“We have fewer rights than animals”: The unbearable life in the Greek refugee camp Kara Tepe

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2020 was the year in which the mask fell. The coronavirus pandemic exposed the cruel essence of capitalism: Profits over lives. Millions of refugees have experienced this policy first-hand for decades, but the past year also brought their desperate situation to a head once again.

Anyone wanting to gauge the criminal character of European governments and the European Union (EU) must look to Kara Tepe, the temporary camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. Here, around 7,200 people spent Christmas and New Year in the cold and wet, in sickness and fear. More than 19,000 refugees are forced to persevere on the Aegean islands.

The Kara Tepe tent camp is located on a former military training area directly adjacent to the sea; it is a construction site where the noise is deafening day in, day out. Refugees had to move here in the autumn after the notorious Moria slum camp went up in flames in September.

Refugees and aid organisations report with horror that conditions in the new camp are even worse than in Moria. “We all live in fear and hardship,” Kara Tepe inmates wrote in a Christmas letter to the EU and its commission president Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU):

> How is it that after three months and so many millions of government donations and money raised by NGOs, we are still sitting in a place without running water, hot showers and without a functioning sewage system? ... Do we not have rights as human beings and refugees in Europe that include basic services for everyone? We often read and hear that we must live like animals in these camps, but we think that is not true. We have studied the laws protecting animals in Europe and we have found that even they have more rights than we do.

One in three refugees on the islands is thinking of suicide, the letter says. “We see a lot of appeals for donations and promises and we see our reality and it makes us frustrated and angry.” Their demands include adequate water supplies and showers, proper sanitation, provision of electricity, light, heating and tents for the winter, and better medical and psychological care.

But the EU will cast even these minimal demands for basic human needs to the winds because the hardship in Kara Tepe is not an accident, but a deliberate and conscious policy of deterrence. In the burnt-out Lipa refugee camp in Bihac on the Bosnian-Croatian border, refugees are also fighting for sheer survival under the eyes of the EU. For days, hundreds of refugees have been camping out in the open in the snow, facing death from frostbite with almost no help.

Marcus Bachmann of the aid organisation Doctors Without Borders Austria confirmed the extent of the disaster in the Greek refugee camps in an interview with the Viennese weekly *Falter* at the end of December. He used to be head of operations in crisis regions such as Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and South Sudan. “But the dimension of the misery of the refugees on the Greek islands also stuns me,” he says.

Compared to his experiences in war zones, the Greek camps do not even reach the minimum standard. “As Doctors Without Borders, we have to do things in Greece that are otherwise only necessary in countries where the health system has completely collapsed,” says Bachmann.

An unbearable stench pervades the entire Kara Tepe camp. Until recently, there were no shower and washing facilities, people had to bathe and wash their clothes in the sea. There is still no hot water. There is no rubbish and sewage disposal. Dirty water and rainwater flow through the camp. Often the packaged food is inedible and already spoiled when it is handed out.

Food scraps, feces, mud—these unhygienic conditions attract rats and other creatures. They crawl into the tents at night and sometimes run around during the day, says Bachmann. “Especially children are badly hurt by these rodents,” he explains. “We have had babies in our clinic with several rat bites.”

“In the warmer months, the snakes also come.” He has treated many snakebite victims on Samos, for example. “We usually do that in South Sudan or the Central African Republic. But not in Europe.”

However, the warnings and demands of Doctors without Borders have not been heard in the EU and Greece for years, Bachmann said. “On the contrary, we see that the situation has even worsened.”

In addition to the coronavirus, numerous cases of diarrhoea, respiratory and skin diseases are rampant, as well as typhoid fever.

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People receive only 1.5 litres of drinking water per day per person, even in the hot summer, although according to Bachmann, the "minimum standard at the beginning of a refugee crisis" is 7.5 litres, which is achieved in camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, for example. He sums up, "It has to be said very clearly: if the people there are not evacuated, their lives are in danger."

The severe traumas refugees suffer because of war, flight and the countless fires in the camps are particularly serious. Eight out of 10 people in the camps come from war and crisis regions, according to Doctors Without Borders. Mental illness and the risk of suicide increase dramatically. The huge Moria fire, in which several people were killed and wounded, drove thousands of families to flee.

Children, who make up more than a third of camp inmates at Kara Tepe, are suffering the most. On Lesbos alone, 49 children and young people with suicidal thoughts or attempts were treated last year. Joseph Oertel, who has worked as a counsellor in a therapeutic children's project run by the aid organisation Medical Volunteers International in Kara Tepe, spoke to *Der Spiegel* of a "whole new form of hopelessness in the new camp."

At least 300 police officers are operating in Kara Tepe. In an interview with the conservative newspaper *Kathimerini,* Greek migration minister Notis Mitarakis gloated that, "You didn't have this feeling of security in Moria, it was a jungle." By "security" he means the brutal repression of the refugees. The police monitor the camp around the clock and use batons against the refugees. Drones, barbed wire fences and exit restrictions give the camp more the character of a prison, as child psychologist Thanos Chirvatidis explained to *Der Spiegel*. Children are afraid of the police. Access for aid organisations and journalists is extremely difficult.

But Kara Tepe is only a foretaste of what is to come. The Greek government and the EU want to build a closed camp by summer 2021, which will probably be right next to a rubbish dump. German EU bureaucrat Beate Gminder, who heads the European Commission's "Task Force on Migration Management" and is responsible for the construction of the new camp, sees no problem with this. Better sites were not available, but Greece had taken "numerous samples" of soil and water, she claims in an interview with *Der Spiegel*.

On December 31, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis visited Kara Tepe and praised it as representing progress over Moria. With similar gall, Gminder also glosses over and justifies the conditions. The camp had many advantages, for example, it is located directly by the sea—"people can swim." And in the winter? Well, "large, heated tents have been set up" and "warm blankets and sleeping bags have been distributed." When it comes to a lack of hot water and electricity, it was the Greek authorities who were to blame for all the problems, according to Gminder.

The moral decay and criminality emanating from these words are an expression of an EU policy under German leadership that has only one goal: To get rid of refugees at all costs and to mercilessly crush resistance within their ranks.

In October, Migration Minister Mitarakis boasted that 73 percent fewer refugees had arrived in Greece in the first nine months of the year than in the same period last year. However, the drop in new arrivals is not the result of declining refugee numbers, but the massive intensification of illegal rejections and deportations without asylum procedures.

The so-called "pushbacks" of rubber dinghies into Turkish waters take place not only under the eyes but also with the involvement of the European border protection agency Frontex. According to an internal letter from Frontex head Fabrice Leggeri to the EU Commission, reported by *Der Spiegel* at the end of November, German officials were also involved in pushbacks. The German Interior Ministry is trying to cover up these crimes and human rights violations.

In early December, reporters from *Der Spiegel* described the story of one of these brutal deportations, which are happening more frequently. Two African female refugees were picked up by hooded Greek police officers after arriving on Lesbos, searched, beaten, spat on and forced to undress. "Along with sixteen others seeking protection, including minors and several pregnant women, according to the refugees, the two were left on two small inflatable life rafts. In the middle of the night, in the middle of the sea, with no chance of reaching the coast under their own power." Only after holding out for hours were they rescued by Turkish coast guards and taken to Izmir.

The entire year 2020 was marked by the war against refugees in Greece. In February, Greek police used tear gas against protesting refugees on Lesbos. In March, the land border with Turkey was sealed off and the right to asylum suspended. Suddenly, refugees were trapped in no-man's-land on the Greek-Turkish border at the river Evros. Soldiers and police fired live ammunition and tear gas at defenceless people; at least three refugees were killed crossing the border. In its brutal action, the Greek government worked closely with the EU leadership under von der Leyen and received backing from Syriza party leader Alexis Tsipras.

At the same time, the coronavirus was spreading throughout Greece and thus also in refugee shelters and camps. Due to a lack of tests and inadequate health care, there are many unreported cases of infection and death among refugees. Under the pretext of the pandemic, Europe has also effectively stopped sea rescue operations, further accelerating mass deaths in the Mediterranean. This was followed by the unveiling of a murderous "Asylum and Migration Pact" that will further drive forward the disenfranchisement, deportation and ultimately the killing of refugees. From January to November 2020, more than 1,200 refugees lost their lives on the way to Europe.

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