

New report condemns Greek government's “inhuman” treatment of refugees

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“Appalling,” “inhuman,” and “degrading” are some of the words published in a report by the Council of Europe’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), describing the conditions refugees live in on Greece’s islands.

Approximately 50,000 refugees live in Greece, 38,000 of whom are on the mainland and 11,000 are on the Greek islands of Lesbos, Leros, Chios, Kos, and Samos. More than half are women and children.

The report, published last month, summarizes the CPT’s findings from its visit to Greece from March 13 to 17. The CPT informed the Greek government of its intent to visit and inspect refugee detention centers less than 48 hours before its visit. It should be noted that CPT’s visit and its findings describe conditions before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and before the devastating fire at the Moria refugee camp on Lesbos island. Since then, life for refugees on Greece’s islands has deteriorated significantly.

The previous pseudo-left ruling party, Syriza, paved the way for today’s assault on migrants with attacks by riot police, evacuations and the creation of festering holding camps. In 2015, the European Union (EU), Turkey and the Syriza government struck a dirty deal to establish Greece as the EU’s prison camp for refugees at its southern border.

Greece’s ruling conservative New Democracy (ND) is building upon these anti-refugee policies. Under ND, refugees have been shot and killed by Greek police, beaten by fascists and illegally turned away, also known as “push backs”, when crossing into Greece and seeking asylum. As with the recent attacks on refugees in France by police, the onslaught against refugees and migrants is a policy of the entire European ruling class.

Adding to previous countless eye-witness accounts, video footage, and other investigations, the report only

confirms the ongoing brutalisation of Greece’s refugees. Focusing on certain facilities in the Evros region, Greece’s most north-eastern tip, and on the island of Samos, the report describes refugees being held in detention units made of “large barred cells crammed with beds, with poor lighting and ventilation, dilapidated and broken toilets and washrooms, insufficient personal hygiene products and cleaning materials, inadequate food and no access to outdoor daily exercise”. These appalling conditions were made worse by overcrowding in several centers.

In one instance, upon visiting two Greek police holding cells on the island of Samos, the CPT delegation “found 93 migrants (58 men, 15 women—three of whom were pregnant—and, 20 children, 10 of whom were under five years old), crammed into the two cells.”

The detained men, women, children “slept on blankets or on cardboard placed on the cell floor. The cell reeked from “unpartitioned in-cell toilets” that were “blocked and emitted a foul stench.” No one was given access to a “shower for more than two weeks and no soap was given to them to wash their hands after going to the toilet.” The female detainees were “given wet wipes, but they were not provided with any other hygiene products; many women recounted the embarrassing and unsanitary situation with which they had had to cope during their detention.”

The report cites examples of extraconstitutional and rushed court sentences in which refugees appear in court without a lawyer within 24 hours of their apprehension by Greek police, are sentenced to 3-4 years in prison and given fines in the thousands of euros that same day.

In one example, two Turkish men had entered Greece at 6am and were then brought to a police station at 9:40 am that morning. In that afternoon, they appeared in court without lawyers, and claimed they did not understand the proceedings due to the language difference. At the end of

the hearing, both were sentenced to four years of imprisonment and fined 10,000 euros.

Additionally, the CPT's delegation found overwhelming evidence of Greek police performing pushbacks at the Evros River border in northeastern Greece. A recent report by the *New York Times* found the EU border patrol group, Frontex, to be complicit in helping cover up Greece's role in performing illegal pushbacks.

The CPT's damning exposure of the plight of Greece's refugees is one documenting a humanitarian crisis. But the crisis has only gotten worse since the CPT's visit some nine months ago.

On Lesbos sat the Moria camp, described by BBC as the "worst refugee camp on Earth." With a capacity of less than 3,000 people, at one point it held 20,000 refugees in and around the site. In September, it burst into flames, in still unexplained events, and was laid to waste.

Previously housed in Moria, some 8,000 men, women and children now live in a temporary camp, once a former shooting range near the sea. Lack of infrastructure has meant the sprawling facility is wholly dependent on water tanks. With winter only weeks away, refugees will have little protection from the cold.

A new detention center will not be built until next summer. George Koumoutsakos, ND's alternate minister for migration and asylum policy, told the *Guardian*. "A new camp has to be built from scratch and agreement has yet to be reached over its location. It's impossible to get a new state-of-the art facility ready before next summer."

Refugees are plagued by another factor: the Covid-19 pandemic, which is briefly mentioned by the CPT report, due to its visit preceding the massive spread of the virus. Adding in the devastating impact of the pandemic on society makes worse the already grueling conditions.

The report notes, "The CPT acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional challenges to ensure that all facilities in which migrants are detained adhere to strict standards of hygiene and cleanliness, and that persons in need of health care are provided with rapid access to such."

The island's cramped detention centers create the perfect breeding grounds for the virus to spread uncontrollably. According to the International Rescue Committee, 35 refugees have tested positive on Lesbos. On Samos, over 100 refugees tested positive last month.

The Greek government has used the pandemic to implement draconian lockdown measures. *Vice News* reports refugee camps were repeatedly placed on

lockdowns, even after the rest of the country opened up, which severely limited access to resources and healthcare. This shows that the measures have nothing to do with fighting the pandemic but are rather means to imprison refugees and deprive them of basic resources.

The Moria camp was locked down for nearly six months before a single confirmed coronavirus case was confirmed. The first person in Moria tested positive on September 2, which moved the camp under a stricter quarantine. The camp erupted into flames a few days later.

Andrea Contenta, Regional Advocacy Representative for Doctors Without Borders, told *VICE News*, "We warn against using quarantine as a blanket measure. It should only be implemented when people's basic rights can at the same time be protected. This can be seen in access to economic and social rights. The restrictions are impacting access to services, to lawyers or other essential services because people are basically unable to enter the cities."

The brutal conditions and treatment of refugees by the Greek government, the lack of healthcare, sanitary living areas, create the deadly possibility of COVID-19 ripping through refugee camps on Greece islands.

As the virus spreads across Greece, the healthcare system is close to collapsing under the weight of the spread of the virus. On Thursday, another 100 people were announced as the latest COVID-19 fatalities bringing the total to 2,706. Total infections stand at 111,537 with almost 1,900 reported yesterday. In November, more than three times as many people died from the virus than in the entire span of the beginning of the pandemic until October.



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