

Greece: Olympics "clean-up" hits city's most vulnerable inhabitants

Athens has worked hard to present visitors of the Olympic Games 2004, and the world's media, with its best face. People living in the city have been rewarded with new sports facilities, railways and road junctions after months of dusty work on buildings and roads. However, all this has come at a price in terms of human rights.

Official figures put the number of workers killed on construction sites at 14, but unofficial estimates put the figure at 40 workers dead due to poor safety measures. Union representatives say that no accurate official figures are being kept. Many of Greece's construction workers are from Eastern Europe and South Asia.

In the months leading up to the Games, Greece was heavily criticized for the poor organization and slow preparation. There were fears that key facilities would not be finished in time for the start. All this reflected on the workers, many of whom worked long hours in dangerous conditions without protective equipment or supervision.

Greece is obliged under international law to guarantee minimum labour standards including under the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The UN Human Rights Norms for Businesses set out a comprehensive list of the human rights obligations of companies, including the provision of safe and healthy working conditions.

As the building work draws to a close, the Athens authorities have put a lot of effort into cleaning up the streets. This has also meant the rounding up of homeless people from the centre of the city and sending some of them to psychiatric institutions.

"Following arrests by the police, the prosecutor issues sectioning orders that force us to lock up drug addicts, alcoholics or mentally ill people," said Michalis Yannakos, head of a trade union at Dromokaition Psychiatric Hospital.

The newly-imposed security measures also affect asylum-seekers or refugees. There are reports that the Greek authorities are asking them for particular documents that they may not be able to provide.

Robert White, the representative of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Greece, says that they expect the legitimate border controls and security measures, being undertaken by the Government in relation to the Olympic Games, to be balanced with the provisions of access to the territory and access to fair asylum procedures for those in genuine need of refugee protection, in accordance with established international obligations.

"Some local media reports mention roundups and detentions of persons, sometimes without proper screening to identify those who may be of concern to UNHCR. We are working with the Greek government to address these and broader issues related to improvements of the asylum system and the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees."

The Ministry of Public Order is alleged to have issued a memo in support of detaining asylum-seekers in a camp in Larissa for reasons of public order and security, a measure that will seriously undermine the asylum process.

In a report published in October 2003, the UNHCR criticized Greece over detention conditions under which asylum-seekers are held.

"Many people who eventually are registered as asylum-seekers are initially detained for a three-month period for reasons of illegal entry, at various locations in the country," Robert White of the UNHCR explains. "Detention conditions are quite variable -- in some cases improved as compared to one year ago (for example Chios and Lesbos), in other cases with

improvements underway (e.g. the Evros area near the border with Turkey), in still other cases, substandard."

In the run up to the Olympic Games, inmates of Korydallos Prison and five other prisons have protested against the government's decision to stop authorizing parole during the games as a security measure. Amnesty International addressed the Greek government in July 2004 about the conditions of detention in high security facilities at Korydallos Prison. The organization had received information that the conditions of detention amounted to inhuman and degrading treatment, including poor hygiene in cells; a lack of access to association, fresh air and exercise facilities; and a lack of prompt medical treatment.

The rights of a group of Romani families were abused after they signed an agreement with the mayor of the Athens suburb of Maroussi in 2002. Under the terms of the agreement, they would leave their homes in the vicinity of the Olympic Stadium construction site on the condition that they would receive subsidies to help them rent new accommodation. This was to be a temporary measure, as under the terms of the agreement, the Municipality of Maroussi also undertook to work towards their permanent rehousing.

The agreement, which affects a total of 137 people, guaranteed a monthly payment for each family with payments varying according to family size. By October 2002, they had already begun making complaints that they were not receiving payments or that the payments were erratic. Some families allege that they faced discrimination whilst looking for new accommodation and, when they did finally find a house to rent, they would lose it through lack of funds, caused by the non-punctual payment of the rent subsidies by the Maroussi Municipality.

On 8 June 2004, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance made public its Third Report on Greece, in which it criticized the Greek central administration and local authorities alike for not making all efforts necessary to improve the living conditions of Roma in Greece.

The European Commission has threatened to take legal action against five EU countries, Greece included, for being slow in bringing national laws in line with the bloc's rules against racial discrimination.

Greece has made an enormous effort to welcome athletes and visitors for the Olympic Games in renovated Athens. The country's authorities should match the Olympic principle of "fair play" in their treatment of the most vulnerable groups of its society.