

On the Sidewalk of Eirini Street: Insights into the Refugee Struggle in Cyprus

The protagonist of this article, Sarem, is a fictional character inspired by a true story. His experiences echo those of countless migrants in Cyprus and worldwide: the struggles and challenges they face, as well as the incredible resilience and spirit they must embody.

Seemingly for an eternity, over there at the corner of Eirini Street, a man sits on the same side of the curb. Nearby, on the asphalt, fuzzy chalk scrawls the words: 'Resilient against human rights violations,' and a tired expression marks his face. He is Sarem, a man who endured a year-long waiting period in the Buffer Zone, followed by additional months in Pournara camp and in Kofinou center. For several months now, every single day (and night), he has taken to the streets, engaging in a peaceful strike, to have his basic human rights recognized: the necessary documents to be able to work and live with dignity. Yet, his struggle persists."

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It's challenging for me to recount Sarem's experience. Not only, because he is a dear friend, and I am well aware of the amount of dedication he pours into his cause. But also, it's his story. He alone possesses the genuine emotion necessary to grasp everything that unfolded—from his flight from home for political reasons to these present days spent on the same corner in Eirini Street.

I first met him while volunteering with an NGO operating in the Green Line. Our paths crossed frequently; the NGO's office was nearly opposite the UNHCR tent where he slept, and he could often be found in the hallway, charging his phone, reading, and interacting with us. Our communication was initially limited due to the language barrier. Still, day by day, with the help of a translator, we bridged the gap. He taught me words in his mother tongue, while I introduced him to chess. Much to my surprise, he defeated me the very first time we played.

In addition to the tent, the United Nations provided him with food, washed his clothes, and offered shower facilities. He had his basic needs met, yet the sparkle in his eyes hinted at something deeper, perhaps a nostalgic hope to rebuild his future. He never told me what happened in his homeland, or how he reached the Buffer Zone. He only mentioned spending several years in prison. Upon arriving at the Green Line, Sarem found himself again confined to a strip of land for an unknown duration. I often reassured him, highlighting his improved conditions compared to refugee camps. He was in an uncrowded space, with a chess board and a hallway with a small library, big enough to get bored and find distractions. However, he

insisted and still insists today, that until he gains his freedom, he doesn't feel it; he can't concentrate enough.

August arrived. By this point, I had finished the project, almost everyone went on vacation, Sarem continued in the usual limbo. Finally, he took the tough decision to initiate a hunger strike, demanding expedited processing of his papers. A few weeks later, he was relocated to Pournara Camp. During this period, I remained unaware of his circumstances, as I couldn't visit him, and he was not permitted to exit. He told me that he was in a de facto detention, in unsuitable conditions surrounded by razor wires and dirt. After three months he was transferred to Kofinou Reception Centre, where he stayed for a few weeks. Since then, he sleeps in the backyard of an abandoned café on the same street. All he has received is a document with the date of his release, so he continues to advance his cause, displaying his handwriting with chalk. Even when security agents erase it, he simply rewrites it.

Again and again, I have offered him a hand, hoping to somewhat alleviate his situation. An improvised place to get by, or just a hot meal. Each time, he shakes his head resolutely and repeats that he refuses to rely on anyone for assistance but from the respective institutions through legal means. Neither just for one day, to recharge the battery and get some rest. Neither on a Sunday. He laughs and goes: "I can't go away from the sidewalk. It's important, it's my business!".

Sarem's undefined wait for his asylum application is not isolated. Cyprus currently receives the highest number of applicants per capita, for protection, in the EU, with 26,599 persons pending at the Asylum Service, and another 5,073 persons at the International Protection Administrative Court, as reported by UNHCR (United Nations Refugee Agency) at the end of 2023.¹ Pournara, the country's sole centre for hosting and managing first reception procedures, has limited capacity to accommodate the increasing number of applicants. The latter, often fleeing dire circumstances and enduring strenuous journeys, are left waiting in many cases for years to obtain documents. On top of that, they also have to contend with increasing xenophobia in politics, fuelled by media disinformation, which fosters hostility and anti-immigrant

¹ According to Eurostat, in February 2023 Cyprus recorded the highest rate of first-time asylum applicants (885 applicants per million people) in the EU. The EU recorded 171 first-time applications per million people in February. A total of 76 505 first-time asylum applications were recorded in the EU in February 2023, a 41% increase compared to February 2022 when 54 370 such applications were recorded.
<https://www.unhcr.org/cy/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2024/02/UNHCR-Cyprus_Country-Fact-Sheet_2024.02>

sentiments. Racist attacks by extreme right groups, enjoying total impunity from law enforcement agencies, have been documented in the island and are on the rise. The inadequate response of authorities to these incidents urgently warrants further investigation.²

These concerning events in Cyprus are not isolated either. Many other countries, facing increasing migration flows, have similar issues, among which the extension of barbed wire, the normalization of hate speech and the making of migrants into scapegoats to blame for economic and societal problems. These countries, however, have committed, through national laws and international agreements, to ensuring that refugees can exercise their rights in a safe environment. Within the legal framework, the principle is clear; solidarity represents a fundamental human value that mutually enriches communities, thus making it the interest and responsibility of governments to protect migrants and invest in integration.³ Only through such an approach can people like Sarem be granted their dignity. For Sarem, specifically, getting papers would mean returning to do business as a tailor rather than spending his time on a sidewalk for an unknown amount of time. How much longer does he have to wait?

²<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/01/cyprus-despicable-attack-against-anti-racism-ngo-kisa-highlight>

³ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 14), which states that everyone has the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries. Under the non-refoulement principle, you cannot be deported or sent back to a country in which your life or freedom may be in danger on account of your race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. The 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocol Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT): This treaty is crucial for protecting refugees from being returned to countries where they may face torture or other forms of ill-treatment. For other information: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/core-internationalhuman-rights-instruments-and-their-monitoring-bodies>

Cyprus: Asylum Statistics 2002 - December 2023

Year	New Applications	Appeals	Repeated applications	Decisions						Pending applications year-to-date
				Refugee status	Subsidiary protection status	Total protection	% Refugee status	% Subsidiary protection	Rejected	
2002	952	-		0	0	-	0.0%	0.0%	143	845
2003	4,407	22		0	10	10	0.0%	3.5%	274	4,884
2004	9,872	938		30	56	86	1.0%	1.8%	2,958	11,098
2005	7,746	2,436		43	136	179	0.9%	3.0%	4,369	13,554
2006	4,545	2,615		44	171	215	1.1%	4.4%	3,631	12,261
2007	6,789	2,092		37	233	270	0.8%	5.2%	4,243	11,997
2008	3,922	2,992		75	188	263	1.1%	2.8%	6,440	9,096
2009	3,199	3,714		71	1,351	1,422	1.1%	20.0%	5,334	4,849
2010	2,882	3,254		45	461	506	0.9%	8.7%	4,781	4,105
2011	1,770	2,370		62	48	110	1.1%	0.8%	5,572	2,541
2012	1,620	1,088		85	43	128	3.0%	1.5%	2,662	2,344
2013	1,346	1,245	350	42	210	252	3.0%	15.1%	1,140	2,512
2014	1,628	335	440	64	1152	1,216	3.7%	66.6%	515	2,691
2015	2,108	388	269	249	1638	1,887	9.3%	61.4%	781	1,983
2016	2,871	697	211	227	1190	1,417	10.1%	52.7%	841	3,088
2017	4,459	1,047	280	253	1063	1,316	8.9%	37.5%	1,522	5,263
2018	7,713	1,010	290	193	1021	1,214	6.6%	35.1%	1,693	10,307
2019	12,724	796	535	163	1220	1,383	3.9%	29.2%	2,800	18,827
2020	7,094	-	57	172	1512	1,684	4.2%	36.6%	2,450	19,653
2021	13,235	-	245	291	1983	2,274	2.4%	16.2%	9,962	18,808 A/S
	-	9,128	-	14		14	0.5%	0.0%	2,593	6,537 IPAC
2022	21,565		260	331	227	558	3.7%	2.5%	8,509	29,715 A/S
	-	9,093	-	8	1	9	0.2%	0.0%	4,300	6,805 IPAC
2023	11,617		240	749	2314	3,063	6.5%	6.1%	7,448	26,599 A/S
		8,399		17	5	22	0.7%	0.1%	2,471	5,073 IPAC
Total	134,064	53,659	3,177	3,265	16,233	19,498	3.1%	15.2%	87,432	