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Bill Frelick of Human Rights Watch has the audacity and arrogance to slam Greece (July 30) owing to the policies of Athens on asylum applications for immigrants. The fundamental root of this problem from Turkey owing to the fact that most of these people were in Turkey before the Turks shipped them off to Greece. Greece is a very small country that is trying to deal with the problem in the most humane way possible.

Of course, for Mr. Frelick to attack Greece is hardly surprising considering that Human Rights Watch has had a blatantly anti-Greek political agenda for many years and has permitted itself to be used as a political pawn by regimes in Ankara and Skopje that are blatantly hostile to Greece. This writer has had first hand experiences with staff at Human Rights Watch that have been quite hostile to suggestions that HRW cover human rights abuses of Greeks in Constantinople and the Turkish occupied territories of Cyprus. Greece is a democratic country and the bastion of stability in the Balkan Peninsula. If the Greek government is not performing to the satisfaction of bureaucrats such as Mr. Frelick and his colleagues, perhaps they should leave their comfortable offices in Washington and New York, and volunteer their services and deal with the asylum problem in Greece firsthand.

Theodoros Karakostas

HEC Executive Committee
WASHINGTON - The Greek government has come up with a novel solution to a growing backlog of asylum appeals: Abolish appeals.

No backlog. No Problem.

But the problem can't be dismissed so easily. Greece has a backlog of about 30,000 cases. A part-time asylum appeals board hears about 60 cases a week. At this rate, it would take about 10 years to clear the current backlog alone.

But wait. Greece, with its long coastal borders, is at the front line of migration to the European Union, with nearly 20,000 new asylum applications lodged there last year. Part of the reason is E.U. law, and the so-called "Dublin rules," under which other Union member states can send asylum seekers who entered the E.U. through Greek borders back to Greece.

Last year, the Greek asylum approval rate was 0.05 percent. Since essentially everyone is initially denied, the appeals have been growing faster than the system's capacity to keep up.

Anyone with a pocket calculator can see that the system doesn't work. But it is not just a question of numbers. Each number represents a person. One of them is "Hamed," who fled Afghanistan alone at age 13 when a local warlord threatened to kill him if he did not submit "for dancing and more."

His asylum interview took place in 2008 in a noisy, crowded room in the Petrou Ralli police station:

"The policeman in civilian clothes asked something and the Iranian woman [the interpreter] told me I should say I came for a better life.

"I don't know whether the police officer said that or not because I didn't understand him. I told the Iranian woman that I wanted to explain my other problems. At that point the police officer shouted at me and I got scared. "...

The interview took five minutes.

The obvious solution is to have specially trained officials, including specialists in interviewing children, conduct careful, private interviews, and grant asylum to people who need it. Then, an
independent body should work full-time to consider appeals in a fair and timely way.

Instead the government has introduced Presidential Decree 81/2009, which makes a bad system worse.

First, instead of creating a corps of specialized asylum interviewers capable of identifying people needing protection, the decree spreads the job of interviewing asylum seekers to police directorates throughout the country.

Police officers have a host of other duties and lack training in asylum law or in conducting interviews with fearful and traumatized asylum seekers.

Competent interpreters and asylum lawyers, in short supply even in Athens, are almost absent in the islands and border regions.

Second, the decree abolishes the right to lodge an appeal and eliminates the asylum appeals board (after it finishes the cases currently before it), retaining only strictly limited judicial review. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has declined to participate in the new asylum procedure, saying that it does "not sufficiently guarantee efficiency and fairness."

Greek asylum procedures are just the tip of the iceberg of a system that fails at every stage to protect refugees and unaccompanied children.

These failures include illegal push-backs of migrants at the Turkish border, the puncturing of boats in the Aegean Sea, deplorable conditions of detention, police brutality, and various legal and administrative tricks to keep asylum seekers from lodging a claim, all of which Human Rights Watch exhaustively documented in two reports published late last year.

In June, the European Council's Committee for the Prevention of Torture issued a report, saying that its repeated recommendations since 1997 to improve the conditions of migrant detention have been "largely ignored by the Greek authorities."

Greece responded with legislative changes that extend the period of administrative detention to up to one year, and possibly 18 months. And, on July 12, the Greek authorities burned and bulldozed a long-standing campsite at Patras occupied by migrants, including many unaccompanied children, thus swelling the numbers being held in unacceptable conditions of detention.

If Greece does not put its own house in order, the European Union must hold it accountable. Other E.U. member states should suspend all returns of asylum seekers to Greece under the terms of the Dublin Convention and all E.U. institutions should demand that Greece immediately comply not only with Union asylum standards, but also with human rights norms that should long since have been considered inviolable among European states.

Bill Frelick is the refugee policy director at Human Rights Watch and the author of "Stuck in a Revolving Door: Iraqis and Other Asylum Seekers and Migrants at the Greece/Turkey Entrance
to the European Union."