

# Thousands sleeping rough after the burning down of Moria refugee camp on Lesbos

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What little remained of the Moria refugee camp on the island of Lesbos/Lesvos was destroyed after secondary fires broke out on Wednesday evening. A terrible blaze destroyed most of the site on Tuesday. According to the local news site stonisi.gr, two fires broke out almost simultaneously Wednesday at around 7:30 p.m.

The first fire was in an olive grove next to the camp where tents and nylon shacks salvaged from the day before had been stacked, while the second was in the northern section of the camp where fuel storage units were located. There were hundreds of refugees and migrants, mainly families, in both locations who had been made homeless by the previous fire. Underscoring the possibility of arson, a smaller fire on Thursday afternoon at the camp site destroyed the few tents that remained.

Prevented by the police from making their way to the port city of Mytilene, thousands have been forced to sleep rough on roadside verges and on hillsides with no access to food and water for three consecutive nights. Shocking footage and pictures show refugees of all ages sleeping rough surrounded by their meagre possessions. Some were able to find shelter in a church while one group slept in a cemetery where they reportedly had access to water.

Aid organisations have been prevented from distributing tents and other emergency supplies by blockades mounted by what are described as “local residents,” more likely fascists, without the police intervening.

The Greek New Democracy government is using the disaster to demonise and dehumanise Moria’s former inmates. In a press conference Thursday, government spokesman Stelios Petsas blamed the initial fire on refugees protesting being isolated after 35 tested

positive for COVID-19. “[S]ome people do not respect the country that is hosting them, and they strive to prove they are not looking for a passport to a better life,” he declared

Sections of the media have chimed in to portray a humanitarian disaster as a question of “law and order” and “national security.” Without any evidence a report in the right-wing daily *Kathimerini* Friday cited officers involved with the investigation into the fire, jointly run by police, national intelligence and counter-terrorism forces, that they are “honing in on a group of 30 young Afghan men ... who travelled to Greece without their families and had been linked to instances of drug dealing and extortion at the camp.”

New Democracy’s deputy leader and Minister for Development and Investment, Adonis Georgiadis, told Skai TV, “I don’t feel at all duty bound whenever they burn down their houses to build new ones for them.” He added, “I am very sad to see them like this. However, we must take into account the fact that these people set fire to the camp themselves.”

Using the word “houses” is a lie and an insult. Frequently described as “hell on earth” the camp was described last year as “the recreation of a concentration camp on European soil” by Jean Ziegler, a member of the committee of experts advising the UN Human Rights Council. Massively overcrowded, the camp detained 13,000 inmates in shacks and tents when it only had capacity for 2,800.

Under these conditions the government sought to turn Moria into a de facto death camp following the rise in cases of COVID-19 by imposing a blanket quarantine on the inmates, allowing the virus to tear through the camp.

In a statement last week, Doctors without Borders slammed the plan as “ill-considered and potentially

very damaging.” “We cannot see the justification of the enforced mass quarantine,” said Caroline Willemen, the organisation’s COVID-19 field coordinator on Lesbos, adding “what’s worse, we know these measures will worsen our patients’ already deteriorating mental health.

“Right now in Moria, there are elderly people with underlying health conditions, pregnant women, as well as children who are afraid and are being exposed to more trauma as a result of this policy. The government should be protecting these people, but instead by keeping them hemmed in with COVID-19 in the camp, they are exposing them.”

Plans to temporarily house the homeless refugees were set into motion, with helicopters transporting tents to state-owned land behind the shooting range near the village of Panagiouda on the east coast of Lesbos. This is part of the government’s longer-term plan to establish closed detention centres on the island. In the Thursday press conference, Petsas declared a four-month national emergency on Lesbos, stating that those who started the fire “did so because they considered that if they torch Moria, they will indiscriminately leave the island. We tell them they did not understand. They will not leave because of the fire.”

Testimonies from aid workers on the ground stated that the only reason there were no deaths from the fire was because the camp was not closed. “Can you imagine if the fire had started in a couple of months when they had fenced it in with razor wire as they were planning to do?” said Philippa Kempson of the Hope Project to the *Guardian*. “You would have had 12,000 people trapped in an inferno.”

Former inmates staged a protest in front of police roadblocks Friday against the creation of a second camp. “Singing and banging plastic bottles, they march up and down a stretch of coastal road, calling for the right to leave Lesbos,” reported Bethany Bell, BBC News correspondent on Lesbos.

To enforce its plans in the face of mounting opposition the government has sent additional police units to the island, which reportedly arrived on Friday by air. Contingents of riot police vans, patrol cruisers and water cannon vehicles also arrived by sea at the port of Mytilene.

Commenting on the developments in Moria, European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva

Johansson tried to absolve the EU from any responsibility. Stating that “Migrant camps on Greek soil are primarily the responsibility of the Greek government,” she noted “the failure [of] the previous commission to actually reach a common European migration and asylum policy.”

There is no evidence that the present Commission has plans to deviate from the anti-refugee policy of the entire EU, with Greece acting as a gatekeeper. The commission has only agreed to fund the transport of 400 unaccompanied children onto the mainland. Germany has committed to take a thousand additional refugees and the Netherlands a minuscule 50.

The hellhole that was Moria was created under the direct instigation of the EU, which struck a filthy deal with Turkey in 2016, allowing for the internment of any refugees on Greek soil, or more properly its islands, before being deported back to Turkey.

Plans to set up closed camps on Moria are also in line with EU policy. Following a visit to Lesbos on Friday, European Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas announced that the Moria camp would be replaced by “a modern facility.”

The pseudo-left party Syriza has sought to make political capital out of the disaster. In a statement released on Wednesday, it said, “Before the election ND was pledging to close Moria. The only thing it accomplished was to take over a facility with 5,600 people and exceed 20,000 before the programme of decongestion began. Without putting pressure for a collective European initiative, [Prime Minister Kyriakos] Mitsotakis has rendered Greece into a warehouse of souls.”

This turns reality on its head. It was under Syriza that the EU-Turkey deal was signed, turning the pseudo-left party into a willing jailor of refugees. ND builds its policy on the foundations laid by Syriza.



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