

# Brutal conditions at Greek refugee camps condemned

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There are currently over 17,000 refugees held in appalling conditions on the Greek islands of Chios, Samos, Lesbos, Kos and Leros. They are caged in detention centres that have the capacity for only 6,000 people.

The most notorious of these is the Moria camp on Lesbos, recently described by the BBC as “the worst refugee camp in the world.” With a capacity of just over 3,000, the camp’s inmates total three times that number, with a third of them children.

The appalling conditions are a direct consequence of the filthy deal cut between the European Union (EU), Turkey and the Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government in March 2016. Alexis Tsipras’ pro-austerity government became an enthusiastic jailor for the EU, presiding over what are essentially concentration camps. The deal stipulates that all refugees crossing into Greece from Turkey be interned until their case is processed, with the plan that they are ultimately deported back to Turkey.

According to figures from the UN Refugee Agency, nearly 30,000 refugees, most of them women and children, crossed the Aegean from Turkey into Greece in 2017. So far this year, nearly 23,500 have made the same journey, with Lesbos receiving over half of them. Most of those arriving are from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, all of them war-torn countries destroyed by US and EU-backed conflicts.

Describing living at the camp as “a life of lines,” a recent *New York Times* article outlines a typical day for Afghan farmer Rahmuddin Ashrafi. Rahmuddin arrived at the camp in June with his wife and three children.

“The family’s typical day begins at 4 a.m. when Mr. Ashrafi joins a line for water and bread that is usually served four hours later at 8 a.m. At around 9:30 a.m., he joins the line again for lunch, which tends to arrive after another four hours of waiting. Two hours later, he joins another four-hour line for dinner. On the days when he needs to line up for official paperwork, or to visit the doctor—his three-year-old daughter was recently hospitalized with appendicitis—he sometimes has to skip meals altogether or rely on leftovers from other Afghans.”

“Before, I thought that Greece would be one of the best places to live,” Ashrafi told the newspaper. “Now I feel it would have been better to drown while crossing the sea.”

Referring to the sanitary conditions at Moria, a joint statement by 19 NGOs declared, “The sewage system does not work and filthy toilet water reaches the tents and mattresses where children sleep. This, despite funds for sewage system improvement having been approved for some time.”

In a September blog post on Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Liz Clark, a British doctor volunteer on Lesbos, wrote that “there are between 62-70 people for every toilet and 84 people for every shower. ... This is respectively twice and three times more than the international minimum standards in a humanitarian emergency.”

She added, “Those seeking medical treatment have to provide an appointment slip, or somehow prove their need to see a healthcare provider to the police officers that control entry to the enclosure where the clinic is situated.”

The appalling conditions, along with the painfully slow and complicated asylum process—which few of the refugees fully understand—places extreme psychological pressure on people already traumatised as victims and witnesses of atrocities in their home countries.

In an open letter published on MSF’s website in September, Dr. Alessandro Barberio, a psychiatrist working at the MSF Lesbos Project, wrote: “In all of my years of medical practice, I have never witnessed such overwhelming numbers of people suffering from serious mental health conditions, as I am witnessing now amongst refugees on the island of Lesbos. The vast majority of people I see are presenting with psychotic symptoms, suicidal thoughts—even attempts at suicide—and are confused. Many are unable to meet or perform even their most basic everyday functions, such as sleeping, eating well, maintaining personal hygiene, and communicating.”

Incidents of violence between inmates, including sexual violence against women, are widespread at Moria, as are suicide attempts and acts of self-harm, including among

children.

Since 2015, some €1.6 billion was allocated by the EU, supposedly to tackle Greece's refugee crisis. This would have amounted by 2017 to €7,000 per refugee. According to a *Guardian* report last month, "Of the €561m of long-term funding allocated by the European commission, only €153m has so far been disbursed."

Allegations of corruption regarding the funds that have been released are surfacing.

At the centre of these is Defence Minister Panos Kammenos, who is leader of the far-right Independent Greeks, Syriza's junior coalition partner. According to material published in the Greek daily *Fileleftheros*, it is alleged that companies with close ties to Kammenos routinely inflated charges for services at the Moria camp, ranging from catering to plumbing. Kammenos responded by filing a defamation action against three of the newspaper's journalists, which resulted in them spending one night in custody. Following the report, the EU's anti-fraud agency launched an investigation.

Kammenos' authoritarian actions provoked an outcry in Greece and internationally regarding press freedoms in the country.

The response of the Syriza government to this humanitarian catastrophe is to brutally crack down on all opposition. In a letter to the mayor of Lesbos last month, Immigration Minister Dimitris Vitsas boasted that the government had increased the police presence inside the facility.

The director of Moria is former army brigadier Yiannis Balpakakis, who was on a Syriza candidate list for election in Lesbos as recently as 2014.

Speaking last month to *Sto Kokkino*, a radio station owned by Syriza, Balpakakis—in the teeth of all evidence—dismissed reports about the appalling conditions. He claimed Moria's toilets and facilities are clean while food was distributed in 45 minutes, with queues only forming because "many just go and sit in the queue to chat, because they have nothing else to do." He said, "Many NGOs, which are now planning ahead for 2019 and are trying to find donors, are creating a completely negative situation so that they can be seen as saviours and get funding."

Balpakakis' provocative comments should be seen in the wider context of the criminalisation of aid workers by the Syriza government, in collusion with the EU whose anti-immigration diktats it is implementing. Last month 30 members of the Emergency Response Centre International (ERCI) were charged with people-trafficking offences, including former Olympic Gold medallist Sara Mardini. In 2015 Mardini saved 18 refugees by swimming their waterlogged dingy to the shores of Lesbos. Her lawyer,

Haris Petsalmikos, stated, "The accusations are more about criminalizing humanitarian action. Sara wasn't even here when these alleged crimes took place but as charges they are serious, perhaps the most serious any aid worker has ever faced."

The intimidation of aid workers, especially those who carry out rescue patrols in the Aegean, is a central plank of the EU's anti-immigration policy. By allowing refugees to drown in the sea, the EU seeks to deter people fleeing war-torn countries from attempting the journey to Greece.

October 3 marked five years since the tragedy which saw 369 migrants lose their lives, when the boat they were travelling in sank off the coast of the island of Lampedusa. Since then thousands more have drowned in the Mediterranean, with over 1,000 perishing already this year.

Moria's refugees suffer from policies intended to make life as harsh as possible, in order to deter people from attempting to reach Greece. A British official representing the European Commission admitted as much at a private meeting of Greek, EU and NGO officials at the start of last month. According to the *New York Times*, the official "suggested keeping standards low at Moria in order to deter future migration to Greece."

Anti-immigrant policies are central to the ruling elite's effort to divert popular anger against the austerity policies presided over by successive Greek governments—and substantially worsened by Syriza—at the behest of the EU to create a situation where the local population and refugees are competing for ever scarcer resources.

This was underscored recently following recent heavy rainfall in Lesbos, when the army withdrew an initial offer to shelter 1,200 Moria inmates. According to *Kathemerini*, the offer was withdrawn because the authorities did not want to be seen giving priority to refugees at the expense of the local population.



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