

Greece: Europe's gateway for illegal immigration



By ELENA BECATOROS, Associated Press

Thu Nov 4, 12:43 pm ET

NEA VYSSA, Greece – They huddle together, shivering violently in the freezing morning, shoes and trousers soaked. Some cradle babies or lead toddlers by the hand. Bewildered children cry.

Fleeing war or poverty, these migrants and legions of others have sneaked across the Greek-Turkish border illegally to the promised land of European Union riches. The numbers are staggering. Greece now accounts for 90 percent of the bloc's detected illegal border crossings, compared to 75 percent in 2009. Greek authorities reported 45,000 illegal border crossings in just the first half of this year, according to European border authorities.

Greece has become the migrant world's gateway to Europe. It's a crisis that accelerated as most other smuggling routes to the EU became blocked off due to increased sea patrols and countries such as Italy inking agreements to deport illegals.

The crush is compounded by what is known as the Dublin procedure, under which EU countries return illegal migrants to the first EU country they entered — in most cases, Greece.

The debt-hobbled country says it can no longer cope — and has called for emergency help. For the first time, the EU's border agency Frontex is deploying rapid intervention teams. The 175-strong force, with officers drawn from 26 countries, began arriving in the northeastern town of Orestiada this week for a two-month mission, and started their first border patrols at dawn on Thursday.

The officers, accompanied by Greek police, are carrying out foot and vehicle patrols, while thermal imaging vehicles and an aircraft will boost surveillance capabilities.

"The number of irregular migrants crossing illegally the land border near Orestiada has now reached alarming proportions," Frontex said in a statement, with 120-350 people crossing per day between mid-September and mid-October.

Apart from patrols, the teams — which include interpreters, interviewers and experts in false documents — will also carry out screening operations for those migrants who do make it in. They

come armed with thermal imaging vans, a helicopter and dozens of patrol cars and buses.

"Our objective is to provide our assistance to the Greek police, our experience in immigration issues," said Benjamin Lecointe of the French border police, who was on patrol with two officers from Portugal and Romania.

It is the farming village of Nea Vyssa, about 10 kilometers (6 miles) north of Orestiada, that has become the flashpoint in the country's immigration crisis. Along with nearby village Kastanies, it lies on the brief stretch of border where the 206 kilometer (128 mile) land frontier with Turkey doesn't run along the middle of the Evros River.

From January to September, 31,400 illegal crossings were reported at just this 12.5 kilometer (eight mile) section of the border, Frontex said — compared, for example, to the peak annual total of 30,300 reported by Spain for the Canary Islands in 2006, when that country was hit by an immigration wave.

Migrants have used this crossing point for years, but in far fewer numbers, say locals, who have watched with a mixture of confusion and anxiety as teams of destitute people traipse through their streets each day. These days, police simply do not have the manpower to stem the flow.

"Since March we've had a big explosion (in numbers), and what worries us in the region is how we will deal with this problem," said Nea Vyssa Mayor Panagiotis Siankouris, who also is responsible for Kastanies.

Carrying their few belongings in backpacks and shoulder bags, men, women and children skirt around fenced-off minefields — a legacy of conflicts between Greece and Turkey — and tramp along potato and asparagus fields. They wade through irrigation ditches or paddle across the river in rubber dingies. Most cross at night or at dawn, changing out of their sodden, muddy clothes by the train tracks in Nea Vyssa and heading to the train station, hoping for a ride to Athens — or for the police to pick them up.

"They cross over land, they cross from the river ... they cross everywhere," said 67-year old villager Kostas Arvanitidis.

"These things aren't right. You can't have five children and six children, babies, walking. From the border to here it's five kilometers. They come here soaking wet," he said. "It's a big problem."

Not everyone makes it across.

Dozens have died over the years, blown up after straying into minefields, drowning in the Evros River, perishing from the cold. Their bodies, unclaimed and unidentified, are collected by the Evros Mufti, who has taken over an empty field to set up a graveyard of the unknown.

"They are not lesser people of another God. They are equal to me, and perhaps more so," Mufti Serif Damadoglu said.

With numbers so overwhelming, Greek authorities no longer have the capacity to hold the migrants they detain. The new arrivals are well aware of this. They often seek out the police or wait to be picked up, knowing they are likely to spend a few days in detention before being released with an identity document ordering them to leave the country within 30 days. Few stick to the timetable.

"The most important thing was to leave my country. I don't actually know where I'm going," said Ibrahim, an exhausted, French-speaking 22-year-old warding off the cold in a thick black jacket. "The most important thing was to find a country where there is peace. Do you understand? That was my objective."

Like most of the migrants, Ibrahim would only give his first name. And like nearly all of the group of more than a dozen Africans with whom he crossed, he claimed to be from Somalia.

Many of those arriving in Greece claim false nationalities, hoping for preferential treatment in the asylum process. Migrants from North Africa mostly claim to be Palestinians, those of Asian origin often claim to be Afghan and Africans say they come from Somalia. Turkey's porous and mountainous borders with Iran and Iraq to the east make it easier for migrants to sneak into the country, and make their way from there to Greece.

The fact that the identities of those entering are so nebulous also raises security issues, and part of Frontex's objective will be to help identify precisely who is entering the EU through the clandestine migrant networks.

"Border security is also about terrorism. This is about any cross border crime, any terrorism issue, anything that has so called security threat," said Frontex spokesman Michal Parzyszek. "I'm not saying that migrants are a threat as such, but among them you can have people who are not simply looking for a better life, but are looking for something else."

Under agreements between the longtime foes, immigrants who enter Greece can be sent back to Turkey. But in practice, few are.

"The readmission agreement between Greece and Turkey, although in force, is not effectively implemented," Frontex said in a release, noting that Turkey accepted mostly only its own nationals back. Despite pressure from the EU, which Turkey is a candidate to join, Ankara is reluctant to accept the return of migrants as it could lead to the deportation of hundreds of thousands of people by Europe back to Turkey.

"It is a huge problem and requires great financial resources and manpower to deal with such a thing," said Yigit Anil Gurer of the Ankara-based Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants. "Also, sending those people from Turkey back to their home countries is problematic from the perspective of human rights and Turkey does not want trouble."

Most, though not all, migrants arriving in Nea Vyssa admit to having paid smugglers in Turkey varying amounts to arrange their trips and guide them across the border. The smugglers take them to near the Turkish border, they say, then point them in the right direction and tell them to walk.

Karim, a gaunt 30-year-old Tunisian sheltering from the frigid night air in a bus stop in Kastanies said he had paid euro1,000 (\$1,400) in Turkey. He wanted to get to Italy, he says, to find work — "to help my family, to help myself, to get married."

On the way he heard his mother had fallen ill, and now just wanted to go home.

But his passport was kept by those who arranged his passage, and the former textile factory worker found himself destitute in a northern Greek village.

"I want to go back to Tunisia. I will do everything I have to. It's the first and the last time. I will stay in my country and that's all," he said, close to tears. "I had no luck. Not in Tunisia, nor in Turkey, nor in Greece."

He leapt out at a passing police car, asking to be taken in. But there are many like him to be picked up tonight, and he was told to wait. Two hours later, he was still there.

Associated Press writers Selcan Hacaoglu and Suzan Fraser in Turkey, and Costas Kantouris in Greece, contributed.