

# Lesbos fire highlights tragic situation of refugees in Greece

John Vassilopoulos  
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Tensions reached the boiling point on the Greek island of Lesbos on Monday, September 19, after the refugee camp at the village of Moria was set alight.

Around 60 percent of the camp was destroyed, including 50 large sleeping tents, three containers as well as clothing supplies. Two separate fires also broke out in the surrounding area, laying waste to nearly four acres of land containing olive trees adjacent to the camp.

The sequence of events that led to the fires began earlier in the day when rumours circulated around the camp of imminent mass deportations to Turkey. This led to riots breaking out, during which around 300 refugees attempted to march through the town. They were stopped by large numbers of police who blocked their way, forcing them back to the camp where fresh unrest broke out—including scuffles between different ethnic groups—culminating in the torching of the camp.

According to the Greek edition of the *Huffington Post*, when the fire broke out in the camp, “hundreds of refugees and migrants ran away towards different directions on the island. At the same time mothers with babies in their arms, old people, men and children were running to safety—some without even shoes on. By around midnight the fire had been put out.”

Nine people of varying nationalities living at the camp were arrested the following day on suspicion of starting the fires.

While the camp’s catering and medical facilities had been restored by Thursday, 300 small tents had yet to be fully set up and it was still unclear at that time whether the approximately 4,500 detainees resident before the fire had returned. Many of them are still sleeping rough nearly a week later.

There are currently nearly 14,000 people being detained in refugee camps on Greek islands in the

Aegean, while existing infrastructure is only adequate for around 7,500 people. In Lesbos alone, which is the entry point of around 50-60 percent of all refugees arriving into Greece from Turkey, there are 5,700 stranded refugees while the island’s capacity is for only 3,500. This is more than double the number only a few months ago due to an increase in the flow of refugees coming into Greece from Turkey.

This is only one consequence of the flood of refugees created by the predatory wars of the US and European powers. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 300,000 refugees and migrants had crossed the Mediterranean, mainly to Italy and Greece, by September. This was 42 percent lower than the 520,000 registered sea arrivals during the first nine months of 2015. However, the numbers of dead or missing was 3,211, “only 15 per cent lower than the total number of casualties for the whole of 2015 (3,771)”—making this year potentially the deadliest ever.

A report published by Doctors of the World, an NGO operating at the Moria refugee camp, states that Lesbos saw a 28 percent surge in the number of arrivals between July and August. The camp, according to the report, is ill-equipped to deal with this surge and there are real risks to public health due to overcrowding, the lack of adequate washing and toilet facilities as well as ongoing problems with the sewage facilities at the camp.

“We have no water for showers and sometimes we have to go to the field in order to use the bathroom because the smell and hygiene of the toilets are horrendous,” a Nigerian inmate told *Deutsche Welle*. Another inmate from Palestine was quoted by Greek daily *Kathimerini* stating, “The situation is dramatic, there are sick people [at the camp] and there are no

doctors to treat them. Recently there was a scuffle and we were pleading for an ambulance to be called.”

This situation is a direct consequence of the EU’s policy on the refugee crisis, which the Syriza-led government is implementing.

In March an agreement between the EU and Turkey stipulates that Turkey takes back all refugees who come across the Aegean to Greece. As a result, refugee camps in Greece, known as “hotspots,” are essentially internment camps of people most of whom are destined to be deported back to Turkey after their cases have been assessed in what is an extremely slow process.

*Kathimerini* cited the example of Asia and her sister-in-law Famida who reached the island of Chios in March with their 11 children. “They tell us that we might not be interviewed for another nine months,” stated Asia, while Famida told the paper, “We can no longer live in the hotspot, my children are frightened with all the fighting and the noise.”

Tensions are also stoked between the different ethnic groups by the fact that the outcome of the asylum process is influenced by the applicant’s ethnic origin. According to the *Huffington Post*, “Syrians are viewed as ‘lucky’ in the great race for asylum, whereas Afghans, Pakistanis, Iraqis and others have a harder time convincing authorities they’re at risk.”

This has fuelled outbreaks of inter-ethnic conflict at the Moria camp, which are often put down by the Greek riot police that has constant presence at the camp.

Aid agencies have long warned about the simmering tensions at the Moria camp, describing it as “a ticking time-bomb.”

“If nothing changes, this is going to happen again and again and again,” Benjamin Anoufa, an IRC field coordinator, told the *Huffington Post*. “We are talking about people who fled war, surely at night, walked at night to cross borders, who stayed in Turkey four to five years. And now, they arrive into circumstances like this.”

The situation at the Moria camp has also stoked tensions among sections of the local population, partly due to the increase in petty theft, including of livestock and vegetables from peoples’ gardens as a result of the economic desperation of the migrant and refugee population, many of whom are sleeping outside the hotspot due to overcrowding. There are also concerns

about the ongoing problems with the camp’s sewage system, given that sewage has reportedly been leaking in the local river and is ending up in the sea.

On the day the fire broke out there was a march by around 600 residents of Moria through Mytilini, the capital of Lesbos. The protest included a small, but vocal contingent of the fascist Golden Dawn, who were chanting nationalistic and anti-immigrant slogans. During the march four women NGO activists who were passers-by were attacked and one of them had to be hospitalised. Separate attacks and threats of violence by locals against refugees and migrants have been reported, including a group of migrants outside the Moria hotspot being threatened with a shotgun by an 84 year-old man.

One day before the fire broke out, Golden Dawn activists were present at the weekly ceremony in downtown Mytilini that commemorates Lesbos’ independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, which consists of the lowering of the flag and singing of the national anthem by an armed forces detachment.

Golden Dawn was there on the pretext of protesting the cancellation of the ceremony the week before, due to security concerns given that the ceremony would have coincided with a protest by refugees outside the local customs office. Their presence was described by *emprosnet.gr*, a local Lesbos news web site, as “a contrived display of national patriotism with xenophobic characteristics, which blatantly implies that the refugees and migrants in Lesbos are threatening to alter our national identity.”

If Golden Dawn is able to channel local anger into the scapegoating of migrants, this is primarily down to the Syriza government. It is Syriza whose enforcement of the EU’s reactionary refugee policy has pitted different groups of migrants against each other while stoking tensions among the local population who face savage austerity measures that are also imposed at the behest of the EU.



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