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The Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers at Kofinou

1. Facilities

The Kofinou Reception Centre is the only governmental reception centre for Asylum Seekers in Cyprus. It is composed by 18 rectangle prefabricated units. Four units are used for the administration, another four units as common spaces and two of them as sanitary units. The remaining 8 units are meant to be used as personal spaces / rooms for the hosting of asylum seekers. The Centre facilities are from the aesthetic point of view ugly and depressive. There are no trees within the Centre areas. The capacity of the Centre was initially estimated to 120 persons but due to recent changes the Centre can nowadays host around 80 persons.

Although efforts have been taken to improve the living conditions of asylum seekers there, there are still serious concerns as to the sanitary facilities, cooking and common spaces facilities, bad and smelly air quality due to the proximity to the central arbitrary especially at the days of animal corpses burning, recreational and religious facilities e.t.c.

2. Purpose / Nature

According to the Refugee (Reception Conditions for Asylum Seekers) Regulations of 2005 the Centre is to serve for the temporary accommodation and provision of reception facilities to asylum seekers for an initial period until asylum seekers gain access to the rights provided under the regulations (housing, work, welfare benefits e.t.c.). However, the fact that a structured programme designed to assist the Asylum Seekers to leave the Centre as soon as possible was never adopted, has led to the long term residence of asylum seekers in the Centre. Moreover, clear obstacles were created, especially from the welfare services, to discourage asylum seekers from leaving the Centre. As a result asylum seekers end up remaining there sometimes for years.

The Centre was initially receiving single persons and families, men and women. Due to serious difficulties the authorities decided to receive only families and single women. The decision might be seen, at first side as a protection measure for families and single women. But the Centre is unsuitable especially for these two categories of asylum seekers due to the serious difficulties regarding mobility, their social integration and their specialised accommodation needs these categories have. The place is not designed to meet the needs of families at all (e.g. children are sleeping and living with their parents in the same tiny space).

Finally, the hosted families and single women do not get any budget to prepare their own meals but they have to consume every day take away food which is not always appropriate for the dietary needs as well as food culture of the asylum seekers living there.

Apart from the above there have been reported cases of sexual harassment, abuse of alcohol and physical violence and racial conflicts between the inhabitants that are pushed under the carpet.

3. Governance & Budget

The Centre is governmental, under the responsibility of the Asylum Service of the Ministry of Interior but is run by the Community Welfare Council of Kofinou, a body whose establishment is initiated by the welfare department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance with the aim to engage local stakeholders in the social policy of the government.

At the same time another institution, the University of Nicosia (!), is running programs funded by the European Refugee Fund, with the aim to improve the conditions in the Centre, independently from the Kofinou Community Council, which is otherwise running the Centre. The Director of the Centre is selected by the Asylum Service, paid partly by the Asylum Service to manage the Centre and partly from the University of Nicosia to implement its ERF Project.

The abovementioned structure of the administration of the Kofinou Centre, raises serious concerns about the transparency and the accountability of the decision making and its management authorities whereas the role and responsibility of the Asylum Service, which according to the regulations is responsible for the Centre is not visible at all.

The running costs of the Centre are nearly 1 million Euro. Under full capacity conditions the costs per person is 1000 Euro per month, which amounts to double the public assistance a single asylum seeker would get outside the Centre and triple the public assistance a 4 persons family would again get outside the Centre. Apart from the expensive running costs the Centre affects negatively the efficiency of the European Refugee Fund, since a serious percentage of the ERF budget goes to the Kofinou Centre instead of other necessary programmes asylum seekers really need such as legal aid, integration programmes and efficient reception conditions programmes e.t.c. .

4. Location

The Kofinou Reception Centre is located next to the central Abatoir of Cyprus, 4 km away from the nearest residential area, the small village of Kofinou and around 40 km away from Nicosia, where Asylum Seekers can find the vast majority of the authorities dealing with their issues. It is not within the residential, but in the farming / agriculture zone of the village. There is no public transport available directly from the Centre to and from the major towns of Cyprus. There is no pedestrian road or any lighting from the Centre to the Village.

In this respect freedom of movement of asylum seekers is seriously jeopardised thus leading to possible restrictions of personal freedom.