Syriza government oversees clampdown on refugee shelters in Greece

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Greece's Syriza government has stepped up its repression of refugees and asylum seekers. In the early hours of July 27, riot police raided three separate squats in the city of Thessaloniki, where anarchist groups had set up shelters for refugee families stranded in Greece.

Seventy-four people were taken into custody, with 64 of them reportedly foreign activists, mostly from Europe. Most were charged with "disruption of household peace" and "damage to property."

The majority of the activists arrested were part of the "No Borders" group, which had held a camp in Thessaloniki between July 14 and 24, attended by 1,500 activists from all over Europe.

The three squats were at the city's old Alexander the Great Orphanage in the Toumpa District, at the Mandalideion building, which was the old site of the Aristoteleian University's school of journalism and the Hurryia Community squat on Karolou Ntil Street in the city centre.

Speaking to the Greek edition of VICE News, a resident living close to the orphanage squat said: "Between 3 and 4 a.m. two riot police vans arrived outside the building and threw 10 stun grenades and tear gas. At that moment there were more than 10 children inside, mothers and chaperones from student organisations in the city. Not able to breathe they were shouting for help."

Activists at the Hurryia Community squat uploaded a 37-second video on their Facebook page, in which their voices can be heard pleading with police to give them more time to speak with their lawyer. A police officer's voice is then heard stating that the legal owner wanted them out, at which point chemicals are seen being sprayed through the metal bars on the door, which had been barricaded by the activists.

Shortly after the orphanage squat was cleared, bulldozers arrived to demolish the building. According to reports, under the rubble there were large amounts of medicines, food and other supplies, as well as refugees' possessions. Five years ago, the building had been given by the state to the Greek Orthodox Church, which is planning to build a private care home for people with chronic illnesses.

The following week, five activists from the orphanage squat were taken to court where they received 10-month suspended sentences and fines of €2,000 each. In a separate trial, six activists from the university squat each received four-month suspended sentences.

The trial of 60 activists from the Hurriya squat was postponed until January next year due to a lack of interpreters.

Following the raids, refugees were transported to the city's port to be relocated to different migrant detention centres.

According to recent figures there are over 57,000 migrants and refugees currently stranded in Greece. A pact between Turkey and the European Union (EU) adopted in Brussels on March 18 stipulates that Turkey take back all refugees who come across the Aegean to Greece.

As a result of the dirty deal with Turkey, refugee registration centres on the Greek islands were transformed into internment camps. More than 8,500 refugees are currently confined to the camps, described as "hot spots", where living conditions are notoriously bad.

The same week the police operation took place, a report was published by the Health Ministry's Centre for the Control of and Prevention of Diseases (KEELPNO). This was based on inspections carried out in 16 reception centres in the Region of Central Macedonia during the first week of July.

The report states, "Refugees are housed in disused old industrial warehouses. Hundreds of people are cramped in a single space without adequate ventilation, an accumulation of litter and sewage, bad hygiene conditions

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and a lack of access to drinking water and variable quantity and quality of food."

The report specifically cited the site of the old Karamanlis tannery where the water contains high concentrations of heavy metals, while the warehouse roof contains half-ruined asbestos sheets that contaminate the air with fibres.

It warned of the wider public health implications of such conditions, which "increase the possibility of food borne and water borne epidemics as well as those transmitted by agents (mosquitoes)."

Speaking to Syriza's Sto Kokkino radio station, KEELPNO's vice-president Alexis Benos stated, "these centres were created with the rationale that refugees would be housed there for a few days or months. These centres should be shut down urgently and refugees should be gradually integrated into society."

The health agency's warnings were tragically confirmed last week when eight young refugees aged between two and 18 contracted hepatitis at the Nea Kavala reception centre in Northern Greece.

Speaking to the Athens News Agency, Achilleas Kalemkeridis, a representative of the hospital employees' union said, "This is a serious situation, because in 2015, the recorded hepatitis A cases were 62 while [in 2016] they've reached eight in just 10 days."

The inhumane treatment of refugees in Greece is entirely in line with the wider policy of the EU, which seeks to fortify its borders against refugees attempting to flee wars fuelled by imperialist intrigues in the wider region. As the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle noted, "The conditions in Greek camps, like those on the islands of Idomeni and Lesbos, have acted as a deterrent. The prospect of being sent from those camps back to Turkey has clearly discouraged many refugees from making the expensive and dangerous crossing."

While the raids on the three squats were justified on the pretext of complaints filed by the legal property owners, the real aim was the enforcement of the government's reactionary refugee policy.

The raids were preceded by a series of standoffs between the "No Border" group and the city's authorities after activists set up their camp headquarters in the Aristotle University's Law Faculty.

"This is essentially an occupation that is the definition of iniquity," stated Yiannis Boutaris, Mayor of Thessaloniki. "I believe that the state should intervene. Laws should be implemented; otherwise we will permanently live in a state of lawlessness." Boutaris, nominally an independent, was a founding member, in 2009, of the pro-capitalist Drassi party.

According to *Kathimerini*, municipal authorities held an emergency meeting following an attack on Thessaloniki City Hall on July 21 by 150 "No Border" activists, who reportedly "caused damage to equipment, threw paint and sprayed slogans, such as 'No Border, Open the borders, blood on your hands,' across walls."

The raids must be viewed within the context of reports of an increase in the flow of refugees and migrants into Greece, following the attempted coup in Turkey on July 15. According to the Save the Children charity, "arrivals to the [Greek] islands [from Turkey] during the first 14 days of August increased by 144 per cent compared to the first 14 days of July."

The failed coup has called into question the EU's reactionary refugees deal with Turkey. Under the agreement, refugees in Europe were to be forcibly removed to Turkey and held in camps. In exchange, Turkish citizens were promised visa-free travel in the EU's passport free Schengen Zone.

The European Commission is refusing to honour this agreement unless Turkish President Erdogan repeals anti-terror laws he has put in place to clamp down on his opponents following the coup. In response, the Turkish government is threatening to back out of the deal.

After overturning the mass rejection of the EU's austerity package by Greek workers in the referendum of July 2015, and proceeding to sign a third devastating cuts package with the EU, the Syriza-led government now exclusively relies on repressive methods in order to enforce the EU's reactionary austerity agenda and clamp down on refugees.

This has caused a crisis within Syriza itself, as the pseudo-left party attempts to maintain a left-wing façade. While the Citizens' Protection Minister and Syriza MP Nikos Toskas justified the closure of the shelters, stating, "no one can do what he wants," the party's press office released a statement condemning the operation. It stated, "We are against the police operation to clear squats in Thessaloniki. The criminalisation of solidarity initiatives requires the use of practices that have nothing to do with the values and principles of the Left."

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