

Refugees face disastrous conditions in Greece

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As European governments move to seal their external borders, tens of thousands of refugees fleeing to Europe are trapped in Greece, leading to a rapidly escalating humanitarian catastrophe. Each day hundreds of refugees risk the dangerous journey from their war-torn countries in the Middle East via Turkey and the Mediterranean to Greece. Most of them are trying to get to Western Europe via the Balkan route. In late February, the Macedonian government closed its border to Greece for the transit of refugees. Since then, the number of refugees in Greece has risen to over 30,000. According to the Greek state television ERT, last Thursday there were some 25,000 refugees on the Greek mainland and nearly 7,000 on the Aegean islands.

Idomeni

Thousands of exhausted people face desperate conditions at the border, in the hope they may soon be able to continue their journey north. Idomeni in the Kilkis region has been transformed from a tiny village of 154 inhabitants into a giant refugee camp. Meanwhile, over 13,000 people are camping in a field near the border fence and the railway tracks. Every day, hundreds more refugees arrive from other regions of Greece.

News station ERT has broadcast shocking images of the conditions faced by the refugees. Families from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries have been living for almost two weeks in temporarily shelters. Nearly half are women and children.

There is a shortage of food and basic consumer goods. The refugees have already consumed all the food and used up the money they had brought with them on their hazardous journey, and are now dependent on local aid organisations. A seventeen-year-old boy who had fled with his younger brother from Afghanistan told ERT that they had spent 8,000 euros for the trip and were now destitute.

Every day, refugees stand in long queues to get sandwiches. Volunteers complain that the food rations are not enough to feed everyone. Long queues also form outside the temporary toilet blocks.

In the Greek daily *To Vima*, the spokeswoman for the MSF refugee mission, Vika Markolefa, warns against the danger of epidemics, "We are very concerned about the health situation. Since there are not enough toilets and showers, many people are forced to go in the fields. When it rains, faeces spreads everywhere. This is particularly tragic for children, who are always playing on the ground. We fear the outbreak of an epidemic that could spread through the water."

During the day, refugees try to keep away the cold by making fires using everything they can get their hands on, including wood, waste, and plastic. On Thursday night, it began to rain without pause. The wet and cold make the already horrible conditions in Idomeni even worse. There are not enough tents to go round. That evening, about 1,600 people were forced to sleep in the open in the rain, as temperatures dipped below 10 degrees Centigrade. The ground has turned into a mud pit. Even the tents no longer offer protection from the wet, so more and more children fall ill.

The new, dry tents being erected over the next few days do not offer enough space for everyone.

About 5,000 more refugees have found a place in temporary shelters that were set up in the former military barracks at the nearby villages of Cherso and Nea Kavala. Two more accommodation facilities are to be set up in the villages of Drosato and Kentriko in the Kilkis region.

Anger and despair are spreading among the refugees. At a protest last Monday, refugees broke through the border fence and were brutally repulsed by the Macedonian military using tear gas. On Thursday morning, there was another demonstration in Idomeni. Protesters sat down on the railway tracks, calling out in English, "Open the borders," and blocked the onward journey of a freight train. Many held up their children and carried homemade posters saying "Help us" and "Freedom."

The Macedonian government opens the border for just a short time each day, permitting only a small number of refugees to enter its territory. According to the Greek newspaper *Ethnos*, only 320 people were able to pass through in the 24 hours before Friday evening. The refugees are at the mercy of the bureaucratic harassment of border guards. During the arduous passport control process many are rejected for lack of correct documents or inaccuracies in names and birth dates.

After Monday's protests, the Macedonian government massively increased its security measures at the border town of Gevgelija. Hundreds of soldiers, police officers and police dogs were mobilised to deter the helpless and unarmed refugees. These forces are being used to extend the border fence, and have deployed additional water cannons to repress any potential protests. Macedonian helicopters also fly over the area. According to *Spiegel Online*, several of the Central and Eastern European Visegrad countries have also sent police officers and advisors to the Macedonian border.

Aegean islands and Piraeus

Amid these disasterous conditions, refugees continue to arrive in Greece every day. In the Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, several ferries and ships remain in port and are being used as emergency shelters.

In recent weeks, the Greek Armed Forces have erected four huge concentration camps, called "hotspots," on the islands of Lesbos, Samos, Chios and Leros. According to recent figures, almost 3,000 refugees are accommodated there. Many have suffered traumatic experiences and are physically weak. A fourteen-month-old baby from Syria died last Wednesday night at the hospital on Lesbos from severe shortness of breath. The infant had arrived that day with its mother after crossing from Turkey to Greece.

Most of the refugees are carried by ships from the Aegean Islands to the port of Piraeus in Athens. On Thursday alone, more than 1,000 refugees arrived in the port, including many families with small children, for whom there is little accommodation. They sit and sleep in the harbour waiting rooms or are driven in buses to the train station, from which they depart to

Athens.

Currently, about 2,000 people are in Piraeus. Some registration tents have now been established.

Doctors are on duty, bringing medicines and undertaking vaccinations to prevent the spread of disease. At least 16 children have been hospitalised with high fever.

Reception centre in Elliniko

In mid-December of last year, the government had begun to set up a camp at the former airport in the Athens suburb of Elliniko. Since the airport was shut down in 2001, the site has mainly been used for sports events such as the 2004 Summer Olympics. In winter, the hockey stadium was opened up for refugees. In February, the Greek army erected about 150 ten-person tents in the baseball stadium. Some 4,000 people are now housed in the two stadiums and at the old airport.

Families sleep on the floor and go to nearby beaches to bathe themselves and their children, to brush their teeth and wash their clothes in the icy sea water. “We have no washrooms,” a young man told ALPHA TV. “There are also no staff to clean the toilets. The stench is unbearable and many people are sick. There are no doctors.”

In Elliniko camp on Thursday, several Afghan refugees protested against the border closures. Women and children sat on the street and held banners reading, “Please open the borders,” “Let us go,” and “European Union: why racism?”

Victoria Square in Athens

Hundreds of refugees who have travelled on from the port of Piraeus to the centre of Athens are stuck on Victoria Square in the north of the city. Afghan families, who are denied the onward journey via the Balkan route, sleep here on the asphalt, scantily wrapped in blankets and sleeping bags. Many children are sick. All around, mountains of garbage have accumulated. In the trees on the middle of the square, refugees have hung cardboard signs demanding, “We want justice,” and ask, “Where are our human rights? We want open borders to Macedonia.”

Volunteers from the charity “Praxis” and the Red Cross deliver medicine, food and water. Every day, residents come to assist the refugees. A pensioner regularly shares out hot soup.

As in Germany and other European countries, a wave of solidarity has engulfed the whole of Greek society, which has itself been plunged into crisis and poverty by the EU’s incessant austerity measures.

In Piraeus and Athens, many volunteers support the care of refugees. From the capital and other parts of Greece, people come with clothing and home-cooked food. The “Network for Social Solidarity” organised a huge collection campaign of necessities for refugees. On its Facebook page, more than 7,800 people had promised help by Friday afternoon.

“While the presence of citizens [at Piraeus port] is impressive, the city authorities are noticeable by their absence,” the newspaper *To Vima* noted on Wednesday. Volunteers complain that the volunteers are not being coordinated, there are hardly any state representatives on site and the daily needs of refugees are not being assessed. The entire task of organisation is almost entirely in the hands of volunteers.

The Greek authorities are seeking to hinder the refugees’ onward journey to the border. An employee of MSF told the British Independent newspaper that travel agencies on the islands of Lesbos and Leros had

been instructed by the authorities not to sell tickets to refugees. The number of ferry or hydrofoil crossings has been cut and some of the buses in Athens, for which refugees had already bought tickets to Idomeni, are not operating.

The appalling conditions in Greece are the direct result of the entire inhumane refugee policy of the European Union, which is based on closing borders and deportations. The government of the pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) is working closely with the German government to conclude a deal with Turkey to keep refugees from coming to Greece.

Like Turkey, Greece plays the role of border guard for Fortress in Europe due to its strategic position on the Mediterranean. The government of Alexis Tsipras has massively deployed the military to coordinate refugee policy, thus strengthening the status of the military apparatus within the state.

The ministry of defence is headed by the right-wing populist Panos Kammenos of the Independent Greeks (ANEL). His deputy, Dimitris Vitsas (Syriza), is now taking over the management of the newly-created “coordination centre for managing the refugee crisis,” in which several ministries are represented.

Amid growing class antagonisms in Greece, the bourgeois parties in Greece are closing ranks. It is significant that Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias has explicitly defended his coalition partners and stated that ANEL politicians should not be called right-wing because they too had shown humanity and solidarity to refugees. ANEL is a right-wing split-off from the conservative New Democracy, and is notorious throughout Greece for its xenophobic chauvinism and connections to the extreme right-wing milieu, particularly in the police and the armed forces.

The pseudo-left Syriza has betrayed all its electoral promises and offered itself to the European institutions as the force that could best implement a comprehensive austerity programme against the working class. Now it is taking the same path in relation to refugee policy. It is participating in the NATO mission in the Aegean and acts as the right hand of the EU in sealing off Europe against thousands of people fleeing war and misery.



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