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Cyprus: Human rights defender Doros Polykarpou on trial with possibility of imprisonment

On 15 October 2024, the Nicosia District Court in Cyprus will hear the criminal case of the human rights defender and recipient of the 2024 Front Line Defenders at Risk Award, **Doros Polykarpou**, who is falsely charged with misdemeanour acts of illegal entry, insult and assaulting two security guards at the Pournara First Reception Centre during a visit on 12 March 2022. If convicted, he could face up to three years imprisonment.

[Doros Polykarpou](#) is a leading human rights defender and founding member of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) [KISA - Action for Equality, Support, and Anti-Racism](#). He is an expert on migration, asylum, discrimination, racism, and trafficking in Cyprus. For over 27 years, he has worked to defend and advocate for the rights of people on the move and tackle discrimination and xenophobia in Cyprus. His and KISA's open criticism of Cyprus' policies and practices regarding the rights of migrants and refugees have made him and the organisation an open target for violent attacks, legal actions, and threats, including death threats and threats to harm Doros' family.

On 15 October 2024, human rights defender Doros Polykarpou will stand trial for trumped up misdemeanour charges of disturbance, public insult, assault, and unlawful entry under the Articles 95, 99, 242 and 280 of the Cyprus Penal Code (CAP 154). This follows an incident with security guards, on 12 March 2022, at the Pournara First Reception Centre in the Nicosia district during which the human rights defender was physically attacked. Despite having filed a complaint with the police the same day, his complaint was not investigated by the police.

On 18 August 2022, the human rights defender was notified of the indictment and summoned to appear at the Nicosia District Court on 7 December 2022. The hearing has been postponed twice since this date. The indictment charges Doros Polykarpou with "unlawful entry" (Article 280), accusing him of entering the reception centre illegally, two accounts of assault (Article 242), accusing him of violently attacking two security guards, two accounts of insult (Article 99) against the two security guards, and disturbance (Article 95), accusing him of making noise in a public space.

The events which led to the charges against the human rights defender occurred during a visit of woman human rights defender Brigitte Espuche, the Migreurop coordinator to Cyprus, and Doros Polykarpou to the Pournara First Reception Centre. Migreurop is a Euro-African network of human rights organisations which KISA is a member of. After hearing the complaints of many asylum seekers during her mission regarding the deplorable conditions of the centre, Brigitte Espuche wanted to visit the centre to see the conditions herself.

On 12 March 2022, Brigitte Espuche and Doros Polikarpou came across a minor asylum seeker on his way to the centre and brought him there. Upon arrival, they asked for the manager of the centre to whom they handed over the minor. As they were leaving, a group of asylum seekers approached them, requesting their help and to show them the extreme conditions they were living in. The group guided the two human rights defenders around the “unofficial area” of the centre where hundreds of people live in tents. They then entered through some unguarded gates which is used by the asylum seekers to enter and exit the centre.

As the group continued exploring the area, several asylum seekers from the centre warned them that the security guards had taken their pictures. One of the security guards ran towards Doros Polykarpou and slapped him on the back, asking if he remembered him. When the human rights defender reacted, the security guard started yelling and pushed him several times, despite warnings from Doros Polykarpou to stop. Several other security guards came to the scene and surrounded them. According to the human rights defender, the guard called him a “bastard” and sexually threatened him.

An unidentified person approached the human rights defender and asked for his identity. He then warned Doros Polykarpou that he should not have been there. As the human rights defenders were escorted towards the Pournara First Reception Centre’s police post, the security guard continued to physically attack the Doros Polykarpou from behind, grabbing his neck and trying to trip him.

Once at the centre’s police post, Doros Polykarpou informed the police officers that he wanted to file a complaint against the security guards, who were still escorting them, regarding the physical and verbal assaults. The human rights defender was cautioned by the police officer to reconsider his intention to file a complaint against the security guards because they had also filed complaints against him for illegally entering the centre. After a while, the human right defenders were told to leave the centre’s police post and file their complaint at the local police station.

Doros Polykarpou filed a complaint at the local police station on the same day, 12 March 2022, but despite having being physically attacked and threatened, his complaint was never processed and no prosecution process was initiated by the Attorney General against the security guard who attacked the human rights defender. Additionally, despite Brigitte Espuche’s request to testify, she was never asked to give her statement, and neither she nor several staff of the centre nor the asylum seekers present at the time of the event are listed as witnesses in Doros Polykarpou’s case. All witnesses listed in the indictment are either police officers or the security guards stationed at the reception centre.

On 22 October 2021, KISA filed a complaint against the same security guard who encountered Doros Polykarpou, on behalf of two women asylum seekers. The security guards had used excessive force against the women at the entrance of the Social Welfare Services in Lakatamia, breaking the leg of one woman. When the police officer who received the complaints from the two migrant women failed to investigate, Doros Polykarpou, representing KISA, lodged a complaint against the police officer with the Independent Authority for the Investigation of Allegations and Complaints against the Police for misconduct and failure to fulfil his duty.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the persistent intimidation and targeting of Doros Polykarpou and believes that Cyprus authorities are taking advantage of what appears to be a retaliation attempt of the security guard to further criminalise the human rights defender. The

organisation is particularly concerned that only the complaint of the security guards was taken into account while the complaints filed by Doros Polykarpou and a key witness were ignored.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Cyprus authorities to:

1. Drop all misdemeanour charges against the human rights defender;
2. Investigate the claims of Doros Polykarpou against the security guards and ensure that all relevant witnesses, including Brigitte Espuche from Migreurop, testify;
3. Prevent and investigate any further physical and verbal threats, including through social media, against KISA and its former director Doros Polykarpou;
4. Guarantee that all human rights defenders, in all circumstances, can carry out their activities in Cyprus without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions, in line with Cyprus' national, regional and international human rights obligations and commitments.