

THE MIGRATION ROUTE TO CRETE AND GAVDOS

Arrivals, reception and solidarity
on the two Greek islands

Report by **Operazione Colomba**,

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Although we recognize the sexism in the dominant language, which uses masculine plural forms for mixed-gender groups, in order to avoid making the text difficult to read, we have chosen not to replace these endings with neutral letters or other graphic symbols.

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PREFACE

This report is the result of data and information collected by Operazione Colombia, the Nonviolent Peace Corps of the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII Association, before and during the exploratory trip to Crete conducted in July 2025. The initiative is part of the experimental project of the *Corpi Civili di Pace* (Civil Peace Corps) with the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII Association, which involves two male volunteers and one female volunteer committed for one year (March 2025 - March 2026). Civil Peace Interventions are civil, unarmed, and nonviolent actions carried out by professional operators and volunteers who, as third parties, support local actors in conflict prevention and transformation. The aim of the interventions is to promote positive peace, understood as the cessation of violence but also as the affirmation of Human Rights and social well-being. They are committed to respecting the following ethical principles: nonviolence, local ownership, impartiality in conflict, independence, Human Rights, non-discrimination and gender equality, accountability, transparency, and integrity. Law No. 147 of 2013 (Stability Law 2014) provided for the experimental establishment of a Civil Peace Corps contingent for the training and testing of 500 young volunteers to be engaged in non-governmental peace actions in areas of conflict or at risk of conflict or in areas of environmental emergency.

COMUNITÀ PAPA GIOVANNI XXIII

The Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII Association is an international association of the faithful under pontifical law. Founded by Don Oreste Benzi in 1968, it works in the vast world of marginalization with a style based on directly sharing life with the poor, for the liberation of the oppressed and the removal of the causes that generate injustice. It is currently present in over 30 countries, with projects in favor of minors, people with disabilities, victims of violence and sexual exploitation, homeless people, populations affected by armed conflict, and Human Rights promotion groups, reaching more than 50,000 people per year. In 2006, it was accredited with "Special Consultative" status at ECOSOC and since 2009 has had permanent representation at the United Nations in Geneva.

THE OPERAZIONE COLOMBA PROJECT IN GREECE

Operazione Colombia is the Nonviolent Peace Corps of the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII Association. It is based on the belief that nonviolence is the only possible way to achieve true peace based on rights and justice. Operazione Colombia is involved in various projects in the Middle East (Palestine and Lebanon/Syria), Latin America (Colombia and Chile), and Europe (Ukraine and Greece). The main characteristics of Operazione Colombia's work are based on sharing, nonviolence, proximity, and popular participation. Specifically, volunteers in Greece carry out activities in the field of active listening, initial psychological support, and guidance to services for people on the move, together with monitoring, reporting, and gathering information on Human Rights violations. Operazione Colombia therefore stands as a significant and effective model of a Civil and Nonviolent Peace Corps that intervenes in armed and social conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

Crete, a central spot for migration

For a few months now, Crete, along with the nearby island of Gavdos, has been one of the main spots for migration to Europe. From the beginning of 2025 until September 7, 11,487 people on the move arrived on the two islands, according to [data](#) collected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These are high numbers, equivalent to over 44% of arrivals by sea on the Greek coast.

The importance of Crete and Gavdos in the field of migration is relatively recent. Until two years ago, these territories recorded negligible numbers of arrivals: in 2023, 813 people landed there, out of a total of about 19,000 arrivals by sea in Greece. During 2024, migration flows to Crete gradually increased in importance, with a total of 5,161 arrivals at the end of the year, as reported by [Refugee Support Aegean](#). Finally, in the early months of 2025, this migratory movement gradually increased in importance, reaching its peak in early July, when more than 2,600 people arrived on the two islands in a single week.

The growing centrality of Crete and Gavdos marks a significant change for Greece. Until last year, most of the people on the move arriving in the Country did so from Turkey, crossing the few kilometres of sea that separate it from the Dodecanese islands, Lesbos, Samos, and Chios. Those arriving in Crete, on the other hand, almost always do so after leaving the area around the city of Tobruk in eastern Libya and crossing the Mediterranean. It is a long and dangerous journey, covering 180 nautical miles and lasting an average of 36 hours (slightly less if landing in Gavdos).

Suspension of the right to asylum

On July 11, the Greek parliament approved the [article 79 of Law 5218/2025](#), a measure that prevents people arriving by sea from North Africa from applying for asylum, regardless of their nationality, gender, age, or any other vulnerability. The law stipulates that anyone entering the Country illegally will be detained, as they do not have a residence permit, and then repatriated. The three-month ban came into force on July 14 and was promptly denounced by numerous [international](#) and [non-governmental](#) organizations for its incompatibility with EU law, including the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and with the obligations enshrined in international Human Rights conventions, including the 1951 Geneva Convention. Furthermore, Human Rights Watch [points out](#) that the measure decided by the Greek parliament violates international law and, in particular, the principle of non-refoulement, which prevents refugees from being returned to places where they risk persecution. The critical issues surrounding the suspension of the right to asylum were taken up by the European Court of Human Rights, which on August 14 suspended the deportation of eight refugees from Sudan detained in the Pre-Return Detention Centre (PROKEKA) in Amygdaleza. In a subsequent hearing held on August 28, the Court also upheld the right of Eritrean refugees to remain on Greek soil until their asylum applications had been duly examined.

The Minister of Migration and Asylum, Plevris, explained the desire to block the arrival of people moving from Libya, [stating](#) that "If the States on the borders of the European Union do not take decisive measures, this flow of migrants will be directed towards your societies." In an attempt to

stem the flow of people moving towards Crete, the Greek Government [has deployed military ships](#) off the coast of the island and sought to increase cooperation with the regime of Khalifa Haftar, who controls eastern Libya. The suspension of the right to asylum is part of a broader effort by Greece to combat irregular immigration. Of particular note was the Greek Parliament's approval on September 3 of a controversial [asylum reform](#) that transformed irregular entry and stay from an administrative offense into a criminal offense, punishable by imprisonment of 2 to 5 years and a fine of up to €10,000 for the first offense.

On October 14, the three-month suspension of the right to asylum ended without the Government announcing a renewal of the measure. However, the measure itself created new obstacles to the exercise of the right to asylum for people who arrived between July and October. In particular, people from countries considered "safe"¹ were unable to [apply for international protection](#) or had [their applications rejected](#) through an accelerated procedure and without adequate access to legal information on asylum procedures in Greece.

KEY FINDINGS

Arrivals

1. Travel conditions on the route from Eastern Libya to Crete are dangerous and degrading. The crossing, which usually takes two days, is mainly carried out on small wooden and fibreglass boats and rubber dinghies equipped with very small engines (40 horsepower) that can carry between 40 and 80 people. Alternatively, some people travel on older, larger fishing boats that can carry up to 500 people.
2. Independent landings mainly take place on Tripiti beach (Gavdos) and other locations on the southern coast of Crete (near Paleochora, Agia Galini, Kaloi Limenes).
3. Rescue operations are mainly carried out by the Greek Coast Guard, Frontex, and merchant ships
 - The Coast Guard carries out most of the rescues and also identifies the "smugglers", arresting those who drove the boat, often young people or minors, regardless of their links to criminal networks;
 - Frontex provides support with drones and naval patrols, collaborating with local authorities and monitoring migration routes;
 - Merchant ships, often involved in rescues in response to distress calls from boats, do not have specific training and wait for the competent authorities to intervene before transferring people to military ships bound for land.

¹ Article 92 of Law No. 4939/2022 identifies as "safe countries of origin," in addition to those already identified by the Council of the European Union, Egypt, Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Georgia, Gambia, Ghana, India, Morocco, Bangladesh, Benin, Nepal, Pakistan, Senegal, Togo, and Tunisia. Coming from a Country considered safe allows for the application of an accelerated procedure that shortens the time required to issue a decision on an asylum application as well as the time required for any appeal.

4. The management of landings on the island of Gavdos is characterized by a significant lack of preparation:

- In the case of independent landings on Tripiti beach, when no transport by ship is available from the Coast Guard, people on the move are accompanied on foot by a police officer along paths of about 3 km leading to the villages of Vatsiana or Korfos, where bus transport to the port of Karave is organized;
- At the port of Karave, in the absence of adequate reception facilities, people wait for between 6 and 12 hours for transfer to Crete by Frontex ships;
- First aid is provided by doctors at the Kastri clinic, which does not have sufficient resources to cover the need for medicines, thermal blankets, and diagnostic tools in relation to the number of arrivals.

Reception conditions

1. In the absence of facilities for registration and identification, people on the move are transferred to emergency facilities set up near the cities of Chania, Rethymno, and Heraklion, where they wait for a few days before being transported to dedicated facilities on the Greek mainland.

2. The Coast Guard is responsible for managing temporary reception on the island of Crete and controls access to the facilities. The Coast Guard's management activities are supported by the Red Cross, which distributes food and clothing provided by municipalities and peripheral units, and by doctors from the public health system, who provide medical assistance.

3. The reception conditions in the facilities visited (Agia in Chania and Kitrenosi in Rethymno) are detrimental to human dignity:

- During the visits, dramatic hygiene conditions were found in the care of the spaces: in Kitrenosi, an old disused factory, floors covered with guano and rubbish were observed, while in Agia there is a lack of regular sanitation of the spaces;
- The type and number of toilets were inadequate for the number of people present in the facilities. The facilities had no showers and, in the case of Kitrenosi, no running water, while in Agia, during the visit, there were 11 chemical toilets for 300-350 people;
- The facilities do not provide enough camp beds and mattresses to cover the number of people present, who therefore find themselves sleeping for days on cardboard boxes placed on the floor;
- Access to medical care is provided through visits to the facility by public health service personnel and only to a limited extent through access to hospitals;
- There is no psychological support or legal information available in the temporary reception facilities.

4. The Coast Guard's consistent denial to local organizations of the permission to access these spaces prevents the distribution of clothing and hygiene kits needed to meet the needs of people on the move, hinders monitoring of reception conditions, and drastically increases the isolation of people on the move.

Actors and solidarity

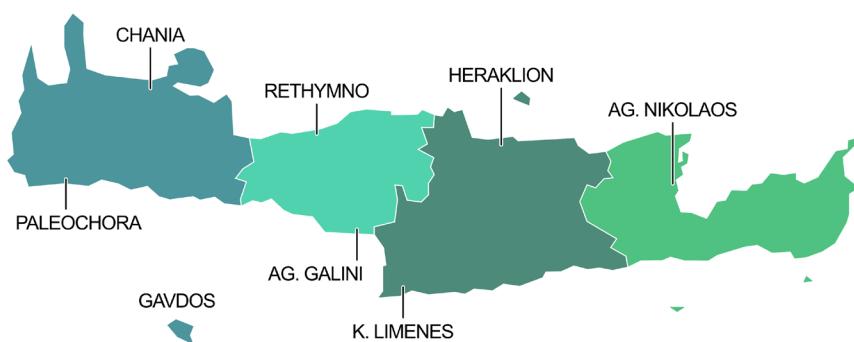
1. Local institutions stated that they do not consider the presence and support of international organizations or specialized third sector organizations to be necessary, despite the obvious shortcomings in the management of migration flows on the island.
2. In the places visited, the diversity of contexts and capacities of civil society is also reflected in the solidarity shown on the island towards people on the move, which is opposed by some more extremist fringes of the population with expressions of dissent of a racist nature that are constantly monitored by solidarity groups and activists.
3. Local organizations are strongly committed to monitoring the trials of alleged smugglers taking place in Chania and Heraklion, which violate the right to a fair trial.

Management of the Deceased

1. The number of deaths officially reported on the Tobruk-Crete route is significantly lower than those recorded on other Mediterranean routes. In 2024, four shipwrecks were reported, with a total of 10 deaths and 38 missing persons; in 2025, there were no reported deaths (up to September, when this report was written).
2. Information gathered from local institutions shows a worrying lack of clarity on the guidelines in place in the event of deaths. It is reported that the procedures for identifying bodies and issuing death certificates are managed jointly by the Coast Guard and public system doctors, without further explanatory details.

METHODOLOGY

Following the peak in arrivals at the beginning of July and the Government's suspension of the right to asylum, Operazione Colomba travelled to Crete to conduct an eight-day monitoring trip from July 23 to 30, 2025. In the weeks leading up to the trip, preparatory work focused on two areas: on the one hand, monitoring local and international media to map the main temporary reception centres to visit and, on the other, searching for local people and organizations directly involved in the migration phenomenon on the island, including through Operazione Colomba's well-established network of contacts. In this way, we sought to enrich our direct observation of key phenomena and places with the testimony of actors with a more in-depth knowledge of the context.



Administrative division of the island of Crete with the capitals of the peripheral units and main places of interest

It was therefore decided to structure the trip around the island's main urban centres, Heraklion and Chania, where, in addition to the two main temporary reception centres, the main local organizations active in monitoring and defending the Human Rights of people on the move are also located. The island of Gavdos was also visited with the aim of observing and gathering information on the management of arrivals. For logistical reasons, therefore, less attention was paid to the south coast of the island, despite the fact that it also receives a significant number of arrivals.

Locations	Places visited
Chania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exhibition center in Agia (35.482428, 23.953025) Port of Souda (35.489164, 24.076276)
Rethymno	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stadium Tsesme (35.518009, 24.018980) Abandoned factory in Kitrenosi (35.518009, 24.018980)
Heraklion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old bus station (35.339324, 25.141287) Old freezer hall (35.343242, 25.142636 *)
Agia Galini	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Port of Agia Galini (35.095815, 24.688762)
Gavdos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Port of Karave (34.847938, 24.120040) Korfos (34.830785, 24.110982) Vatsiana (34.820861, 24.099078) • Tripiti (34.804353, 24.123242) • Kastri (34.834724, 24.084564)

* This location refers to the port of the city of Heraklion

In each of the locations visited (Gavdos, Chania, and Heraklion), interviews were conducted with actors of different natures and functions, with the aim of obtaining a complete picture that emerged from a plurality of points of view. For this reason, the relevant municipal institutions, medical staff, and, where present, civil society organizations and political activists from anti-fascist collectives were interviewed. The Chania branch of the Red Cross declined the opportunity for a meeting, cancelling the appointment scheduled for July 23 one hour before the agreed time via an official communication from the central office in Athens. There was no response to the email sent subsequently with a request to answer in writing the questions we would have asked during the interview.

Locations	People interviewed
Gavdos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mayor, Lilian Stefanaki Clinic doctor
Chania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deputy Mayor, Eleni Zervoudaki Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) Steki Metanaston (shortened as Steki) Antifascist collective Rosa Nera
Heraklion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deputy Mayor, Giorgos Tsangarakis Caritas Hellas Thalassa of Solidarity Antifascist collective Evangelismos

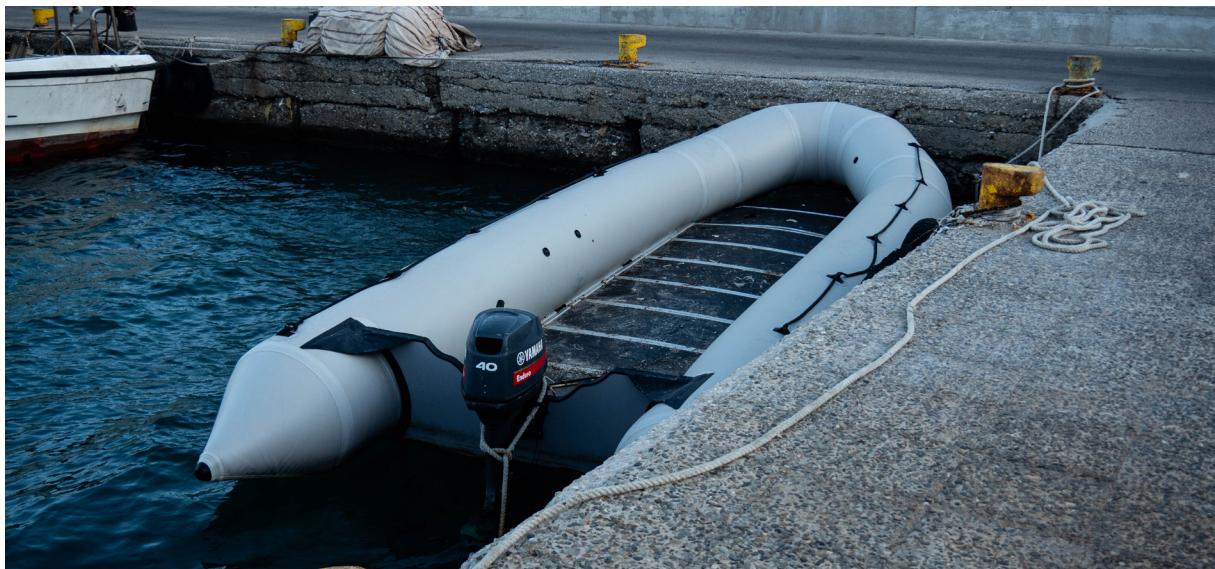
ARRIVALS

[Refugee Support Aegean \(RSA\) inquiry](#) to the Greek Coast Guard regarding arrivals in Crete and Gavdos from the beginning of the year until June 15, 2025, sheds light on the general statistics of people traveling the Tobruk-Crete route. These data show that the three most represented nationalities are Egyptian (44.7%), Sudanese (28.3%), and Bangladeshi (19%). Furthermore, the vast majority of people moving on this route are young single men, with a high number of minors. These data also show that approximately 68% of incidents, i.e., arrivals of boats carrying people on the move, took place on the island of Gavdos. Other arrival points on Crete are Kaloi Limenes, Agia Galini, and Paleochora.

People on the move arriving in Crete and Gavdos set off from eastern Libya, mainly from the cities of Tobruk, Derna, and Benghazi. The stretch of sea between these centres and the two Greek islands is about 180 miles long, a greater distance than that between the Italian island of Lampedusa and the coast of Tunisia (around 100 miles) or Libya (around 160 miles). The open sea crossing for those leaving from eastern Libya takes at least two days, with no food or life-saving equipment. Despite the dangers of this “new” route, people on the move are increasingly forced to take it, both because of the lack of legal routes to Europe and the growing difficulty of taking other routes, such as the Turkish-Greek route or the route to Italy.

Both local organizations such as Thalassa of Solidarity (active in Heraklion) and people met by Operazione Colomba in refugee camps in the Athens area (particularly Ritsona, Malakasa, and Thiva) report that the cost of the route to Greece is lower than that of reaching Lampedusa from western Libya, ranging from a minimum of €1,000 to a maximum of €3,000.

Unlike the central Mediterranean, where illegal push-backs carried out by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard are well documented, in the stretch of sea along the route to Crete there is no evidence of such practices, and the phenomenon appears not to exist. Despite this, some testimonies from people who arrived in Greece via the Tobruk-Crete route, collected by Operazione Colomba, indicate that these illegal actions are also carried out by eastern Libya, although probably still in a rather unsystematic manner.



Inflatable boat used for the Eastern Libya - Gavdos/Crete route

People attempt the crossing on various types of boats, such as small wooden and fibreglass boats, rubber dinghies, and old fishing boats, which are usually larger. The boats can usually hold between 40 and 80 people and use very small engines (40 horsepower). The overcrowding and structure of these boats, which are totally unsuitable for crossing such a long stretch of sea, make this route particularly dangerous and degrading, as it forces dozens of people to be crammed together in poor sanitary conditions for several days. In some cases, much larger fishing boats have been used, carrying up to 500 [people](#).

Once in international waters, mainly in the Greek [SAR](#) zone, boats in distress can call emergency numbers such as those of the Greek Coast Guard or [Alarm Phone](#), an international network of activists and volunteers whose purpose is to monitor the safety of people on the move, mainly in the Central Mediterranean. Regardless of whether these numbers are contacted or not, boats arrive in two ways: independently or through rescue operations. The latter are carried out in most cases by three actors: the Greek Coast Guard, the European Border Police Frontex, and merchant ships.

The Greek Coast Guard is responsible for rescue operations in its SAR zone. In practice, therefore, the Coast Guard carries out most rescue operations and, [unlike in the Aegean Sea](#), there are no reports of illegal push-backs. The Coast Guard also takes the personal details of those who arrive, but it is unclear how this is done. For each event (i.e., landing), the Coast Guard identifies and arrests the "smugglers" in an attempt to criminalize them, with the stated aim of limiting illegal arrivals. In practice, however, the investigations conducted by the Coast Guard consist of identifying who drove the boat, regardless of any links to the criminal network of smugglers. In most cases, very young men, sometimes even minors, are charged and used as scapegoats because they belong to one of the least represented nationalities on the boat. It should be noted that the Coast Guard is also responsible for the entire temporary reception system in Crete, in conjunction with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.

In Crete, Frontex is present with two drones surveilling the entire area, three medium-sized patrol boats—positioned in Gavdos, Agia Galini, and Paleochora—and a smaller patrol boat in Gavdos. It works closely with local authorities, in particular transporting people on the move who have arrived on the island according to the instructions and requests of the Coast Guard. It is also responsible for monitoring and surveilling the sea, identifying and intercepting boats carrying people on the move arriving from Libya. Officially, Frontex in Crete is not involved in identifying



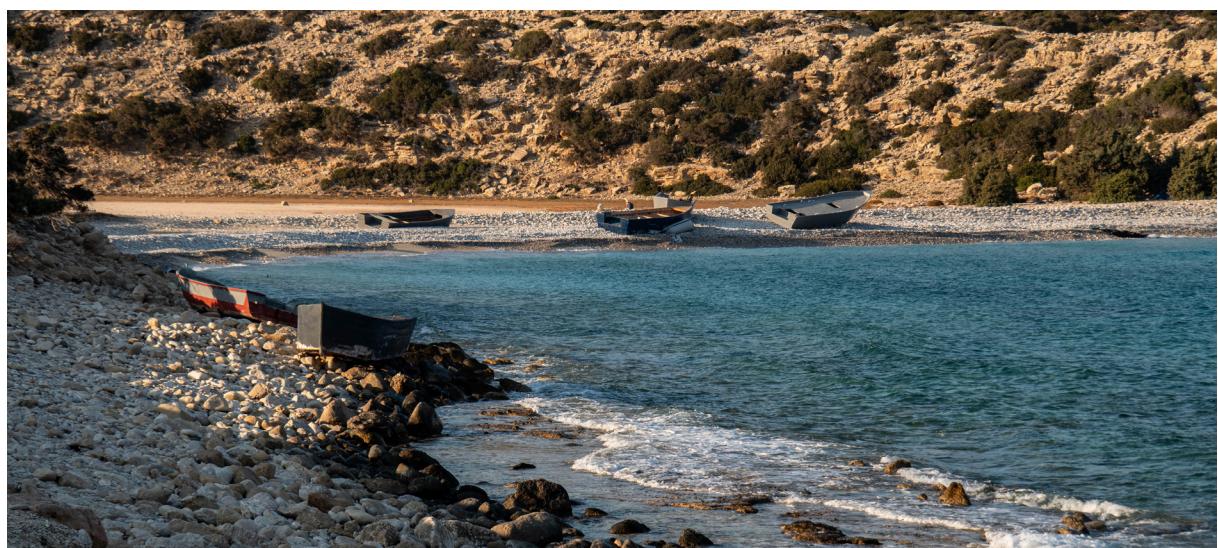
Frontex patrol vessel, owned by Latvia: provides support to Greek authorities in maritime border surveillance

suspected smugglers; however, it is plausible that the material and information collected by the European agency could be used by the Coast Guard for identification purposes.

Finally, various sources (local media, local institutional and non-institutional actors, Alarm Phone) attest to the large-scale participation of merchant ships, often cargo ships, in rescue operations. The eastern Mediterranean is a very busy sea for commercial shipping routes, and numerous rescues are carried out spontaneously by these enormous vessels, which, however, have no expertise or training in operations of this type. Usually, once the rescue has been completed, the merchant ships approach the coast of Gavdos or Crete and wait for the Coast Guard or Frontex to bring the people safely to the islands or, more rarely, directly to the mainland.

The place where most independent landings take place is Tripiti beach, the southernmost point of the island of Gavdos. Operazione Colomba had the opportunity to visit the site and observe first-hand the numerous boats abandoned on the beach. All the boats used to make the crossing (up to 40 have been observed across the island) are without engines, but show no signs of having been seized by the authorities, as is the case in Italy, for example. According to Mayor Lilian Stefanaki, the engines are temporarily entrusted by the Coast Guard to local citizens, who receive monetary compensation when the engines are permanently seized by the authorities.

When autonomous landings take place on Tripiti beach, people can be transported by boat by the Coast Guard to the port of Karave, or they may have to walk to the villages of Vatsiana and Korfos.



Boats used on the Eastern Libya - Gavdos route abandoned on Tripiti beach

This is a couple of hours' walk along rather steep paths. Often a police officer goes to the site to guide the newly arrived people. On the trail, Operazione Colomba noticed numerous items of clothing left behind by people during the walk.

Once they arrive in one of the two villages mentioned above, people are loaded onto a bus and taken to the port of Karave. There, they wait on the left side of the port to be transported to the southern coast of the island of Crete by Frontex ships, mainly to the towns of Paleochora, Agia Galini, or Kaloi Limenes. The mayor of Gavdos said that two premises, one of which has toilet facilities, have been identified for their short stay on the island (usually 6 to 12 hours). Upon arrival at the port, people on the move would receive food and water distributed personally by the mayor herself, the deputy mayor, and the only police officer on the island. If necessary, clothing would also be distributed. At the discretion of the Coast Guard, which carries out rescues and transports people on the move, doctors are also requested to be present at the port of Karave and, if necessary, people are transported to the Kastri clinic to receive medical care.

However, during monitoring at the port, it was observed that around 80 people were seeking shelter from the sun, huddled under the keel of a ship raised on wooden poles. In this same place, brochures posted by Steki activists were observed, which are in fact the only legal information available to people on the move in Gavdos.



Boat used as shelter from the sun in the port of Karave (Gavdos) with information leaflets posted on it, visible in the detail image



People waiting to board in the port of Karave (Gavdos)

As for medical care, however, Kastri's clinic is actually a small facility capable of meeting only the ordinary needs of the islanders. One of the doctors on rotation met by Operazione Colomba reported a lack of sufficient medicines to cover the needs identified during arrival visits. The most frequent cases are heatstroke, dermatological problems (especially scabies), for which the treatment available on the island is insufficient, wounds (especially to the feet), and hypothermia in winter. There have been cases of diabetics entering ketosis, while no cases of hydrocarbon poisoning have been reported. However, the clinic does not have sufficient supplies of paracetamol or thermal blankets, and there is no possibility of conducting specific tests, leaving helicopter transport to one of the hospitals in Crete as the only alternative in cases of serious emergencies.

RECEPTION CONDITIONS

Unlike the Aegean islands near Turkey, where [hotspot](#) have been in place since 2015 to temporarily accommodate people awaiting the examination of their asylum applications, Crete does not have facilities for managing asylum seekers upon their initial arrival. For this reason, after disembarking on the mainland, people on the move are transferred to facilities set up in emergency conditions, where they wait for a few days before being transported to dedicated facilities on the Greek mainland. The assignment of the temporary reception centre depends on the level of occupancy and the location where the arrivals were at the time of their first contact with the Coast Guard authorities. Crete is divided into four districts, called "Peripheral Units" (see the map in the Methodology section): Chania (which also includes Gavdos, where there is no temporary reception centre), Rethymno, Heraklion, and Lasithi. Once they arrive in Kaloi Limenes, Agia Galini, and Paleochora, people on the move are transported by municipal buses to temporary reception centres in the capital of the Peripheral Unit. Lasithi is an exception, as it does not have a reception centre and therefore refers to Heraklion.

In Chania, for about a year and a half, the “Agia” exhibition space, a former warehouse on the outskirts of the city previously used for festivals and events, has been designated to accommodate the largest number of people on the move (especially those from Gavdos, being in the district of Chania). In Heraklion, on the other hand, people were initially housed in the former bus station, while they are currently housed in the former freezer hall at the city port. Finally, even the smaller capital of Rethymno sometimes houses people on the move, especially when the other two facilities have reached their maximum capacity. On one occasion, people were housed in the Tses stadium on the outskirts of the city, and then again in a disused private warehouse in the Kitrenosi industrial area.

During the peak of arrivals in early July, Migration and Asylum Minister Plevris announced plans to build a ‘closed’ detention centre on the island, modelled on those existing on the Greek mainland. However, strong opposition from local institutions (regional, provincial, and municipal) led the Ministry, at the conclusion of an online meeting between the parties on July 18, to [back down on this initiative](#) and instead recognize the provisional reception system, despite the fact that it has no legal basis in either the measures regulating the right to asylum or those regulating detention.

Due to political will, therefore, the island of Crete remains a place of transit that is intended to remain extremely temporary. Before the suspension of asylum applications, people were taken to Reception and Identification Centers (RIC) on the Greek mainland to start their asylum applications. The suspension of asylum applications has made it more difficult to monitor the movements of people who arrived between July 14 and October 14, but the presence of people arriving from eastern Libya via the route to Crete has been confirmed at least in the [Pre-Return Detention Center \(PROKEKA\) in Amygdaleza](#) and the [Controlled Temporary Reception Center for Asylum Seekers \(CTRC\) in Sintiki](#).

The Greek Coast Guard is responsible for temporary reception on the island of Crete, under the provisions of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. The fact that the Coast Guard is responsible for both sea rescues and reception further confirms the highly hybrid and emergency nature of temporary reception centres. Within these centres, the Red Cross is responsible for distributing food and clothing provided by municipalities and peripheral units, while medical assistance is managed by the national health system. However, according to organizations active in the field (such as Steki Metanaston and Thalassa of Solidarity), it is not uncommon for people’s most basic needs to go unmet.

Chania

At the time of our visit on July 29, in the presence of Deputy Mayor Eleni Zervoudaki, the Agia Exhibition Centre was housing between 300 and 350 people, apparently all young men, some of whom appeared to be minors. At its peak, it housed 900 people.

Before our visit, we were told by organizations active in the area that initially the Municipality had only provided one portable toilet in the space, adding more only after interest was attracted by civil society organizations and the local and international press. At the time of our visit, the deputy mayor informed us that there were 11 chemical toilets and no showers, while we observed a couple of outdoor taps located inside the structure that people were using to wash themselves with running water. According to the deputy mayor, the Municipality was waiting for four containers



Agia exhibition centre in Chania

equipped with toilets and showers from the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. Furthermore, in the space, which is very large and completely devoid of any form of separation inside, there were no camp beds or mattresses available for the people present, forcing them to sleep on cardboard boxes placed on the floor. Again, the deputy mayor informed us that the Municipality was awaiting 1,500 camp beds promised by the Government. In winter, the space is heated with small heaters, but given its size, it is reasonable to imagine that it is difficult to heat the space adequately.

Upon our arrival, we observed some of the residents beginning to sweep the floor, and we learned that cleaning is managed by the residents themselves during their stay in Agia, as the Municipality can only provide complete sanitation of the premises when they vacate. It should be noted that people wait for days before being transferred to mainland Greece: some of the people present during our visit had already been staying in Agia for five days.

Food, provided by the Municipality, is distributed by the Red Cross twice a day, while breakfast is distributed by the Coast Guard. We were asked to leave the space after taking a few photos without having had the opportunity to talk to people or observe the distribution of breakfast, for fear that outside observers might cause unrest with their presence and witness disturbances.

According to information provided by Deputy Mayor Zervoudaki, the Red Cross is also responsible for distributing clothing as needed. Before Law 5218/2925 was passed on July 11, Steki activists were also allowed to distribute clothing and soap, but they are now barred from entering the facility. Healthcare is provided by a public service doctor. According to the deputy mayor, initial medical examinations are carried out directly in Agia upon arrival, with subsequent examinations based on the symptoms presented and the treatment required. Although it is possible to request medical assistance in case of need and also to access treatment at hospitals in Chania, the local

organizations interviewed reported that hospital visits have become rarer in recent times due to the recent discontent of the local population, who have seen their medical appointments cancelled due to the increase in users of the health service. In particular, in line with information from Gavdos, Deputy Mayor Zervoudaki mentioned cases of mild hypothermia during the past winter and the presence of diabetic patients whose care is monitored by medical staff. In the case of a heart patient, however, it was decided to transfer them to the hospital in Heraklion. Contrary to what we learned on the island of Gavdos, the deputy mayor informed us that no cases of scabies have been reported this year.

Following the approval of the suspension of the right to asylum enshrined in Law 5218/2925, the legal information activities carried out by Steki have become superfluous. At the same time, the interview with the deputy mayor reveals a clear lack of information provided to people on the move regarding their status in relation to the criminalization of arrivals and what to expect during their stay in Greece. Furthermore, no psychological support is provided during temporary reception on the island. The deputy mayor justified the lack of this service by citing the absence of serious cases requiring psychological intervention. However, according to information obtained from a source, during a monitoring visit to the island, MSF found serious psychological problems among those arriving.

Heraklion

Currently, people on the move are housed in the old freezer hall at the port, with access from the courtyard of the dockworkers' union. The temporary reception centre is run by the Coast Guard and is not open to members of civil society, so it was not possible to visit it.

The Municipality's support for the management of people temporarily housed in the facility is limited to providing municipal buses to transport people on the move from the south coast of the island to the temporary reception center in Heraklion and to using public health system resources to provide medical assistance to people on the move. For this reason, Deputy Mayor Giorgios Tsangarakis said he was not well informed about the specific details of the reception conditions.

As civil society organizations are not allowed access, food and clothing are distributed exclusively by the Red Cross, which was not available to meet with us. Food and clothing are provided by the Heraklion Peripheral Unit, and the search for goods is sometimes assisted by the Municipality. However, as the founder of Thalassa of Solidarity told us, it is not uncommon for the needs of people on the move (especially with regard to the provision of clothing, shoes, and hygiene products) to go unmet, due in part to limited cooperation with civil society.

Rethymno

The Rethymno Peripheral Unit records fewer arrivals than those in Chania and Heraklion. Furthermore, since the city of Rethymno is less connected to the ports of mainland Greece than other capitals, its facilities are less frequently chosen to accommodate people on the move.

Operazione Colomba had the opportunity to visit the old facility in Kitrenosi on Sunday, July 27. The place looks like an old disused factory; it was abandoned and not controlled by any private security guards or law enforcement. However, local newspapers report the presence of people in the facility

at least until the middle of the month, when about 100 people were still being housed there, part of groups other than the one that had been attacked. Furthermore, at the time of the visit, there were clear signs of these people's presence: a storage room on the side of the building full of piled-up clothes, mattresses and camp beds, most of which were still sealed and unused, bottles of water and packets of cigarettes, and toilets that had been used relatively recently, judging by the state of the stools (never flushed, partly because the toilets had no running water).

The complex is very large and consists of several buildings, so we can only speculate as to where people were actually housed. None of the rooms appeared to have been specifically designed for this purpose, and indeed the dirt and pigeon droppings highlighted poor hygiene conditions throughout. A comparison with photos available online, showing the same place when it was used to house people, suggests that the mattresses we saw were probably used more as temporary seating (in the form of sofas), while people slept on cardboard boxes on the floor. It is possible that these cardboard boxes were recovered from the facility, which, when it was still active, probably processed fruit into finished products.



Images of the Kitrenosi private facility: on the left a storage room with packaged cots, on the right a bathroom, below a room used as a dormitory

ACTORS AND SOLIDARITY

The varying degrees and methods of involvement by the relevant local actors and civil society contribute to creating a strong differentiation in the solidarity shown on the island towards people on the move. During the monitoring trip, Operazione Colombia noted how the structural fragility of the island represents a factor of difficulty in creating a coordinated and homogeneous response, while the temporary nature of people's stay is used as an excuse for not adopting a more systematic approach to reception management that respects human dignity.

Furthermore, the presence of [deep-rooted and widespread corruption](#) on the island is a cause for concern in view of the increase in funding for the management of people on the move, even if temporary, especially when carried out in the absence of international observers. Although several international organizations have visited the island, both to monitor the management of reception (IOM, EUAA) and to provide support through donations (MSF, UNHCR), all the representatives of local institutions interviewed by Operazione Colombia did not consider a constant presence necessary, given the efficiency of the existing system, the temporary nature of the stay, and the lack of space available to meet the logistical needs of these organizations.

Local organizations are demonstrating a strong commitment to monitoring the trials of alleged smugglers, often young men, sometimes even minors, identified by the Coast Guard for their role as boat drivers. As [reported by Human Rights organizations](#), the trials are conducted with insufficient access to adequate legal defence, and there have been several reported cases in which the translation of testimony is carried out by other defendants present in the courtroom.

On the other hand, social tensions within the island are increasing and the discontent of the most extremist fringes of the population, who do not accept the presence of people on the move, is beginning to manifest itself in racist dissent, which is constantly monitored by solidarity groups and activists.

Gavdos

In Gavdos, which has a stable population of just 80 people outside the tourist season, the limitations of local capacity to manage arrivals and initial reception are evident, exacerbated by the absence of international organizations and grassroots solidarity movements on the part of civil society. In fact, there is only one police officer on the island and one permanent doctor at the Kastri clinic, supported during the summer months (July to September) by doctors from the Chania Peripheral Unit on a monthly rotation.

Back in April 2024, the then Minister of Migration and Asylum, Dimitris Kairidis, [visited the island](#) and established a Coast Guard presence in the form of two military personnel, which was further reinforced by subsequent Governments. While military support has been strengthened, economic support has been halved (from €100,000 allocated to the Municipality for the management of arrivals in 2024, only €50,000 has been allocated this year). However, during our meeting, Mayor Stefanaki indicated that the only form of support needed was for the Government to donate a boat with which the Municipality could clean the beaches of personal items left behind by people on the move.

The main concern of the inhabitants of Gavdos, as both the mayor and the islanders themselves tell us, is linked to the negative impact of the increase in arrivals on tourism, the real driving force behind the island's economy². For this reason, there has been no organized response of solidarity from the citizens. Instead, it was organizations from nearby Crete that donated medicines and organized, on an occasional and limited basis, the distribution of water upon arrival.

Chania

According to Deputy Mayor Zervoudaki, there is a good level of cooperation between the actors involved in managing the temporary reception of people on the move. Both the mayor and the activists from Steki Metanaston told us that there are coordination meetings attended by both the actors directly involved in managing reception (the Coast Guard, the Municipality, the Red Cross, and local health units) and civil society organizations, including Steki.

However, access to the temporary reception centre in Agia is regulated by the Coast Guard, which, since the approval of Law 5218/2025, adopted a more restrictive approach to access by civil society organizations, thus interrupting Steki's activities (such as the distribution of clothing and hygiene products and legal information activities carried out through the distribution of brochures and through collaboration with the professional bar association).

In Chania, the presence of a deep-rooted network of political activism in the city has enabled mobilization in solidarity with people on the move, including at the political level. As an activist from the anti-fascist collective Rosa Nera tells us, when around a hundred citizens, mostly from the countryside and villages near Chania, organized a protest on July 12 against the presence of people on the move on the island, the organization of an [anti-racist counter-demonstration](#) with around twice as many participants forced the protesters to move their protest from the city centre to the port of Souda.

Heraklion

In Heraklion, the involvement of municipal institutions and civil society appeared more moderate than in Chania. In fact, neither municipal institutions nor civil society organizations regularly visit the spaces where people on the move are temporarily housed.

At the same time, Deputy Mayor Tsangarakis was keen to emphasize the high level of integration between the population with a migration background residing in the city and the local population. He proudly mentioned the existence of an Integration Centre, active for a year now, which organizes Greek language courses for adults in a public school, anti-racist festivals, and tours of the city and museums to show the relationship between the Byzantine Empire and the countries of origin. However, as Thalassa of Solidarity told Operazione Colombia, Greek courses had previously been offered to the population, but the teachers gave lessons on a voluntary basis, which in the past meant that the service lacked continuity.

There is also an asylum office in Heraklion, but it does not accept initial applications or open asylum cases; rather, it only performs administrative functions for renewals.

2 Another possible explanation for the decline in tourism on the island can be traced back to a scandal in August 2024, which shed light on the level of contamination in the water supply and led to the removal of one of the island's two permanent doctors.

On the other hand, in Heraklion, attempts by civil society to show solidarity with those arriving on the island seem to be met with greater opposition from local actors. The informal organization Thalassa of Solidarity has never been able to access the temporary reception centres, despite having requested permission from the Coast Guard first in April and then in May 2025, receiving a refusal in both cases. At the same time, although individuals and civil society organizations can make donations to the Red Cross, as a matter of policy, donations of second-hand items and sizes other than those requested are not accepted. As a result, in a case [documented by Thalassa of Solidarity](#) and recounted to us during our meeting on July 28, this led to the inability to provide shoes to people on the move, who were then photographed with plastic bags on their feet as they travelled from the reception centre to the port of Heraklion to be transported to mainland Greece.

On July 27, a demonstration against the presence of people on the move was held in Elefteria Square. Operazione Colomba chose to observe the proceedings. Despite the presence of police to prevent unrest, the protest soon turned out to be nothing more than a gathering of about twenty people with neo-fascist tendencies. Even the local anti-fascist collective Evangelismos, which was monitoring the event, decided not to intervene with a counter-demonstration.

Rethymno

According to an activist from the Rosa Nera anti-fascist collective of Chania whom we met on July 24, Rethymno has a more fascist and racist atmosphere than the other two urban centres. The far-right groups active in the area mainly come from the surrounding countryside and villages, but do not yet have a particular structure or organization. Despite this, on June 22, the city witnessed a [racist attack](#): a crowd of about 100 people blocked access to the Tsesme stadium, where 501 people on the move who had arrived on the island the previous day were staying, blocking access to the facility and even using flares. The stadium had been set up just a few days earlier with tents to accommodate the arriving people. Immediately after the attack, on June 24, these were transferred to the former Kitrenosi industrial plant in Latzima, 15 kilometres from the city.

MANAGEMENT OF THE DECEASED

One of the least clear aspects of migration in Crete concerns deaths among people on the move, how they are managed, and the application of any relevant procedures. Given the scarcity of information and lack of clarity on the subject, Operazione Colomba sought to investigate the issue during its monitoring trip.

The number of officially reported deaths is very low compared to [other Mediterranean routes](#). RSA [reports](#) that in 2024 there were four shipwrecks, with a total of 10 deaths and 38 missing persons. The best known, reported in many national and foreign newspapers, is the [shipwreck that occurred on December 14, 2024](#), 12.5 miles south of Gavdos, with eight bodies recovered and about 30 missing. As for 2025, no deaths have been reported on the island. Local organizations interviewed during the monitoring trip also reported the [case of a girl](#) who died of dehydration in Chania hospital and that of a baby born dead after disembarking, both dating back to 2022. In these last two cases, the dead were buried in the section of St. Luke's cemetery in Chania dedicated

to unbaptized children. The small reinforced concrete tombs were adorned with messages and objects left by sympathetic people on the island.

When the issue and the various incidents were reported to the mayor of Gavdos and the deputy mayors of Chania and Heraklion, they responded vaguely, stating that they were only certain about the shipwreck in December 2024, which was the most well-known. The deputy mayor of Heraklion, Tsangarakis, mentioned a possible death that occurred before he took office (in January 2024), but said he was not aware of any further details.

There was also some uncertainty among local Government representatives regarding existing procedures in the event of death, except for the general notion that the Coast Guard and public health system doctors are jointly responsible for identifying bodies and issuing death certificates. The deputy mayor of Chania, Zervoudaki, also stated that, in the event of death and identification, the institutions would proceed with the repatriation of the body to its Country of origin. However, [repatriation of bodies](#) is particularly expensive, occurs rarely, and is usually paid for by the family of the deceased.

Some of the people interviewed by Operazione Colomba - in particular a doctor who served both on the island of Gavdos and in public clinics in the district of Chania - expressed strong concern about the extremely low number of official deaths and the lack of information regarding official procedures and possible burial sites (with the exception of the two mentioned above).

The issue of deaths is sensitive for a number of reasons. On the one hand, the low number of deaths could be explained by the absence of officially reported illegal push-backs, committed by both the Libyan authorities and the Greek Coast Guard. However, in the absence of a civilian fleet or Human Rights defenders who continuously monitor shipwrecks and illegal push-backs not only in Greek SAR but also in neighbouring countries (as demonstrated by a [report](#) by Alarm Phone³), these figures may be unreliable. On the other hand, the lack of clarity on the procedures to be adopted in the event of death highlights the unpreparedness of local actors in the face of such an eventuality. It should also be noted that the procedures for identifying bodies, in addition to giving due dignity to those who lose their lives at sea and reconstructing a shared memory of the dramatic events that take place in our seas, also give the families of the deceased the opportunity to have the death of their family member legally recognized in their countries of origin, with all the legal and economic consequences that this entails.

3 In one case, on March 24, 2024, Alarm Phone received a call from a boat in distress with 160 people on board between Libya and Crete. The boat was in international waters in Egyptian SAR but much closer to Crete than to the Egyptian mainland. The passengers reported a serious situation on board. The JRCC in Cairo (Joint Rescue Coordination Centre) was coordinating the rescue. They ordered several merchant ships to intervene. One of them went to the scene and during the rescue operations two people reportedly died. The ship then headed for the nearest safe port, which was Crete. Several passengers, as reported by the crew of the merchant ship, needed urgent medical assistance. However, the Greek Coast Guard refused to allow them to disembark in Greece and ordered them to head for Port Said in Egypt, which they eventually did. The captain of the ship then reported that the people who finally arrived in Port Said were in urgent need of medical assistance and were in serious condition. It should be noted that Egypt is not a safe port of refuge for asylum seekers or third-Country nationals in transit. According to Human Rights Watch, repression against refugees and asylum seekers is very severe.

CONCLUSIONS

During the eight-day monitoring trip, from July 23 to 30, 2025, Operazione Colombia visited the island of Gavdos and the cities of Heraklion and Chania, where, in addition to the island's two main temporary reception centres, the main local organizations active in monitoring and defending the Human Rights of people on the move are also located. The Kitrenosi site and the port of Agia Galini were also visited. In order to obtain a complete picture from a variety of perspectives, interviews were conducted with the relevant municipal institutions, medical staff, and civil society organizations.

The data collected in the field revealed that local authorities were ill-prepared to manage the increase in migration flows to the island, resulting in degrading treatment and a lack of respect for people's Human Rights. The lack of facilities previously used to manage flows, together with the temporary nature of people's stay, is used as an excuse for not adopting a more systematic approach that respects human dignity, both during arrival and in the management of reception. The situation is further aggravated by the unwillingness to involve local and international organizations with the aim of providing an adequate response to the basic needs of people on the move.

In a national and European context where borders are increasingly militarized, arrivals increasingly criminalized, and the approach to reception increasingly punitive, the context of Crete allows us to reflect on how strategies to render people on the move invisible provide an opportunity for our State institutions to fail to fulfil their obligations to respect international law on asylum and universal Human Rights. The aim of this report is therefore to try to break down the wall of invisibility and isolation, helping to denounce the injustices suffered by people trying to cross European borders and to shed light on the arbitrary treatment of people on the move arriving in Crete.

ACRONYMS AND TERMINOLOGY

People on the move: in line with careful attention to terminology, Operazione Colombo has also chosen to use the term “people on the move” because it is broader and more respectful: it does not refer to the point of origin/departure or destination/settlement, nor does it label people by defining them based on the reason for their movement. Furthermore, this term is inclusive of all genders and ages, and does not make (implicit or explicit) reference to irregular status.

References: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000163621>

CAFTAA - Controlled Access Facility for the Temporary Accommodation of Asylum Seekers

CCAC - Closed Control Access Centre

CSO - Civil Society Organisation

ECHR - European Convention on Human Rights

EDU Court - European Court of Human Rights

EODY – Greek Public Health Service

EUAA - European Union Asylum Agency

ESTIA - Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA) programme

Fundamental Rights Officer of the Greek Ministry of Migration

IOM - International Organisation for Migration

MOMA - Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum

RIC - Reception and Identification Centre

RIS - Reception and Identification Service

RLS - Refugee Legal Support

RSA - Refugee Support Aegean

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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