

LESBOS BULLETIN

Update on the EU 'hotspot' Moria, by the Greek Council for Refugees & Oxfam



A young boy in Zone 11 of the Olive Grove, outside Moria. August, 2020. Photo by Yousif Alshewaili

- Efforts to alleviate levels of overcrowding in the 'hotspots' have continued throughout the summer. But by the end of August, more than 24,000 asylum seekers and refugees, of whom more than 12,000 are in Moria camp on Lesbos, remained trapped in dangerous and undignified accommodation in the islands 'hotspots'. This situation will persist if Greece and the EU continue to apply the EU-Turkey deal and fail to agree a proper European responsibility sharing mechanism.
- Against the backdrop of a second COVID-19 outbreak in Greece and the first confirmed case of coronavirus in Moria camp, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum applied additional restrictive measures to camps, extending their lockdown until 15 September. This risks turning the camps into 'closed centres' with conditions similar to detention, and has led to protests by refugees and segments of the local communities.
- Greece and international media reported that the Greek security forces pushed back asylum-seekers at land and sea, as part of a widespread and systematic practice.¹ The Greek Government denies all allegations.
- In a positive development, Germany has offered to relocate 243 children with serious medical issues, alongside their families, from the Greek islands.² **If more European member states were to follow this example, the situation on the islands could be significantly and rapidly improved.** Meanwhile, despite the ongoing relocation efforts, 634 unaccompanied and separated children remain in Moria waiting for their turn. The slow pace of the relocations is causing frustration and despair for those left behind.

CALL TO ACTION

The Greek Council for Refugees and Oxfam are calling on EU member states' governments to, urgently:

- Condemn illegal pushbacks and collective expulsions in the strongest possible terms and work towards ensuring all EU member states respect their international legal obligations.
- Share responsibility with Greece for receiving and welcoming people seeking asylum in Europe through a mandatory relocation mechanism. Most urgently, member states should act on their commitments to relocate unaccompanied, separated, and sick children from Greece, work with NGOs and professionals who support the concerned children and inform them about the process.

GCR and Oxfam are also calling on the European Parliament and the European Commission to:

- Investigate the allegations of pushbacks, and work with member states to ensure accountability for all violations of international and EU law. The results of such investigations should be made public.
- Support the Greek government and NGOs in reinforcing medical and hygiene preparedness in camps and in refugee hosting localities, including water and sanitation, accommodation, sharing medical information and health facilities. All such initiatives should also take into consideration the needs of local communities, to ensure equal treatment for all.

In addition, GCR and Oxfam are calling on Greece, with the support of other EU member states' governments and the European Commission, to:

- Respect fundamental human rights, ensure that no pushback operations take place at Greece's land or sea borders, and commence a full-scale investigation into the numerous pushback allegations that have been reported.
- Act fast in order to prevent a large scale COVID-19 outbreak among the population in Moria. This requires the immediate testing of everyone for the coronavirus and transferring everyone out of Moria to appropriate accommodation on the mainland and in other EU Member States.
- Take all necessary measures to eliminate all phenomena of xenophobia and racist violence. Most importantly, this should include promoting dialogue and cooperation between local communities and the refugees and migrants on the islands, and the implementation of early integration measures for the purposes of ensuring long-term social cohesion.

Overview

Arrivals by sea to the Greek island ‘hotspots’ remained low in July and August, with a total of 459 asylum seekers reaching the island of Lesbos, and another 135 the islands of Kos, Chios and Samos up to 23 August. Based on statistics provided by the Migration and Asylum Ministry’s, a 93.12% drop in arrivals was recorded from April to July on the islands.³ In conjunction with the ongoing departures of asylum seekers to the mainland (6,436 people relocated, either through state-led transfers or by their own means), this has led to alleviation of some of the overcrowding on the islands, yet there is still much more to be done.⁴

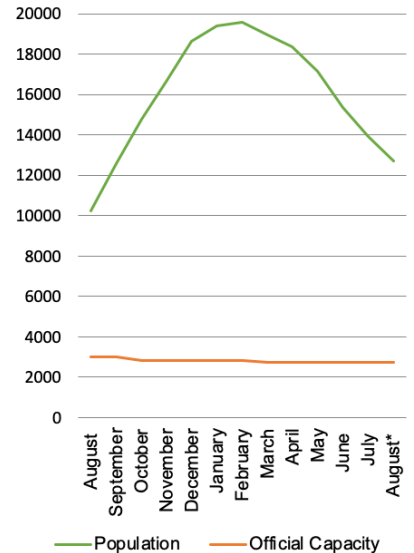
More than 24,000 persons remain trapped in the island ‘hotspots’, which continue operating far beyond capacity (394%).⁵ The vast majority of these people are from Afghanistan (47%), Syria (19%), DRC (6%), Palestine (6%) and Somalia (6%)⁶ – countries of origin for many refugees,⁷ as evidenced by the very high recognition rates of these nationalities.⁸ Most are families with children and 22% are women. Children constitute 31% of the population; more than 1 in 10 are unaccompanied, while 70% of all children are below the age of 12.⁹

In Moria, though overcrowding has decreased sharply, more than 12,000 people remain trapped without sufficient space or access to soap and water.¹⁰ In the facility’s overspill areas, many asylum seekers only have water for 5-6 hours per day while others have none, despite ongoing efforts from grassroot initiatives and NGOs to construct water and sanitation infrastructure, and to promote hygiene and solid waste disposal. This makes it impossible to carry out preventive measures, such as physical distancing and regular handwashing, leaving close to 1,000 COVID-vulnerable asylum seekers exposed to increased health risks.¹¹

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Moria¹² on 2 September only highlights the need for immediate action to protect the residents of the ‘hotspot’. It is clear that the ongoing restriction of movement and the measures introduced in relation to the second COVID-19 wave are insufficient to prevent a mass outbreak in the camp.^{xii} Currently, less than 1% of the people in the ‘hotspots’ can exit the camp daily, and even then, only for specific purposes, such as for legal or medical aid and access to public services or pharmacies. Meanwhile, asylum seekers are obliged to wear (non-medical) masks, which the Greek state does not provide, and not everyone has the means to purchase.

Severe healthcare gaps and shortages further contribute to people’s feelings of insecurity and frustration. Asylum seekers with tuberculosis and meningitis have no access to medical care, as the Greek National Public Health Organization (EODY) is not present anymore in the camp. On 30 July, after being fined by the Municipality of Mytilene for operating without a building permit, MSF closed its COVID-19 response center outside of Moria, which was the only place in Lesbos dedicated to isolating and treating asylum seekers displaying COVID-19 symptoms.¹³ Should an outbreak of COVID-19 take place, the local health system is understaffed and totally unprepared to respond.

Overcrowding in Moria camp



“The smuggler in Turkey told us that we have to be careful not to get sick, because if a member of our family gets sick, they will bury our whole family alive or drown us in the sea. When we finally reached Lesbos and were examined by the Greek public health organization, we said we are healthy. But we are not, because we are afraid.”

Ahmed*, Afghan asylum seeker who arrived in Lesbos in March, victim of pushback.

Tensions rising, inside and outside the camp

In the past months, there have been increasing security issues, exacerbated by understaffing, overcrowding, the lack of lighting throughout the overspill areas and the ongoing COVID restrictions since 17 March. At the food distribution points in Moria, people have to stand in line three times a day for more than 2,5 hours each time, only to receive poor quality, and sometimes rotten, food. The camp's lockdown and the small amount of money people receive in cash assistance as part of reception provisions, leaves many with no option but to eat the food. Meanwhile, the risk of fire due to hot temperatures is ever-present, with fires being reported on a weekly basis during August.

All of this has resulted in incidents of fighting, sexual harassments, and the tragic death of two young men: a 19-year-old from Ivory Coast on 6 July and a 21-year-old Afghan on 27 July.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the Ministries of Migration and Asylum reported plan to transform Moria into "a smaller, controlled closed centre",¹⁵ was met with opposition and protests by the local community. Locals on all the 'hotspot' islands are increasingly fed up that for over four years, they have borne the brunt of a failed EU asylum policy. During one such protest, on 20 August,¹⁶ a small group of protestors attempted to set areas of Moria on fire and assaulted nearby asylum seekers on account of the perceived expansion of the 'hotspot', before being apprehended by the police.¹⁷ The lack of tangible solidarity amongst EU member states, coupled with the concomitant inability of Greece to manage the reception crisis, directly opens the space for incidences of intolerance and xenophobia.

Deterrence and returns

Over the past two months, there have been credible reports of pushbacks near Lesbos,¹⁸ as well as footage suggesting that NATO¹⁹ and FRONTEX²⁰ forces have been present during pushback operations by the Greek coastguard and have not intervened. These operations reportedly took place at sea, with video footage depicting migrants adrift in unseaworthy rafts.²¹ Further reports of pushbacks resulted from footage of people who had reached Lesbos and who were observed by the local population subsequently disappearing.²²

Despite the growing number of reports on pushbacks, the Greek Government has been ignoring or denying the allegations, instead pointing the finger to Europe's hard stance on European border protection.²³

Relocation

As of 20 August, 634 unaccompanied and separated children reside on Lesbos island. Of these, only one in five (166) have access to a shelter, but the majority of children (60%) are still in overcrowded sections of the 'hotspot', while 55 are sleeping rough in the olive grove.

"Once or twice per week we are given meat or spaghetti, which is considered good food. But when the food is good, it is not enough for everyone because people take more. When you wait in line for hours and the food ends, the fighting starts. The army knows that. Why can't they give us better food more often?"

Ali*, asylum seeker and a community representative from Afghanistan in Moria camp.

"Pushbacks are against EU law. We cannot protect our European borders by violating our values."

Ylva Johansson, the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs on 6 July

Despite a welcome increase in suitable accommodation places for these children throughout Greece (in the past 12 months, 49% or 578 places have become available), shortages persist, which the Greek government still fails to cover. Meanwhile the slow and insufficient number of pledged relocation places to other EU member states deny over half the children access to a proper shelter. By mid-August, out of the estimated 4,511 unaccompanied children throughout Greece, only a third (34%) had access to long-term accommodation and even less to short-term/emergency accommodation (13%). The rest of these children reside in overcrowded and unsafe camps (20%), in insecure conditions or on the streets (22%), or are in so-called 'protective custody', which is actually detention (4.5%).²⁴ None of these places provide adequate protection for this vulnerable group, and detention is never in the best interest of a child.

A small number of EU member states continued with the relocation of some of these children. Since the beginning of this initiative, 229 children have been relocated to six EU countries, most recently to France and Finland.²⁵ A new relocation program introduced in July aimed at relocating families with at least one child with serious medical problems in Germany is a very welcome and promising development. However, hundreds of children still need to be relocated urgently. Further, because the process is often complicated and involves many different agencies, the confusion and lack of clarity about eligibility and procedures create stress for children who do not know if or when they will be relocated. Better coordination with organisations on the ground is needed.

NOTES

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² Ministry of Asylum & Migration, Reception of another 121 asylum seekers -families with children with serious medical conditions- by Germany, 26 August, available in Greek at: <https://migration.gov.gr/ypodochi-akomi-121-aitoynton-asylo-oikogeneies-me-paidia-me-sovares-astheneies-apo-ti-germania/>.

³ Ministry of Migration and Asylum, Semi-Annual Information Note January - June 2020, available at: <https://migration.gov.gr/examinaio-enimerotiko-simeioima-ianoyarios-ioynios-2020/>

⁴ Data on arrivals and departures acquired from UNHCR's Aegean Island weekly snapshots for the period of 29 June to 23 August. The relevant snapshots can be found at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>.

⁵ General Secretariat for Information and Communication, National Situational Picture Regarding the Islands at Eastern Aegean Sea (27/8/2020), 28 August 2020, available at: <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/refugee-migration/?lang=en>.

⁶ UNHCR, Aegean Islands Weekly Snapshot (17-23 August 2020), 25 August 2020, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/gr/en/16207-unhcr-concerned-by-pushback-reports-calls-for-protection-of-refugees-and-asylum-seekers.html>

⁷ Indicatively, see UNCHR, Global Trends, Forced Displacement in 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/305YNw0>, p. 8.

⁸ As per the last available data issued by the Greek Asylum Service (GAS) in February 2020, the known recognition rates for the specific nationalities were 98.5% for Syrian nationals, 97.2% for Palestinians, 91.2% for Somalis and 69.1% for nationals of Afghanistan 69.1%. GAS Service Statistical Data (from 07.06.2013 to 29.02.2020), 29 February 2020, available at: http://asylo.gov.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Greek_Asylum_Service_data_February_2020_en.pdf. Since then, the GAS has ceased issuing disaggregated data on asylum.

⁹ *Ibid vi*

¹⁰ *Ibid v*

¹¹ Greece - MSF forced to close COVID-19 centre on Lesbos, 30 July 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greece-msf-forced-close-covid-19-centre-lesbos> and euronews, Medecins sans Frontieres: "One shower for 600 refugees. How can they be protected from COVID-19?", 27 August 2020, available in Greek at: <https://gr.euronews.com/2020/08/27/giatroi-xoris-sinora-ena-ntous-gia-600-prosfiges-pos-na-prostateytoun-apo-ton-covid-19>.

- ¹² Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, "Positive case of coronavirus in RIC Moria", 2 September 2020, <https://migration.gov.gr/thetiko-krovysma-sto-kyt-morias/>.
- ¹³ *Ibid* xi
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This paper was written by Natalia-Rafaella Kafkoutsou and Spyros-Vlad Oikonomou. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.