

Syriza government steps up repression of refugees

Robert Stevens
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Refugees fleeing war ravaged Syria, Afghanistan and other countries seeking protection in Greece are being brutally treated by the Syriza government.

On Tuesday, in scenes reminiscent of the Second World War, thousands of refugees, who had been sleeping rough on the island of Kos, were rounded up and marched to a sports stadium in order to be registered. On the way, some were brutally set upon by police officers wielding truncheons, using fire extinguishers and firing tear gas.

The Greek government headed by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has responded to Tuesday's events by drafting in even more riot police. On Wednesday, two riot squad units (40 men) arrived in Kos from the mainland, and more are being sent from other islands.

The Mayor of Kos, Giorgos Kiritsis, declared Tuesday in the most inflammatory language, "The situation on the island is out of control. There is a real danger that blood will be shed."

YouTube footage shows one police officer slapping a refugee and pushing others. He tells them to withdraw behind a line he has drawn on the pavement with a knife he has been brandishing and yells, "Where did I say? Here!"

The BBC broadcast pictures of refugees packed like sardines chanting: "We want papers, we want to eat!" When they arrived at the stadium in scorching temperatures, the desperate men, women and children were locked in overnight and denied access to facilities.

The group *Médecins sans Frontières* told the *Guardian* newspaper that refugees were fainting due to heatstroke—at a rate of one every fifteen minutes—and one had an epileptic seizure. Its aid workers had had to withdraw after police used a sonic weapon to maintain order.

MSF spokeswoman Julia Kourafa described the

distressing scenes she had witnessed, "This is the first time we've seen this in Greece—people locked inside a stadium and controlled by riot police. We're talking about mothers with children and elderly people. They've been locked in there after many hours in the sun."

MSF Director of Operations Brice de le Vingne condemned the situation in Kos, saying it was "state abuse, with police using increasing heavy-handed force against these vulnerable people."

He added, "The Kos authorities have clearly stated that they have no intention of improving the situation for these people as they believe that this would constitute a 'pull factor'. But the truth is that people fleeing war will keep on coming whether or not the authorities are trying to stop them from doing so."

The Greek islands are now the main point of entry for refugees and asylum seekers hoping to reach Europe by boat, supplanting Italy. According to the United Nations refugee agency, at least 124,000 people have arrived in Greece in the first seven months of this year, nearly all from the war zones of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan—up from around 30,000 in the whole of 2014.

Kos and neighbouring Greek islands are just a few miles from the Turkish coast, and some sources report that up to 1,000 refugees per day are arriving from the mainland.

Thousands have drowned attempting the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean from North Africa to Italy on overcrowded boats and dinghies.

A reported 1,417 migrants were rescued just between Friday morning and Monday morning in 59 separate incidents off the Greek islands. Greek newspaper *Kathemerini* reported, "At least two rubber boats made landfall Wednesday, while an Italian coast guard boat

participating in a European border watch mission brought in about 50 people rescued at sea.”

The indiscriminate violence meted out to people desperate to escape from their home countries, ravaged by years of war and imperialist intrigue, exposes the right-wing, bourgeois character of the Syriza government led by Tsipras.

Since Syriza came to office in January, its entire policy of dealing with refugees and asylum seekers has been based on repression. It has mobilised the Greek army to enforce order at a migrant camp on the island of Lesbos, where the civilian authorities had run out of food to feed residents.

In its barbaric treatment of immigrants, Syriza has gone even further than other governments. Figures released this week by the Greek police reveal that between January to July, 156,726 migrants, deemed to have entered the country “illegally” were arrested, compared to the 32,070 for the same period in 2014.

Around 7,000 refugees and asylum seekers are now on Kos, an island with a population of just 33,000 people. Public spending throughout Greece, including on its islands, has been decimated and the basic facilities and infrastructure required to deal with such an influx no longer exist.

On August 7, following a meeting at the interior ministry, Tsipras said, “The immigrant flow to Greece is beyond what our state infrastructure can handle. We have significant problems and that’s why we have asked for help from EU”.

These comments were made just days before Syriza signed its latest austerity agreement with the European Union—the same body whose imposition of years of budget cuts have led to a situation where the majority of the population, let alone refugees, have no access to basic necessities.

Tsipras called for support from the EU while saying nothing about the fact that the EU, through its support for the military interventions of the imperialist powers over the last decade and more, bears a major responsibility for terrible devastation that has turned millions of people into refugees in the first place.



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