, this person shouted at me to get off. When I told him that I could not swim, he pushed me off the boat and I fell into the water. The current of the water was very strong and its depth was up to my throat level. When he suddenly pushed me off the boat, I lost my balance in the water with the effect of the current and I was in danger of drowning. I really could not swim, and the water level was almost above my height.



There were also women with small children on the boat. The person at the head of the boat, dressed as a soldier, ruthlessly turned the boat over and everyone in the boat fell into the river. There were the sounds of crying and wailing of children and women coming from behind. Everyone was in fear for their lives. In this way, they brought everyone waiting on the shore to the centre of the river and threw them into the water. There may have been some people who drowned in the current. Because there were many women carrying small children in their arms.

With difficulty we reached the opposite bank of the river (the Turkish side), it was quite steep, and with the help of others we were able to climb up. It was midnight, it was the end of August, so it was cold at night, and we were wearing thin summer clothes. Our clothes and other clothes were wet. We were shivering from the cold. The place where we climbed to the Turkish side of the river was a wooded area, we could not see our surroundings because it was dark at night, but we could hear voices nearby. It was clear from the sounds that there was a settlement (village/town) nearby.

The other members of the group (Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis) left the place as they were not worried about being caught in Turkey. We, 5 of us, stayed there and did not know what to do. As it was a border area, the risk of being caught by patrolling soldiers was very high. Since our mobile phones were seized by the Greek soldiers, we had no possibility to communicate with anyone and get help. Our families had no news from us.

We decided to go a little further into the woods and wait for the morning in a wooded area. The night was cold and we were very cold because our clothes were wet. We could hear the sounds of soldiers patrolling around us. At one point they

came very close to us, we were very scared that we would be caught. We waited until morning in fear and cold. In the morning, we learnt that Greek soldiers had pushed us back to the coast of Doyran village in Edirne province.

The coordinates of the place where we were pushed back:

Greek side:

41.478112, 26.597381

Turkey side (near Doyran Village) :

41.478370, 26.599420

In the morning (on Sunday, 30 August 2020), we arrived in Doyran Village, taking the risk of getting caught, and from there we hitchhiked to Edirne city centre.

One of our friends (a lawyer) who was trying to go to his place of residence was caught on the way and arrested and sent to prison.

-----

-----

Illustrations were drawn by Italian artist Gianluca Costantini, <https://twitter.com/channeldraw>