

A “parody of justice”

Four asylum seekers accused of starting Moria refugee camp fire handed 10-year prison sentences

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Four Afghan asylum seekers have been convicted for intentional arson and handed 10-year sentences for the devastating fire at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos last year. Three of the four defendants had documentation to prove they were minors at the time of arrest but were still tried as adults. In March, two Afghan youths were convicted as part of the same case and received five-year jail terms.

The conviction and sentencing were carried out in a closed three-member court, with journalists and international observers barred from proceedings, after a judge closed the courtroom, citing COVID-19 restrictions. The prosecution’s main evidence was the testimony of another Afghan refugee, who had fled Greece before the trial began. The youths were supposedly motivated to start a fire to protest quarantine measures imposed following a coronavirus outbreak in the camp.

The fire last September destroyed the Moria camp, displacing 13,000 refugees who had been held there in squalid conditions. Although no one was killed in the blaze, the entire camp was destroyed, including most of the inhabitants’ belongings. For many weeks afterwards, thousands of refugees, one-third of whom were children, were forced to sleep on open hillsides surrounding the camp.

At the time of the Moria fire, a number of refugees accused Greek fascists of starting it, after news of a coronavirus outbreak in the camp. Small groups of fascists, with the tacit backing of local police and EU agents, have regularly attacked refugees and aid workers around the camp. Many eyewitnesses also

reported a huge delay between the reporting of the initial fire and the response of local authorities, which allowed the blaze to consume the whole camp. After the incident, a spokesperson for the right-wing New Democracy government made unsubstantiated accusations that migrants started the fires themselves, claiming “they [asylum seekers] thought if they just set fire to Moria, they would be able to leave the island.”

The only evidence against the youth and men who have been convicted, all of whom are members of the persecuted Hazara ethnic minority, is the testimony of another Afghan refugee. The witness was Pashtun, the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan, and the defence argued he was convinced to frame the accused due to ongoing ethnic tensions between refugees in the camp. According to *infomigrants.net*, over 70 percent of the camp’s inmates were Afghanistani, although they were from a mixture of the country’s ethnic backgrounds.

The defence did not even have the chance to cross-examine the witness, who fled Moria shortly after giving his account to the police and was not present to face the accused in either the March or last week’s trials. The testimony was described by defence lawyer Natasha Dailiani as “full of inconsistencies.” The defence further described the final conviction of the four refugees as “inconceivable” and “without evidence.”

After the conviction, Patrikios Patrikounakis, one of the lawyers representing the asylum seekers, stated, “Clearly it had come from above, and it was a decision of the state. Before an investigation was launched, the government ministers were asking for convictions.”

Nine months before the convictions, the Greek ministry of migration told CNN: “The camp was set on fire by six Afghan refugees who were arrested.”

Responding to the fact that three of the convicts were minors at the time of arrest but were illegally put on trial as adults, he added, “[a]ge should have been taken into account, according to the Greek penal code. What we saw, instead, was a parody of justice.”

Fires were not uncommon at the Moria camp. In 2016, around 60 percent of the camp was destroyed following a fire. In September 2019, two fires broke out in the camp, leading to the death of a woman and a child. In March 2020, another fire claimed the life of a six-year-old girl. All of these fires have had unclear origins.

Even if it were the case that the latest fire was started by those accused, the responsibility for this desperate act of protest lies with the entire European Union and its governments, and not with their prisoners. The word Moria is synonymous with the inhuman treatment of refugees by the EU. The horrific conditions at Moria camp are meant to serve as a deterrent to incoming refugees.

At the time of the most recent fire there were 13,000 refugees in a camp designed to hold 3,000. Inmates had to queue for hours to access drinking water and toilets. After the fire, thousands were moved to Kara Tepe, which had no running water or sewage system for months before it was closed down earlier this year to move refugees back to what has been dubbed “Moria 2.0.”

Jean Ziegler, the former UN Special Rapporteur for the right to food, described the conditions in February 2020 as the following: “Human rights are being violated in the camp at every turn, total despair is all-pervasive. The malefactors in Brussels are allowing conditions of survival to develop in the hot spots that recall the deplorable concentration camps.”

Deteriorating conditions at Moria and refugee camps throughout Greece, as well as increases in EU navy patrols in the Aegean Sea have been overseen both by the openly right-wing New Democracy government and the pseudo-left Syriza coalition, which ruled in Greece until 2019.

The conviction of six asylum seekers, five of whom were children at the time of arrest, on highly dubious and unverifiable eyewitness account is part of a

criminal attempt to cover up role of the Greek government and the EU’s own role in the Moria crisis.

At the same time, the Greek and European ruling class have consistently defended and collaborated with their far-right allies in attacks on refugees and aid workers.

As a product of the EU’s “fortress Europe” anti-immigrant campaign, in the last seven years over 20,000 migrants are officially estimated to have drowned in the Mediterranean, from Morocco to the Aegean Sea. This itself is likely a significant underestimate of the real scale of deaths.

The Greek’s governments efforts to scapegoat these asylum seekers is a natural extension of the EU’s murderous continent-wide anti-immigrant policies, which are aimed at diverting outward social tensions produced by the enormous austerity imposed on the population. As part of this effort the EU actively protects and promotes far-right groups and policies, which are directed ultimately against the entire working class.



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