



Press release

EU border agency targeted “isolated or mistreated” individuals for questioning

EMBARGOED until 00:00, 16 February 2017, London, UK

Guidelines produced for border guards participating in an EU joint operation instruct the targeting of “migrants from minority ethnic groups, and individuals who may have been isolated or mistreated during their journey, as such people are often more willing to talk about their experiences.” [1]

Written by the EU’s border agency, Frontex, the guidelines on the “debriefing of migrants for intelligence purposes” were attached to the 2012 plan for Operation Hera, a Frontex-coordinated joint operation that was launched in 2006 to halt irregular migration by sea from north-west Africa to the Canary Islands. [2]

Debriefing officers were recommended to seek out potential interviewees as soon as possible after arrival: “Once arriving migrants integrate with others in the camp, there is a tendency for them to become more reluctant to cooperate.”

There are no instructions what to do regarding any possible need for medical attention, fundamental rights or legal information for any subsequent claims for protection.

The guidelines were released by Frontex following a request for access to documents by the *European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights*. [3] Other documents released have sections containing briefing guidelines blanked out.

The document in which the guidelines can be read also contains large sections that are supposed to be censored, but in which the original content is still available: for example on the operation’s command structure, health and safety during “debriefing”, interview techniques and ways to identify an individual’s country of origin.

Statewatch recently published an assessment by the ECCHR of the “opaque and unaccountable” nature of Operation Hera, which is ongoing. [4]

Quotes

Chris Jones, a researcher for *Statewatch*, said:

“Border guards participating in Frontex operations are undoubtedly aware of the appalling conditions to which migrants and refugees are subjected during their journeys, yet these guidelines make no mention of a duty of care or protection, which should be the priorities of an agency that claims it upholds fundamental rights in all its activities.”

“The purpose of ‘debriefing’ is to try to counter a problem that is largely a result of the EU’s inhumane migration policy. A lack of legal pathways to enter the EU simply boosts the phenomenon of migrant smuggling that our governments say they are so determined to prevent.”

Background

Debriefing officers are deployed by Frontex with the aim of obtaining information on criminal activity, principally the routes and *modus operandi* used by people smugglers, to “assist in the deployment of means used in the detection and disruption of irregular migrant activity.”

The formal instruction to target ethnic minorities and “isolated or mistreated” individuals contrasts sharply with one of the few public statements made by Frontex officials on the debriefing process. In 2013 the head of Frontex’s Operational Office in Piraeus, Greece, told human rights groups that “debriefs” concern “a few persons who have been specifically chosen (based on ‘intuition’ or ‘experience’).” [5]

Issues around fundamental rights have also been raised by EU bodies. The Fundamental Rights Agency said in a 2013 report [6] that Frontex debriefing guidelines “should contain clear instructions and procedures for debriefing officers on referring, with the interviewee’s consent, asylum requests as well as other important protection-relevant information.”

Frontex’s Consultative Forum on Fundamental Rights raised similar concerns in a 2014 report and stated in 2015 that “Frontex debriefing guidelines have been reviewed and amended with the support of the Fundamental Rights Officer and the Consultative Forum,” [7] although no further public information is available on their contents.

National border guards and police officers are regularly deployed in Frontex-coordinated joint operations in a variety of roles, including as debriefers. Currently the agency has a significant focus on the “hotspots” that have been set up in Italy and Greece for processing migrants and refugees.

ENDS

Statewatch can be contacted via office [at] statewatch.org or on 0207 697 4266.

Notes to editors

[1] The guidelines are one of many annexes to the Operational Plan 2012 for Operation Hera, which *Statewatch* has made available [here](#) (pdf) with the majority of the censored parts removed. The guidelines have also been reproduced in [a more easily-readable format](#).

[2] Operation Hera was launched in 2006 as the first Frontex-coordinated sea borders operation. In 2013 it was renamed to European Patrols Network Hera and became “a permanent joint operation”. Between July 2006 and October 2014 the operation cost over €48.2 million euros and involved staff and “assets” (boats, vehicles, other equipment) from 13 different EU Member States.

[3] The *European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights* (ECCHR) is an independent, non-profit legal and educational organization dedicated to protecting civil and human rights worldwide. It was founded in 2007 by a small group of renowned human rights lawyers, in order to protect and enforce the rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other declarations of human rights and national constitutions, by juridical means. Website: www.ecchr.eu

[4] *Statewatch* is a non-profit-making voluntary group founded in 1991. It is comprised of lawyers, academics, journalists, researchers and community activists. Its European network of contributors is drawn from 18 countries. *Statewatch* encourages the publication of investigative journalism and critical research in Europe the fields of the state, justice and home affairs, civil liberties, accountability and openness. Website: www.statewatch.org

The analysis by the ECCHR’s Vera Wriedt and Darius Reinhardt is available here: <http://www.statewatch.org/analyses/no-307-frontex-operation-hera.pdf>

[5] FIDH, Migreurop and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, [Between Greece and Turkey: at the border of denial](#) (pdf)

[6] Fundamental Rights Agency, [EU solidarity and Frontex: fundamental rights challenges](#) (pdf)

[7] Frontex Consultative Forum on Fundamental Rights, [2013](#) and [2015](#) (pdfs)