Coronavirus transforms Greek refugee camps into death camps

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The spread of the coronavirus around the world is continuing to accelerate. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), Europe is now the worst affected part of the world by the disease. But the people living in refugee camps on the Greek islands have been left to fend for themselves. The overcrowded internment camps on Lesbos, Chios, Samos, and Kos will thus quickly be transformed into death camps.

The aid organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned in a March 12 statement about the danger of an uncontrollable spread of coronavirus throughout the camp after a resident on Lesbos was diagnosed with COVID-19.

"It would be impossible to suppress an outbreak in a camp with conditions like those on Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros, or Kos," stated Hilde Vochten, medical coordinator for MSF in Greece. "We have yet to receive a credible emergency plan that would allow the people living there to be protected and treated."

The situation got worse on Monday. In the Moria camp on Lesbos, a fire broke out, claiming the life of a six-year-old girl. The fire brigade was unable to reach the fire immediately, resulting in the fire continuing to burn for an hour due to the closeness of the containers used as living quarters.

The intolerable hygienic conditions in the internment camps prevent even the most basic protective measures from being adopted. In the Moria camp, which the European Union (EU) established for 3,000 people to live in while their asylum applications were processed, 20,000 people are vegetating without any escape route if the coronavirus breaks out.

"In some parts of the Moria camp on Lesbos, there is just one water tap for 1,300 people, and no soap is available," said Vochten. Five- and six-person families barely have three square metres of space. There are no permanent structures for accommodation, and most refugees spend the night under plastic sheeting.

For the refugees there "it is simply impossible to follow the recommended measures by washing their hands regularly and maintaining distance from others," continued Vochten. But it's not only that: There is absolutely no functioning healthcare system in the camp, never mind a plan to identify, treat, and isolate infected people.

Doctors Without Borders is therefore demanding the immediate evacuation of the Greek camps. Florian Westphal, operational head of Doctors Without Borders in Germany, said, "It was already irresponsible to allow asylum seekers to live under such conditions as part of the European policy of deterrence. But it is now bordering on an act of criminality if nothing is done to protect them."

But precisely the opposite is taking place. The Greek healthcare system, which was devastated by EU-imposed austerity, is in no position to provide sufficient tests to identify those infected, never mind treat COVID-19 cases. In this situation, the refugees are being scapegoated and exposed to draconian police measures that are unprecedented since the downfall of the Greek military junta.

Conditions resemble warfare

Immediately after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced he would allow refugees to travel on to Europe in late February, the Greek government declared it would suspend the right to asylum. This represents a gross breach of the Geneva Convention on Refugees and a violation of the European Union's founding charter.

The EU fully backs this ruthless and illegal approach. EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen praised Greece as "our European shield." According to the Greek authorities, 43,000 refugees have been pushed back across the border without being able to exercise their right, guaranteed under the Geneva Convention on Refugees, to file a claim for asylum. Around 300 refugees who managed to cross the border were arrested by the Greek police and transported back to Turkey.

Conditions resembling a war zone predominate at the Kastanies and Pazarkule border crossings. Greek security forces target refugees with tear gas, flash grenades, rubber bullets, and even sometimes live ammunition. Around 10,000 people continue to huddle in makeshift tents in no-man's-land without any provisions. Since the Turkish police refuses to let them back into Turkey, they are left totally exposed to violence.

At least seven people have been seriously injured due to shots

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fired by Greek snipers. Three refugees, Muhammad al-Arab, Muhamad Gulzar, and Mohammed Yaarub were shot and killed, according to independent media reports.

Volkan Pirincci, operational coordinator of the aid organisation Support to Life (STL), told Evangelische Pressedienst, “I've never seen a scenario worse than this. The refugees are in great danger of losing their lives.” Detained refugees have been forced to undress down to their underwear. Telephones, money, and jewelry were confiscated before they were forced back over the border.

These illegal pushbacks have been carried out by the Greek police for years, but they have now reached a qualitatively new level. The *Monitor* television show on German public broadcaster ARD reported on secure refugee camps where detained refugees were immediately brought before a judge and charged with illegal border crossing.

Margaritis Petritzikis from the UN Refugee Agency told *Monitor* that many refugees are being sentenced to multi-year prison terms in rushed legal proceedings. “This is a new practice, and we are very concerned because families are being separated. For example, the father may get sentenced to three years in prison while the mother and child are sent to a refugee camp.”

Petritzikis estimated that some 50 such trials have taken place with a typical prison sentence of four years. The criminal prosecution of asylum seekers and refugees for illegally crossing borders is explicitly prohibited by the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

Additionally, an investigation by the *New York Times* revealed the existence of secret prisons on the Turkish-Greek border, run by the Greek government. The Syrian Somar al-Hussein told the *Times* that he was brought to a camp and confined to a room with dozens of other refugees. His phone was confiscated. “We were like animals for the Greek guards. The refugees were not provided with any provisions before being forced across the Evros River back to Turkey the following day.

The hellish conditions on Lesbos

The situation on the island of Lesbos is particularly perilous. Unhindered by the police, gangs of fascist thugs have taken over control of parts of the island. They have established roadblocks and attack all occupants of cars identified as non-Greeks. Reception centres belonging to the UN Refugee Agency, such as the One Happy Family centre, have been burned down by right-wing thugs.

The police joined in the witch-hunting of refugees, forcing them into the port of Mytilini, the main town on the island. Some 500 refugees are crammed together there in inhumane and humiliating conditions on the cargo deck of a warship. They are set to be taken to a secure camp on the Greek mainland before swiftly being deported to Turkey without ever receiving the chance to file a claim for asylum.

The aid organisation Human Rights Watch described this practice as an “arbitrary denial of freedom.” “The refusal to grant the people in custody the opportunity to apply for asylum and the explicit threat to send them back to their persecutors stand in stark contrast to the legal obligations to which Greece has committed and the values and principles it claims to stand for,” stated Bill Frelick, director of refugee and migration law at HRW. The Greek authorities subsequently refused to grant HRW workers access to the refugees in Mytilini.

Development Minister Adonis Georgiadis, who is also deputy leader of the governing New Democracy, told *Die Zeit* in an interview, “The refugees will be permanently held in the secure camps. “Anyone who thinks they can come through Greece to get to Europe is making a big mistake. Nobody will make it to Europe through Greece.”

The refugees are therefore being detained indefinitely in these camps at the behest of the EU, without ever being charged, having access to legal representation or applying for asylum.

But even those lucky enough to secure refugee status face further hurdles. Immigration Minister Notis Mitarkis declared his intention to cut all benefits paid to asylum seekers and leave them to survive with nothing. Mitarkis told *Sky*, “Our goal is to ensure that those who are entitled to asylum get it within two or three months, then cut all welfare benefits and accommodation, because these measures are encouraging people to come into the country and exploit them.”

The police repression against refugees is being accompanied by attacks on refugee aid organizations. The Greek government adopted a measure in February to regulate aid organisations, which Greek politicians describe as “criminal parasites.”

The attacks on refugees are also being supported by the pseudo-left opposition. Former Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras told an interview with Mega-TV that the government acted correctly by closing the border. Tsipras also closed the Greek-Turkish border during 2015-16, but spoke about it less in public than his right-wing successor.

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