**Join the West Against Racism Network to celebrate International Human Rights Day in West Belfast on Monday 10 December 2012**

The country of Greece is rarely far from the news these days. Last month Greece agreed a bailout agreement with the EU and IMF of a staggering 44 billion euro. The impact to date of the economic crisis on ordinary citizens of Greece has been brutal, with over one in four unemployed and most struggling to get by. The situation is unlikely to get better any time soon.

However, a side to this story which has remained largely underreported is the impact that the social and economic crisis is having on those who are among the most vulnerable in Greek society – asylum seekers and refugees. There is no question that racism is on the rise in Greece, fuelled by fascist political parties like Golden Dawn, with its calls for the deportation of migrants and the mining of the country’s borders.

One of the most shocking examples of the end result of such racism which has emerged from Greece is the case of Walid Taleb, a 29 year old Egyptian baker and father of two children, living on the Greek island of Salamina. Walid was summarily dismissed by his employer’s son on the morning of 3 November 2012. Taken aback at his rash dismissal, Walid felt that there was little he could do as an immigrant with no papers. However he did ask for two months’ unpaid wages he was owed. The response of his employer? Along with his son and another man they brought Walid to a stable beside the baker’s home and tortured him over an 18 hour period, telling him “*you will die here and you will be buried*”.

When the baker and the others left to open the bakery early on Sunday morning Walid managed to use a rock to smash the chain imprisoning him and escape. However his ordeal was far from over. After stumbling in a semi conscious state around the village for a couple of hours he was brought to the police station by a passerby. Taken by hospital by ambulance the medics declined to admit him – instead the police detained him for three nights while preparations were made to deport him to Egypt.

Following the intervention of a volunteer with the Egyptian community in Greece who secured a lawyer for Walid he was released from custody.

Characterising the attack as one of ‘striking brutality’ the Athens office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said the response of the authorities “*followed a pattern*”.

Here in the North we are all too familiar with similar hate crimes motivated by sectarianism, a form of racism, over many decades. In 2011/12 the PSNI recorded 308 incidents with a sectarian motivation in North and West Belfast; this figure is likely to be but the tip of the iceberg given underreporting due to a continued lack of confidence in the PSNI and their ability to properly investigate such incidents.

We have also had many examples of racist hate crimes against migrant workers and asylum seekers refugees, crimes which often do not make it into court. Recent research commissioned by the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) found that of almost 14,000 hate motivated incidents reported to the police, including murder through to damage to property and name calling, only 12 cases were successfully prosecuted using 2004 hate crime legislation.

One case that did made it into court involves two men from Dungannon who are currently before the High Court to answer charges of assault occasioning actual bodily harm, threats to kill, criminal damage and three to damage property endangering life. The court heard that a migrant worker from East Timor alleges that he was set upon by the two men as he walked home from his shift at a poultry factory. The court was told that the man was beaten about the head with a belt and that an attempt was made to put the belt around his head before he escaped.

Many of these incidents go ‘under the radar’ for a number of reasons. In North and West Belfast in 2011/12 the PSNI recorded 59 incidents with a racist motivation. Yet we know that as with sectarian attacks and incidents many racist incidents will not be reported to the PSNI - due to a combination of vulnerability, mistrust, lack of confidence, language barriers and other reasons.

The West Against Racism Network (WARN) is currently carrying out research in West Belfast in an attempt to gain a more accurate picture of what the lives of people from minority ethnic communities living and/or working in West Belfast are really like. This research covers aspects such as education, employment, accommodation and access to community services as well as policing. Crucially it also examines whether people feel that they have been made part of and belong in West Belfast, or whether their experience has been one of being kept as ‘an outsider’, what has been described in other contexts as ‘the chill factor’. The research involves a mixture of questionnaires and focus groups and the findings will be made available in Spring 2013.

WARN continues its work to raise awareness of and to challenge racism, particularly when it comes as a result of action or inaction from state agencies which have significant power over people’s lives, whether that is in relation to education, health, accommodation, policing or immigration or other spheres. We are acutely aware that in times of economic recession, as we have seen happening in Greece, those who are most vulnerable in our society all too often can become the scapegoats for the problems of unemployment, poverty and lack of services. We need to guard against any such manifestations of racism here in West Belfast.

**To mark International Human Rights Day on 10 December 2012 WARN has organised a screening of the documentary ‘How Much Further?’ on Monday 10 December 2012 at 7.30pm in the Falls Community Council.** Filmed in Athens between October 2011 and February 2012, in the midst of social, political and economic turmoil, the documentary raises the voices of those who have fled Afghanistan, Somalia or Sudan hoping to find refuge in Europe.

After months or even years on the road, they arrive in Greece, a country whose population is facing the full brunt of the economic crisis and where the asylum and reception systems are completely dysfunctional. Most people see no option but to take to the road again in the hope of reaching a country that can receive them and consider their claim for asylum. But once they have entered Greece, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to leave the country given the European policies that legally bind them to Greece.

This documentary is the result of a partnership between the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), the Greek Forum on Refugees and the film maker Matthias Wiessler, and is supported by the European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM).The issues raised in this documentary will be of interest to everybody concerned about the treatment of asylum seekers in Europe generally, but also specifically here at home.

The film screening will be followed by a discussion and refreshments. More information can be found on WARN’s website www.westagainstracismnetwork.org; alternatively you can contact Flair Campbell on 07769785192 or [westagainstracism@googlemail.com](mailto:westagainstracism@googlemail.com)

The film screening is one of a number of events taking place for the Human Rights Consortium’s Human Rights Festival – more information on the festival can be found at <http://www.billofrightsni.org/humanrightsday>