

Greek military to play main role in setting up refugee concentration camps

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The announcement that the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence have been assigned the leading role in the pseudo-left Syriza government's handling of the refugee crisis is part of a deliberate and systematic expansion of the domestic role of the military in Greece.

Greece must set up "hotspots" on the islands bordering Turkey and relocation centres on the mainland by February 15, three days ahead of the European Union (EU) leaders' summit in Brussels. Hotspots are essentially concentration camps on the EU's external borders, where stranded refugees fleeing the war zones of the Middle East and North Africa are detained and have their fingerprints taken.

Those deemed to have a "genuine" asylum claim will be transferred to the relocation centres on the mainland, while the rest will be sent to detention centres and ultimately deported.

The demand to set up the camps is part of the three-month ultimatum issued by the European Commission to expel Greece from the Schengen Agreement for passport-free travel in Europe unless the government demonstrates that it can stop the influx of refugees fleeing the war zones of the Middle East and North Africa.

The announcement follows the recent clampdown by Greek authorities against NGOs and volunteers that are helping refugees stranded on Greek islands on the sea border with Turkey.

Details of the plans were outlined in a February 2 press conference by Defence Minister Panos Kammenos alongside his deputy, Syriza's Dimitris Vitsas, and the chief of staff of the Greek armed forces, Admiral Evangelos Apostolakis.

Kammenos is the leader of the right-wing xenophobic Independent Greeks (ANEL), Syriza's junior coalition

partner. Control of the Ministry of Defence was one of the preconditions set by Kammenos last year before entering into coalition with the pseudo-left party.

Kammenos explained that army and air force engineers will assist contractors in setting up hotspots on the islands of Chios, Kos, Samos and Leros. On Lesbos where there is a hotspot already in place since October, the army will assist in expanding existing infrastructure.

Relocation centres will also be set up in two army camps on the mainland of Greece in Schisto (near Athens) and Sindos (near Thessaloniki). Once established, both centres will be administered and guarded by the army.

In 2015, over 850,000 people made the boat crossing from Turkey to Greece, with 60 percent of them going to Lesbos. More than 250 people have so far died this year attempting to make the same crossing. This includes more than 39 people who drowned on the morning of January 30 after their boat capsized between Greece and Turkey.

More than 52,000 people made the crossing in January, 35 times more than the same month last year.

The plan to allow the military to intervene in the handling of the refugee crisis is testament to how far right Syriza has travelled since it was swept to power in January 2015 on an anti-austerity mandate. Just seven months later, it betrayed this mandate, signing the most severe austerity memorandum yet with the EU in July.

Whether enforcing the EU's reactionary agenda on the refugee crisis, or implementing austerity, Tsipras' government is now reliant on the police and armed forces to force through its measures.

Kammenos announced that the operation—the biggest ever undertaken by the Greek Armed Forces in peacetime—will be managed by the newly established

“Coordinating Organ for Managing Immigration”. This will be headed by Major General Konstantinos Floros. Floros is a Special Forces Officer who has served both as a Paratrooper and Navy Seal (OYK).

Kammenos justified Floros’ appointment stating, “The choice for a Special Forces Officer as a coordinator implies that special circumstances require special people who can make decisions quickly.”

The OYK was one of the bastions of the military junta that ruled Greece between 1967-1974. In more recent years it has developed strong links with the fascist Golden Dawn. Last year an OYK detachment shouted fascist slogans during the annual March 25 Greek Independence Day parade in Athens.

Floros currently heads the National Operations Centre, which is located in the Ministry of Defence and is where operations are coordinated in times of war. Normally, it can only be accessed by officers with special clearance, and it is where the Coordinating Organ will be centred. According to Kammenos, civilians participating in the operation will only have access to a special designated area.

The involvement of the armed forces has been justified as the only viable way of meeting the tight deadline for setting up the hotspots and relocation centres. However, the plan announced by Kammenos goes far beyond merely assisting with construction projects, with a remit that extends in areas of civilian policy. For example, the Coordinating Organ will include:

- * A transportation department, “which will monitor existing arrangements to transport refugees and migrants from the islands and hotspots to the reception centres”

- * A health department headed by army and police doctors

- * A catering department made of 10 different catering corps units

- * An NGO department, which will coordinate all registered volunteers

While Kammenos was at pains to stress that the Armed Forces’ intervention is only temporary, the plans he announced are essentially a framework for establishing martial law on the pretext of the refugee crisis. This in a country that was ruled by a brutal military dictatorship between 1967 and 1974.

Since the crisis began in Greece six years ago,

leading members of the Armed Forces have been increasingly active in public affairs, something that was taboo until recently.

In the run-up to the July referendum on EU austerity called by the Syriza-ANEL government last year, retired General Fragkoulis Fragkos, a former defence minister and one-time head of the Greek army general staff, called for a “loud yes vote”. In 2011, Fragkos was cashiered by then-Prime Minister George Papandreou amid rumours of a coup.

A “yes” vote was also endorsed by a group of 65 retired high-ranking officers, who issued a statement warning that “by choosing isolation, we place the Fatherland and its future in danger.”

The use of the refugee crisis to justify the far-reaching intervention of the armed forces must serve as a warning to the Greek working class and youth.

As opposition mounts to the government’s austerity policies, as seen by the farmers’ blockades and ongoing strike wave, culminating in last Thursday’s general strike, any crisis can and will be used by the ruling elite to impose its agenda by any means necessary, including a military coup.



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