

JOINT STATEMENT:

Lack of interpretation services lengthens existing delays to access asylum and leaves people without protection

29 May 2024

On 14th May the main provider of interpreters to the Greek asylum service, Metadrasj, announced the suspension of its services in both Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) and the Asylum Service, due to months of delay in payment by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (MoMA). As a result of this disruption, people applying for international protection in Greece are forced to wait even longer for their claims to be processed and appeals and subsequent applications have been halted, leaving many people in a legal limbo without access to protection and vital services. Following the withdrawal of interpretation services, people residing in camps are unable to communicate with the authorities in any way.

As of today, there has been no formal recognition by the authorities that these services continue to be unavailable, and no clear information has been provided on when interpretation will be reinstated. Instead, the MoMA announced that the European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA) will temporarily fill in the gaps until the renewal of the agreement with Metadrasj, without providing a concrete timeline for this. Metadrasj has requested the disbursement of funds from the Ministry, which are specifically dedicated to cover interpretation costs of the Reception and Identification Service from the European Commission's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2021-2027).

Many asylum interviews have been postponed or cancelled as a result of the disruption, without any indication of when they will be rescheduled. However, applicants have been informed by the authorities to continue performing all necessary actions relating to their claim - including attending scheduled interviews, renewing asylum seeker cards and submitting appeals on time. In practice, this means people are forced to travel long distances from remote camps to asylum offices, despite the high likelihood that appointments will be cancelled. Applicants must bear the travel costs themselves due to lack of transportation arranged by the authorities from camps.

For many people we are supporting, this latest disruption compounds months of waiting for their interview, due to unavailability of interpreters in their mother tongue. Several clients tell us they feel compelled to undertake the asylum interview in a language they are not fluent in, despite the high risk that they will not be able to fully communicate their need for international protection to the authorities.

Due to lack of interpretation, asylum seekers are also currently unable to lodge appeals after receiving a first rejection, unless they agree to do so in Greek or English. Applicants are receiving a document from the asylum office stating that the deadline for appeals is indefinitely extended. Given the lack of published information by the Ministry on when interpretation will be resumed, there are serious concerns that applicants will not be informed in time when appeal deadlines are reinstated.

The disruption to interpretation services is yet another barrier preventing people from entering the asylum procedure. In recent years, access to asylum in Greece has been consistently obstructed, with the result that many people are left without legal protections and access to their basic rights. Civil society have reported on technical issues resulting in delays issuing vital documentation and ongoing appointment unavailability and staff shortages, which have left asylum seekers and refugees without access to basic rights and exposing them to homelessness, destitution and ill-health.

Metadrasi's announcement comes against a backdrop of chronic under-resourcing of Greece's asylum and reception services in recent years, including shortages of interpreters and administrative staff and outdated computer systems, resulting in dysfunctional and prolonged procedures which block fair and efficient access to asylum for people seeking international protection. The Ministry has previously failed to disburse funds to Metadrasi for several months, prompting similar announcements in October 2023 and January 2024, and leading to precarious working conditions for the NGO's translators.

The undersigned call on the Ministry to take action to ensure the continuous and unimpeded provision of interpretation services during reception and identification procedures and throughout the whole processing of asylum claims by:

- Immediately renewing contracts and disburse funds to the provider of interpretation services and ensure there are no delays which could affect the provision of interpretation in the future
- Immediately releasing a statement explaining why it is currently not possible to complete the registration of asylum claims, to lodge subsequent applications or to file an appeal and adequately informing people of their rights during the waiting period, and when they can expect these procedures to be functional again, in a language they can understand
- Reinstating as soon as possible all asylum processes which continue to be unavailable, particularly the registration of asylum applications and the lodging of subsequent applications and first instance appeals;
- Issuing interim documents to people waiting to register their asylum claim or people having received a first rejection, which will allow them to fully exercise their rights in Greece, including the right to work, to access healthcare, reception services and cash assistance
- Taking immediate action to reduce the backlog which was exacerbated by the suspension and ensure that delays in issuing and renewing documents are reduced
- Ensuring that all people impacted by any future disruptions of asylum procedures have access to temporary documentation protecting them from police checks and arbitrary detention
- Ensuring that people impacted by any future lack of interpretation services or any other issues impacting the operations of asylum authorities are adequately informed of the impact on their access to the asylum procedure and other fundamental rights.

Joint statement by Mobile Info Team, Equal Legal Aid, Refugee Legal Support, I Have Rights, Avocats Sans Frontières, and Legal Centre Lesvos

