

Greece's Syriza government detains refugees

Katerina Selin
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The Greek coalition government of Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) and Anel (Independent Greeks) is pulling out all the stops to implement the European Union-Turkey refugee agreement. On March 18, representatives of the EU and Turkey agreed that anyone who reaches Greece via “irregular” routes will be deported to Turkey. Only those who can prove that they will be persecuted in Turkey can obtain asylum in Greece.

More than 52,000 refugees are currently in Greece. Every day, new boats arrive from Turkey. Until now, refugees could more or less move freely. Many were brought after their arrival to five “hot spots” on the Aegean islands, where they were registered and provided for.

The government has now mobilised the police to either clear the camps or turn them into closed detention centres. “Women, children and entire families are not even allowed to leave their barracks. If this isn’t a detention centre, what is it?” a spokesperson for Doctors Without Borders (MSF) working on Lesbos told *Zeit Online*.

The refugees are to be registered as quickly as possible and rushed through an asylum procedure so that most can be deported to Turkey.

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras described the inhumane deal with Turkey as a “positive step”, which would prevent “the worst”. By the time the deportations commence on March 28, his government is calling for the deployment of 4,000 experts in order to speed up the processing of refugees.

Some 1,500 experts from Greece and 2,500 from other countries are to be deployed. The German government has already sent 200 police officers and 100 asylum experts to Greece. In addition, in the Greek ministry for refugee police, two new secretaries-general, one for the camps and another for the asylum procedures, are to be hired.

The rapid and brutal action taken by the Greek government is meeting resistance from the refugees and volunteers. Several humanitarian organisations in the area have decided to temporarily suspend or restrict their work in the camps.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) justified its decision by stating that the camps had become detention centres in the wake of the agreement. “The people are no longer allowed to leave the camp, they are locked in”, said UNHCR spokeswoman Melissa Fleming. “The UNHCR has therefore suspended the transport of refugees to and from the camps.”

MSF also issued a sharp critique of the agreement. “The only goal of the pact is to prevent people from coming to Europe. Their rights or how they are dealt with play a subordinate role”, stated Aurélie Ponthieu, an expert on flight and migration at MSF.

Ponthieu accused the EU of deliberately provoking a humanitarian crisis. “Europe seems to hope that it can prevent refugees from coming by producing another humanitarian crisis in Greece”, Ponthieu said. “This is short-sighted and inhumane.”

MSF suspended its work at Moria, the hotspot on Lesbos, and at other locations. “We will not allow our assistance to be exploited for mass deportations”, stated Marie Elisabeth Ingres, the country coordinator for MSF in Greece. “We refuse to be part of a system which disregards the humanitarian requirements or protection requirements of the asylum seekers or migrants. Volunteers could not be permitted to become complicit in this system.”

Idomeni

The 13,000 refugees in the Idomeni camp on the Greek-Macedonian border are outraged and angry about the new agreement. Many have been living there under catastrophic conditions for three weeks and are not allowed to travel any further.

In an act of desperation, two men dowsed themselves in petrol and set themselves on fire on Tuesday. Both were

saved and taken to hospital.

On Monday, 2,000 people occupied the railway tracks and prevented freight trains from travelling. “If you won’t give us any human rights, then at least give us the rights you give to animals”, they shouted and called for a hunger strike. “No food, no water, until you open the borders.”

Several refugees began a hunger strike to draw attention to their helpless situation. “If we cannot leave here, then we all want to die here”, some allegedly told reporters. They refused to accept an evening meal and urged volunteers not to distribute any more meals. The atmosphere is increasingly tense. Greek police cars have been stationed next to the camp to intervene in conflicts as quickly as possible.

Under these conditions, the UNHCR has withdrawn some of its workers from Idomeni. “The people here are hurting themselves out of utter desperation”, a UNHCR spokesman told DPA. Other humanitarian organisations have also left Idomeni so as to avoid conflicts with refugees, and volunteers distributed no meals on Tuesday, apart from milk for babies.

Aegean islands

Police began to clear the Moria camp on Lesbos on Monday afternoon. The detention camp was established last summer and consists of several large warm tents, and numerous smaller tents pitched on the bare ground between olive trees.

Dirt and rubbish cover the ground; sanitary conditions were already described as catastrophic in several reports from 2015. After arriving in Lesbos, refugees are separated according to their origin. Refugees from Syria were previously brought to the Kara-Tepe camp, while those from other nations came to Moria.

A volunteer with the “Better Days for Moria” organisation noted in a column for *Handelsblatt* how tense the atmosphere is in the camp. He reported that the police collected 150 Pakistanis and brought them to a police camp, where they were greeted by armed police. Since Pakistanis are mostly classified as economic migrants in Greece, they had virtually no chance of asylum.

Refugees from North Africa are also being separated directly after their arrival on Lesbos and “brought to the

Samos police station, where they must wait in cells to be transported to detention centres on the mainland. The right to claim asylum is denied them from the outset”, an article from MSF states.

Volunteers describe chaotic scenes in the camps. Refugees are hardly being informed about their rights or the conditions of the EU-Turkey agreement and fear deportation to Turkey.

The Greek organisation “Lesbos Solidarity” condemned the government’s actions in a press release and the “barbaric measures of the EU-Turkey deal.” They run the open and self-organised Pikpa camp, which mainly supports people who are sick or who have special needs. It is now to be evacuated.

The volunteers at Pikpa are resisting attempts to criminalise solidarity groups and volunteer initiatives, and called for two demonstrations yesterday and tomorrow.

Scandalous conditions also exist in the Vial closed detention camp on the island of Chios. In a video shot through the camp fence, a volunteer described how the elderly and children are exposed to the cold without any protection or blankets. “We are in prison here in Greece”, he said. “We want out.”

At Vial, protests broke out during food distribution on Tuesday and Wednesday. Refugees demanded in unison to be let out. The police intervened and oversaw the food distribution.

Around 40 percent of all refugees in Greece are children. The new agreement will affect them worst of all. The United Nations children’s charity UNICEF has already sounded the alarm, warning that the agreement will not take account of the “humanitarian needs of the 19,000 refugee and migrant children” in Greece, and force families to choose even more dangerous travel routes.



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