

Lesbos refugee-camp blaze leaves 13,000 without shelter

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10 September 2020

A massive blaze has largely destroyed the Moria migrant camp. Located on the eastern Aegean island of Lesbos/Lesvos, the camp was the largest within the European Union. According to social media accounts, the fire broke out some time before midnight Tuesday.

Around 13,000 men, women and children have been left without accommodation, food, and drink. The detainees held there were forced to flee for their lives as multiple fires spread. No fatalities have been reported, but people are suffering from injuries due to smoke exposure.

On Wednesday night a second fire broke out in a part of the camp not burned in the first blaze, with Associated Press reporting it destroyed "the greater part of what was left and sending thousands more streaming out of the facility."

The "Moria Reception & Identification Centre" was opened in 2013 by the Conservative New Democracy (ND) government and continued to grow under the 2015-2019 pseudo-left Syriza government. Refugees and asylum seekers are held under intolerable conditions, pending deportation.

Twenty five firefighters with 10 engines arrived after some time, and spent hours trying to extinguish the fire. The Refugee aid group Stand By Me Lesbos reported that one of many calls from camp detainees to their partner groups included one terrified person asking, "Where is the police, where is the fire brigade, where is anyone? We are burning, our tents are burning. Everything is burning. We came here to burn to death. All is on fire."

Lesbos is located just off the Turkish coast. In 2015-16, refugees arrived there in their thousands after fleeing war zones in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. InfoMigrants estimates that 70 percent of people in Moria are from Afghanistan, but migrants from more than 70 different countries live there.

Moria was massively overcrowded, detaining 13,000 refugees in an area built for 2,800 people. There were

more children held there—4,000—than the total number it was originally designed to hold.

Video footage showed terrified detainees fleeing for their lives. Many carried what possessions they had left in carrier bags and others in supermarket trolleys. Hundreds of refugees and migrants tried to sleep in the road and adjoining fields.

It is not clear how the blaze started. Last week, the first case of COVID-19 was detected in the camp. This spread rapidly in a few days to 15 cases and was at 35 cases by the time the fire broke out. Stand By Me Lesbos wrote, "After Corona spread and no proper measures were taken, residents were not well informed [and] a kind of uprising broke out..." Under conditions where basic hygiene cannot be maintained and it was impossible to implement social distancing due to overcrowding, a devastating outbreak was only a matter of time.

Greek news agency ANA reported that the fires started after some of the 35 affected families refused to move into isolation with their families. Given the hellish conditions that exist in the camp, one can only imagine how terrible being left to "self-isolate" for weeks must be. Indeed, many forced to live in Moria were glad to see it burnt to the ground, with videos showing migrants singing "Bye, bye Moria."

Other sources, including refugees, said that the blaze may have been started by fascist forces. BBC journalist Parham Ghobadi tweeted two images of canisters that "refugees claim were used by 'far-right Greeks' to set #MoriaCamp on fire." Another tweet read, "Several refugees told me they believe 'far-right Greeks' have set Moria refugee camp on fire after the rumors of the coronavirus spreading throughout the overcrowded facility." InfoMigrants reported the social media comment of one detainee: "Fascists have set fire to Moria."

Another possible cause was a wildfire produced by strong winds fanning two separate wildfires elsewhere on

the island.

The first response of the ND government, as residents fled in the direction of the port town of Mytilene, was to send in riot police to set up a blockade to stop them making the journey. Some migrants fled into the surrounding hillside. After the second fire Wednesday, thousands of migrants seeking to get to Mytilini were met by riot police still blocking the road and whom fired tear gas at them.

The government set up a 3.5 mile cordon around the smoldering camp. This brutal response prevented aid organisations from gaining access. The *Guardian* reported that Annie Petros, head coordinator of the charity Becky's Bathhouse, said she was "blocked by police from taking injured people to hospital as she drove them away from the fire."

Petros continued: "When we saw there was a fire we drove as fast as we could with water to the camp, intending to take sick people to hospital. I can't describe properly the scene we saw. There were streams of people, thousands of them, walking away from the camp. They were totally silent, terrified and traumatised, walking through thick smoke and the awful smell of burning plastic.

"We picked up some pregnant women who needed urgent help and a teenage boy with a broken leg. When we neared the town of Mytilene there were riot police blocking the way to stop anyone reaching the town. I begged the police, but their commander wouldn't let us through. We called an ambulance and it refused to come to the roadblock."

Refugees4Refugees told the *Guardian* it could not find 30 missing children.

The Moria inferno was a disaster waiting to happen. The camp is routinely described as "hell on earth." In 2019, Jean Ziegler of the committee of experts advising the UN Human Rights Council described it as "the recreation of a concentration camp on European soil."

Describing conditions he encountered on a visit to the camp in May last year, Ziegler told the *Teller Report* website: "People live here like animals... Here 100 people have to share a shower and a toilet. It's often clogged, filthy, faeces lying around. There is no hot water, no schools and just two doctors—for 5,000 people!"

While there were an estimated 13,000 in the camp as the blaze began, in January this year more than 20,000 people were being held there—six, rather than four-times, its designated capacity. A junior doctor from the UK's National Health Service, Henry de Berker, told the

Financial Times at the time that there were "more than 1,000 unaccompanied minors living in the camp... Disease spreads rapidly in such miserable conditions. Diarrhoea and vomiting can have fatal consequences for the physically weak."

Moria is the brutal symbol of the "Fortress Europe" policies enacted by the European Union to keep out migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Tens of thousands have died attempting to cross the Mediterranean over the last decade. As a result of the dirty deal signed by the Syriza government with the EU and Turkey in 2015, the thousands who managed to make it to Greece have been forced into foul internment camps, as the authorities prepare to deport them.

In 2016, Moria was set ablaze. The WSWS reported: "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."

In September last year, the WSWS reported that "after months of protests and repression by riot police, two fires broke out." It continued: "One was contained but the other quickly spread, with large sections of the camp engulfed in flames." The fire took the lives of a woman and a child. The previous month, the government stepped up its attack on migrants, with riot police brutally attacking a protest of around 50 child asylum seekers at Moria.

In March this year another fire broke out at Moria claiming the life of a six-year-old girl. The fire continued to burn for an hour due to the closeness of the containers used as living quarters. The WSWS warned that the spread of the coronavirus on Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Kos would mean Moria and other camps being quickly "transformed into death camps."

The victims of the fire face only further misery. Instead of being provided with secure, safe and decent accommodation and treated humanely, the Greek daily *Kathemerini* reported that they "will be temporarily housed in a ferry boat, two navy ships and tents, Migration Minister Notis Mitarakis told a press conference on Wednesday."



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