

Greece: Syriza government mobilises riot police against refugees

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Riot police attacked refugees, including women and children, with tear gas and stun grenades over three days last week in the village of Diavata, 60 kilometres south of the Greek-Macedonian border. The attack by police was brutal, with fires started by exploding stun grenades.

Around 900 refugees, mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, set up a makeshift camp with around 100 tents in Diavata last Thursday, next to the official refugee camp in the village. This followed a false report on social media claiming that the border was now open for refugees to cross and continue their onward journey into Northern Europe. By Sunday, the area had been cleared of the 60 or so remaining migrants, who were sent back to the camps in which they were being held. Police detained those who could not produce valid ID.

Dozens of refugees demanding “open the borders” also occupied Larissa Station—Athens’ central railway station—last Friday, asking to be transported to the border. This resulted in the cancellation of scheduled intercity trains and suburban rail services. The station was cleared by the afternoon.

The source of the social media post, according to a news report on Greek TV station Ant1, was a supposed NGO, “Caravan of Hope.” It claimed that Greece was to open the border with North Macedonia on April 5 at noon. The same report showed footage of a refugee’s mobile phone containing the same social media message in Arabic.

On Monday, three men who were arrested on Saturday appeared in court in Thessaloniki. A Palestinian, aged 28, a Syrian, 32, and an Iraqi, 28, were charged with resisting arrest and sentenced to 12 months in prison. All three told the court they were misled, with the Palestinian man stating, “We were told that the Red Cross and other NGOs would take us out

[of the country]. I believe we were fooled.”

Some reports made unsubstantiated claims that behind the hoax were networks of traffickers who have a vested interest in the border being opened. But the lie seems more likely to have been a right-wing initiative aimed at stoking tensions between Greece and Macedonia.

Greece’s land border with Macedonia has been closed to refugees since early 2016. This was around the same time that the European Union and the pseudo-left Syriza government cut their rotten deal with Turkey, which stipulates that all refugees crossing into Greece from Turkey will be interned there until their case is processed and they are ultimately deported back to Turkey.

Whatever the source of the false report, it served to highlight the desperation of the more than 70,000 refugees who are being detained in overcrowded camps on Greece’s mainland and islands.

Dealing with the massive backlog of asylum claims involves processes that few refugees understand, and has pushed refugees—many already traumatised from the brutality of the wars they have fled—to breaking point. Some are being forced to wait for years in hellhole camps before they are even formally interviewed regarding their asylum claim. Speaking to the Associated Press at Diavata, Shapour Karimi, 43, an Iranian and father of one, said, “I arrived a year and a half ago and they have set my (asylum application) interview for December 2021.” He added, “What will I do all this time? A solution must be found so we can depart.”

One of the asylum seekers present at the Diavata camp before the riot police attacked spoke to the BBC. Bilal Jaf, a 25-year-old Kurdish migrant from Iraq, said, “We’re afraid that the police will try to evacuate

our makeshift camp... I have been living in Greece for 11 months, waiting for my asylum request to be examined. I don't know for how long I should wait for that."

In an interview on Friday on state radio ERA 1, the Syriza-led government's Migration Policy Minister Dimitris Vitsas praised the police's conduct in Diavata, stating, "They are doing their job in the best possible way."

In a separate Open TV interview, Vitsas displayed the government's callous contempt for the plight of refugees, declaring that a refugee's "first obligation is to respect the laws of the state, which one could say is hosting him. This must be understood."

He slandered the refugees at Diavata, stating that some of them "will want to act tough and that as time goes on and they can't get what they want they will start to do other things such as attacking the police. I call on them not to have their kids in front of them because this is not very brave."

Syriza Public Order Minister Olga Gerovassili declared that "the borders for another country will not open" and warned refugees "mustn't risk the privileges that they have and they shouldn't use their children as human shields because some traffickers gave them false hopes."

Syriza took power in January 2015 and played a pivotal role in continuing and deepening the austerity that has pauperised millions of Greeks. It has served as a reliable partner of NATO, with Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras promoting Greece under its governance as a force for stability "in the Balkans as well as in the unstable region of Southeastern Europe."

Its crackdown on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants is of a piece with its overall bourgeois, pro-imperialist agenda.

There is little to distinguish the comments of its ministers from the fascistic anti-immigrant rhetoric espoused by far-right forces throughout Europe and internationally. As far-right politics are being ever more openly adopted by the ruling elites of Europe, and fascistic movements encouraged, Syriza is only too happy to lend its services to this effort. In enforcing the EU's anti-immigrant policy on the continent's southern border, Syriza willingly acts as the jailer of all refugees stranded within its country's borders.

As for the "hosting" to which Vitsas refers, this is a

lie contradicted by numerous reports on the atrocious conditions facing refugees in what are essentially concentration camps run by Greece. The Diavata camp is one of three temporary facilities on the Greek mainland, with an official capacity for 936 people. In January, the infomigrants web site reported on the horrific conditions at the camp, with many detainees struggling to survive in freezing conditions during a cold snap.

The report noted, "The camp is full to capacity, with around 800 registered asylum seekers. On top of these, there are between 500 and 650 people living at the site without having been registered by migration authorities." It cited the comments of Mike Bonke, the country director of the Arbeiter Samariter Bund, an NGO providing support services to Diavata: "Most of them have built their own makeshift shelters and tents, which are not providing them with the protection needed... They have no (safe) heating, washing and sanitation and cooking facilities."

In a statement last month, Emmanuel Goué, head of the Doctors Without Borders mission, said, "Greece has become a dumping ground for the men, women, and children that the European Union has failed to protect." He added, "What was once touted as a 'refugee emergency' has given way to inexcusable levels of human suffering across the Greek islands and on mainland Greece. The EU and Greek authorities continue to rob vulnerable people of their dignity and health, seemingly in an effort to deter others from coming. This policy is cruel, inhumane, and cynical, and it needs to end."

The author recommends:

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