

# Greek state charges pregnant refugee on Lesbos who attempted suicide with arson

Katerina Selin  
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The hellish situation in the Kara Tepe refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos is increasingly driving refugee children and adults to commit suicide. Three weeks ago, the attempted suicide of a heavily pregnant woman from Afghanistan evoked shock and horror across the globe.

On February 21, a Sunday, the 26-year-old refugee brought her three small children to safety and then set herself on fire in her tent. The fire was extinguished in time by other camp residents and the pregnant woman was saved. She was taken to hospital in the island's capital Mytilini with severe burn injuries to her hands, feet and head.

Her tragic act of desperation is a damning indictment of the Greek government led by the right-wing ND (Nea Dimokratia) and the European Union (EU), which together bear responsibility for the death of hundreds of thousands of refugees. But instead of this gang of criminals, it is the victim who is now in the dock facing punishment.

The exhausted and desperate woman, who is eight months pregnant, was interrogated by the Greek judiciary while still in her hospital bed. She faces charges for alleged arson and destruction of public property.

Teresa Volakaki, one of her two lawyers, described the authorities' brutal treatment of her client to the *Guardian*: "Although she was in a lot of pain from her burns and found it difficult to speak, the testimony in Mytilene lasted for around two and a half hours."

"It was clear she was stressed and having difficulty remembering but the prosecutor took a very strict line and ruled she will now face criminal charges, trial and not be able to travel abroad."

With her attempted suicide, the young woman was reacting to the inhuman conditions and sense of hopelessness which prevail in the Kara Tepe tent camp, where she had been staying for 14 months with her husband and three small children. The camp is located on a former military site directly by the sea. Thousands of refugees were forced to move there last autumn when their previous slum camp in Moria went up in flames.

Prior to her suicide attempt, her family had finally been

recognised to be in need of protection and was due to be flown to Germany with other refugees. The woman then learnt she would be denied departure due to her impending birth.

"When she was told she could not travel, her grief and disappointment was so great she attempted suicide," declared Nikos Triantafyllos, an investigating magistrate who conducted the initial interviews. The prospect of a family move to Germany was her "only ray of hope," she told investigators. She had hoped to leave before giving birth. The unhygienic conditions in the camp were unbearable for pregnant women and young mothers, and she preferred to die rather than bring another child into the camp, she told prosecutors, according to *Der Spiegel*.

She had first looked for a rope or other ways of committing suicide, but then in her distress decided to set herself on fire. All the family's belongings went up in flames. The fire did not spread to other tents, however, and no one else was harmed or endangered. The young mother, who has since been released from hospital, remains in a poor mental state, her lawyers stress. They are calling for her acquittal, and a lifting of all restrictive conditions so she can leave for Germany with her family.

This latest suicide attempt is particularly shocking but comes as no surprise. For months, doctors, psychologists and aid organisations have been warning of the dramatic increase in depression, suicidal thoughts and other health consequences resulting from the traumatic and miserable conditions in Kara Tepe.

Around 7,000 refugees—mainly families—live among rubbish and mud. For the last few weeks, they have been struggling against freezing cold, rain, storms and even snow, without sufficient electricity and heating. Most recently, soil samples have shown that the former military training area has elevated levels of lead. The aid organisation Human Rights Watch has warned of the danger of lead poisoning, especially for the around 2,500 children who play outside daily on the bare ground and in the mud, and are exposed to the pollutants. The Greek government, however, has

dismissed all of these accusations.

The child psychologist Katrin Glatz-Brubakk, who works for Doctors Without Borders (MSF) on Lesbos, spoke in an interview with the German paper *Neues Deutschland* one week ago about the psychological suffering in the camp: “Nightmares, difficulty concentrating, extremely low frustration tolerance, aggressiveness and panic attacks. Some children withdraw almost completely from the world. They no longer play, some have hardly spoken a word for eight months. Others are so apathetic that they no longer eat and need to be fed. They are so listless they don’t even go to the toilet themselves.”

On Lesbos alone, MSF treated 50 children and young people with suicidal thoughts or attempts at suicide last year. The youngest among them was an eight-year-old girl who tried to hang herself, Glatz-Brubakk said. “This year we have already treated three children after suicide attempts. Among them is a 13-year-old boy from Afghanistan who has made a number of suicide attempts. He has swallowed pills, he has run into the sea to drown himself, has tried to jump in front of a moving car and has cut himself with broken glass and razor blades.”

The people in the camp are worse off now than they were in Moria, she says. “They are demoralised. Meanwhile many are giving up hope that life will ever get better. Many have run out of any reserves. They are just breaking down.”

Glatz-Brubakk quite rightly blames EU policies for the refugees’ plight: “The conditions in the camp are not the result of a natural disaster. For over five years, I and many others have been repeatedly drawing attention to this disgraceful situation, for which Europe bears responsibility. Political decision-makers then promise us that things will get better—but the opposite is the case! It is not only the camp residents who are disappointed and angry. I am too. Europe is watching these people slowly perish.”

Disease and deadly dangers are also part of everyday life in other refugee shelters. A week ago, a fire broke out in the refugee shelter of Thiva, northwest of Athens, and a seven-year-old boy died. He was living in a container with his family from Iran. According to witnesses, it took the fire brigade over an hour to get to the site, where they were met by angry refugees.

Meanwhile, the Greek government, in close cooperation with the EU, is preparing the construction of a new refugee detention centre on Lesbos, which will replace all the previous camps on the island and is located next to a rubbish dump in the Vastria region. Migration Minister Notis Mitarakis said in a letter to the mayor of Mytilini 10 days ago that the “Closed Controlled Island Facility” (KEDN) would open no later than November. It is to be equipped with “NATO-type double military fences” and “advanced

security systems” and will include a so-called “pre-departure detention centre” where offenders, refugees with deportation notices and new arrivals will be held for the first few days.

Thousands of refugees who have been granted asylum in Greece are now at risk of homelessness as temporary shelters close. The EU-funded “Filoxenia” programme had provided accommodation in hotels and limited assistance for refugees but is now being shut down. Many have already been evicted, among them families and children.

At the same time, illegal deportations continue to take place on the Mediterranean Sea. In the so-called “pushbacks,” refugees are forced to leave Greece for Turkey. The Norwegian non-governmental organisation Aegean Boat Report regularly informs about such pushbacks. According to its latest weekly report, 11 boats with 453 people were stopped or pushed back between February 22 and 28.

Aegean Boat Report describes an incident on February 17, when 13 refugees, including five children, arrived by boat on the coast of Lesbos in the evening. Following advice from the aid organisation, they went to the Megala Therma refugee camp to seek shelter during the cold night. Upon arrival, they received warm blankets from the other residents, but were then taken away by police under the pretext they were to be tested for COVID-19. Instead, the officers took them to a white container, where other men in unmarked uniforms and carrying batons loaded them into vans and drove them to a port. At the port they forced the refugees onto a boat, took them out to sea for about half an hour and abandoned them on a life raft, without life jackets. The panicked refugees were finally rescued by the Turkish coast guard.

Numerous accounts from research and aid organisations make clear that the EU border protection agency Frontex is both directly and indirectly involved in “pushbacks.” Along with the regime of concentration camps and prisons where refugees vegetate and commit suicide, the illegal deportations at Europe’s borders are part of the systematic criminal policy of the EU directed against millions of people forced to flee after their home countries have been bombed, destroyed and plundered.



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