

Greek girl dies from carbon monoxide poisoning after utility shut-off

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12 December 2013

A girl, Sara, aged 13, died December 1 from carbon monoxide poisoning from fumes emanating from a makeshift brazier being used to heat the apartment she shared with her Serbian mother in Xirokrini, a working class district of Salonika, Greece's second-largest city. The state-controlled energy company DEI cut off the power supply to the apartment they were living in three months ago, because of unpaid bills.

Eleftherotypia reported, "It is believed that the mother fainted at around 10pm on Sunday evening. When she came around, she noticed that her daughter had also lost consciousness. Attempts by an ambulance crew, which arrived at apartment shortly after 11pm, to resuscitate the girl were unsuccessful. A coroner who attended the scene found that she had died from inhaling poisonous fumes."

According to reports, Sara's mother, 54, occasionally worked in local restaurants washing dishes, but had been unable to find work in recent months. *Kathimerini* reported that she owed 1,000 euros in unpaid bills.

As the temperature drops, increasing numbers of people are attempting to keep warm by burning wood in fireplaces or woodstoves. Last week, high levels of floating particles were detected in the atmosphere of cities in Northern and Central Greece. In the city of Ioannina, the particles were measured to be 100mg per cubic meter of air, twice the maximum permissible level. Many people in the city complained of respiratory problems.

The use of wood burning to keep warm has also increased the risk of outbreaks of fire and of poisoning from fumes.

The state's response to Sara's death was callous. Her mother was initially arrested for manslaughter due to negligence, but was later released on the condition that

she left Greece within six months. The state's contempt was also underscored by the fact that the Salonika municipality was only prepared to pay a paltry 400 euros for the young girl's body to be transported to the town of Evzonoi, in northern Greece. The cost of the onward journey into Serbia was born by the Serbian Consulate.

The horror and revulsion at Sara's tragic death was underscored by the large number of ordinary workers and youth who attended her funeral in Xirokrini last Friday. The funeral took on an overtly political character when school students, marching to commemorate the killing of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos six years ago, diverted their march to go past the church.

Alexis's killing by a police officer in the Exarcheia district of Athens sparked the worst riots Greece had seen since democracy was restored in 1974. According to *Eleftherotypia*, the students' chants included an attack of Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras: "Sara was one of us, [her] murderer is Samaras!"

Sara's mother apparently did not inform neighbours of her economic plight, and she had reason to fear deportation if she went to seek help from the authorities.

This is underscored by a police official's comment quoted in *I Efimerida ton Syntakton*, who said, "Initially she came [to Greece] as an economic migrant and had a residency permit as she has worked. However, her residency permit later expired and she did not come to renew it. Presumably, she had neither money nor employment to do this..."

Sara's tragic death is by no means an isolated incident. An 86-year-old woman was burned alive last Friday in her house in the town of Aspropyrgos, 18 kilometres west of Athens. According to initial reports,

the fire was caused by her attempts to keep warm.

In the Kordelio suburb of Salonika, a 5-year-old boy and his grandmother nearly died after a fire broke out from candle that had been left lit overnight. The power supply where the two were living with the young boy's parents had reportedly been cut six months ago.

Due to deepening austerity and the massive increase in poverty this has created, thousands of people can no longer afford to pay their utility bills.

The government introduced a token heating fuel benefit last year, which has been set at 35 cents per litre for this year, up from 28 cents per litre last year. The benefit is also subject to a cap, determined by geographic location. If one considers that heating fuel currently costs 1.40 euros per litre, the benefit is clearly woefully inadequate, forcing many people to opt for alternatives. Many struggling families have also been excluded by strict rules regarding home ownership.

According to a recent survey by Greece's Consumer Institute (INKA), eight out of ten of Greece's apartment blocks will not be using heating fuel this year.

Heating provision in most blocks of flats in Greece is communal and arrangements are voted upon by residents. Speaking to Athens News Agency APE-MPE, INKA President Giorgos Lehouritis said, "Unfortunately [people] are unable to use heating fuel and are trying to keep warm with alternative forms of heating. The situation is worse this year compared to last year, despite the benefit."



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