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churches' commission for migrants in europe

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### **Stop hotspot approach, create safe passages: Church asylum experts gather in Athens**

A meeting of 150 asylum experts from churches and civil society drew strong criticism of current European asylum policies and plans in this area. The 15<sup>th</sup> European Asylum Conference took place in Athens from 15 to 20 October at the invitation of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe and Diakonie Deutschland.

The conference started on Chios, one of the Aegean islands where the so-called hotspots approach and EU-Turkey statement are in force. These approaches that aim to keep asylum seekers on the Greek islands rather than the mainland and through "admissibility procedures" attempt to send a majority of the newly arrived back to Turkey. Participants were also confronted with the reality of the ongoing deaths in the Aegean and other external borders of Europe of people seeking safety. They reiterated calls for safe passages into Europe to end deaths at its borders<sup>1</sup>.

Participants were shocked by the living conditions housed in the Vial hotspot on Chios, and later condemned the "undignified and humiliating" situation in the conference resolution. They also expressed concern about the impact on local populations of policies keeping asylum seekers at the border of the European Union. "We can only conclude that Europe cannot continue with its asylum policy as-is," remarked Dr Torsten Moritz, general secretary of CCME. "As churches we want to see this reality of suffering and death replaced by one of solidarity, fellowship, and hope."

Participants also reflected critically on the role played by European Union agencies, including the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) and the European Asylum Support Office. In their view current policy and practice of the EU and its agencies prevents asylum seekers from access to a fair asylum procedure and in practice often leads to a situation described as "de facto lawless."

While those gathered in Greece represented a diversity of interests and national contexts, they agreed on a common call for solidarity between member states of the EU and with refugees as guiding principles for a true Common European Asylum System. "What we have witnessed here calls into question the current regime of the Dublin Regulation, which leaves Greece among other countries at the EU external borders with disproportionate responsibility," remarked Katharina Stamm legal adviser on European Migration Policy of Diakonie Deutschland. "We strongly believe that Europe must renew its commitment to refugee protection, find a truly working solidarity mechanism and do to more to help those arriving in Greece and those welcoming them."

"The evaluation of the field visits and the information received during the days of the conference highlighted the fact that the hot spot approach can't be a "best practice for future" European policies on the management of mixed migration arrivals," said the CCME Vice Moderator Efthalia Pappa. "Durable solutions regarding reception, asylum procedures and return policies need to be in conformity with the European acquis and Member States need to implement effectively the core fundamental principles of solidarity and burden sharing," she added.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ccme.be/fileadmin/filer/ccme/20\\_Areas\\_of\\_Work/Safe\\_Passage/2018-10-22\\_15th\\_European\\_asylum\\_Conference\\_declaration\\_final.pdf](http://www.ccme.be/fileadmin/filer/ccme/20_Areas_of_Work/Safe_Passage/2018-10-22_15th_European_asylum_Conference_declaration_final.pdf)