

# LESBOS BULLETIN

## Update on the EU 'hotspot' Moria, by the Greek Council for Refugees & Oxfam



The overspill area of the EU-sponsored 'hotspot' Moria on Lesbos island. The summer rains have made the camp muddy, adding to the extremely poor hygienic condition under which people seeking asylum are forced to live. June 2020. Spyros-Vlad Oikonomou/GCR

- GCR and Oxfam express their deepest concern on the exponential increase in reported push-back and collective expulsion practices at Greece's land and sea borders throughout May and June. UNHCR and IOM have both raised the alarm. Greek authorities continue to contest the allegations and have yet to order an official investigation.
- COVID-19-related restrictions in the island 'hotspots' have been extended up to 5 July, even though no cases of the virus have been identified in the camps and Greece is gradually opening up, including to tourists. People seeking asylum are confined in overcrowded and unhygienic areas, which undermine their health and wellbeing.
- More than 11,000 refugees have been asked to vacate their accommodation to make space for new arrivals. Without a centralized transition plan to facilitate their integration, these refugees are at risk of homelessness and destitution.

## CALL TO ACTION

- The Greek Government must respect the principle of non-refoulement and commence a full-scale, transparent investigation into the increasing number of reported pushbacks from borders. The investigation should be undertaken by an independent authority, the findings published at regular intervals and potential perpetrators brought to justice.
- The European Commission and the European Parliament must take all necessary steps to ensure Greece's full compliance with EU and international law and, specifically, the principle of *non-refoulement*.
- The Greek government, in compliance with the Commission's guidelines and with the Commission's support, should end the disproportionate restrictions of asylum seekers in the 'hotspots' and ensure their swift transfer to suitable accommodation on the mainland. Until this is accomplished, the Greek government should ensure the timely availability of funding to properly staff and maintain COVID-19 clinics in the 'hotspots'.
- The Greek government should urgently establish an inclusive social housing scheme. In the long run, the Greek government, with the ongoing support of the European Commission, should establish a national integration strategy, with a view to "supporting the objective of building a more cohesive society" in line with Commission's communication.<sup>1</sup>
- EU member states must urgently share responsibility with Greece and relocate asylum seekers from the islands, in order to improve living conditions, preparedness for the re-emergence of COVID-19, and reduce the risk of homelessness of refugees in Greece. In the same context, they must speed-up the relocation efforts of the 1,600 unaccompanied children that are now stranded on the islands.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

### ONGOING AND INCREASED ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS REPORTED AT LAND AND SEA BORDERS

June marked the fourth consecutive month with reports of illegal pushbacks and collective expulsions on the Greek mainland and at sea.

GCR has received several reports of alleged pushbacks near the land borders with Turkey. On 9 June, three Kurdish asylum seekers were stopped by the police in the area of Alexandroupoli.<sup>2</sup> Two of them were forcefully returned to Turkey, where one has been reportedly imprisoned. Likewise, there are reports of the Greek police rounding up people seeking asylum from the camp of Diavata and the wider area of Thessaloniki, sometimes by force.<sup>3</sup> According to testimonies from asylum seekers, Greek police promise to take asylum seekers to receive their asylum papers, when in fact they are brought to the Evros river and illegally sent back to Turkey.

This is in gross violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*.<sup>4</sup> If proven true, these collective expulsions are an alarming expansion of the scope of pushback operations that have been reported at Greece's land borders with Turkey for years.<sup>5</sup>

A similar spike in pushback operations has also been reported at sea and from the Aegean islands. Since March, a number of publications, based on videos and testimonies, have reported that the Greek Coast Guard is rounding up people seeking asylum, frequently after they had reached the islands, and illegally returning them to Turkish waters.<sup>6</sup> Multiple videos have surfaced of people in distress on dinghies<sup>7</sup>, with masked men reportedly removing the engines from their boats and leaving them cast adrift.<sup>8</sup> On the island of Lesbos, one such incident was reported on 13 June of a dinghy carrying 10 children and 3 pregnant women, one of which was bleeding. After 15 hours adrift, the Greek Coast Guard finally towed them to Lesbos.<sup>9</sup>

UNHCR and IOM have raised the alarm over the increase in reported cases of illegal pushbacks, calling on the Greek authorities to investigate these allegations.<sup>10</sup> However, the Greek government remains silent<sup>11</sup> on the issue while the practices continue.<sup>12</sup>

### **COVID-19: A RETURN TO NORMALITY, BUT NOT FOR EVERYONE**

The Greek government has extended the movement restrictions in the EU-sponsored 'hotspots' up to 5 July, despite the lack of any recorded COVID-19 case in the island 'hotspots' and the ongoing screening of people arriving on the islands.<sup>13</sup> People seeking asylum are thus entering their fourth month of confinement, in violation of the EU Commission's relevant guidelines.<sup>14</sup> In Moria camp, the feeling of despair is growing by the day. Since the height of the pandemic, close to 16,000 asylum seekers have been trapped in a space that can barely accommodate 2,800 people.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Greece is gradually returning to 'normality' and even getting ready to welcome its first tourists again.

Even if the extension were justified on the basis of COVID-19 prevention and response, the actual measures to protect people from the virus remain severely insufficient. At the end of May, the medical reception areas outside the 'hotspots' of Lesbos, Samos and Chios ceased to operate, due to a lack of funding. New funding was secured for only two months, and only for a handful of personnel.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, conditions remain particularly dire for people living in the overspill areas of the 'hotspot'. They are subjected to all weather conditions, including the regular summer rains, without proper accommodation. People have to walk through the mud in nothing more than their flip flops. There is barely any access to clean water or showers. In one of the overspill areas, more than 1,600 asylum seekers share a total of 10 chemical toilets. Children are getting sick because of the unhealthy environment they live in, yet they lack access to healthcare. They should have been transferred months before to suitable accommodation on the mainland.

### **'DECONGESTING' THE ISLANDS AMIDST A PENDING HOMELESSNESS CRISIS**

Since the start of the year, more than 14,000 persons have moved from the islands to the mainland, either through official transfers or by their own means. Once on the mainland, asylum seekers often find themselves yet again living in overcrowded and isolated camps, at times in tents or even homeless. In the absence of an EU-wide responsibility sharing mechanism, the Greek reception system has been stretched beyond its limits, and several sites on the mainland are operating above capacity.

*"There is no water, no electricity. It's going to be very hot soon, yet people have to stand in line for 2 to 3 hours just to get food or take a shower."*

Ali\*, asylum seeker from Afghanistan who has lived in Moria for 9 months

*"Living here is really challenging; especially during the Corona time. We didn't have any healthcare; we didn't have anything. The Asylum Service was closed, people did not have the right to move and there was no healthcare. So, living conditions here are really bad. It's like we are living in a prison. We don't have the right to move like other people do."*

Barlin\*, single refugee woman from Somalia, living in the Moria hotspot for over a year

On 9 June, the Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum stated that by the end of the 2020 only 32 of Greece's current 92 mainland sites will remain operational leading to the closure of the cost-inefficient hotel facilities.<sup>17</sup> To be viable, these closures would need to be accompanied by a long-term plan to secure sufficient accommodation places within the social fabric of Greek society. However, no such plan has been announced, while 21 out of these 32 sites are already operating at or above capacity, with more than 3,000 persons residing in tents and more than 300 in makeshift shelters.<sup>18</sup> There is simply no room to reduce Greece's reception capacity, if other member states will not do their fair share. At the end of May, more than 11,000 refugees have been called to leave their homes and free up accommodation for new asylum seekers from the islands.<sup>19</sup>

In theory, people who are awarded international protection in Greece should have access to the country's social safety net.<sup>20</sup> In reality, refugees cannot access social benefits. Chronic institutional and administrative challenges hinder asylum seekers' and refugees' ability to, for example, open bank accounts or issue a tax declaration number (AFM). As a result, very few refugees manage to fully access the only nation-wide integration programme (Helios).

At the same time, the overall lack of a social housing scheme in Greece means that no state-run accommodation places are earmarked for recipients of international protection, not even for people in vulnerable circumstances. Those without the financial resources to rent a house, become homeless or reside in abandoned or unsuitable houses, informal hotels or overcrowded and rundown apartments. Some end up living in the streets, others are in constant danger of eviction.

Greece's overall lack of a strategy or plan to facilitate refugees' smooth integration into society leaves them exposed to destitution, homelessness and exploitation.<sup>21</sup> The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its expected financial impact is only making things worse. Without concrete measures to relocate asylum seekers to other EU member states – with a priority for unaccompanied children and vulnerable adults – the problem of homelessness in Greece will only increase.

## NOTES

\* All names are changed for privacy reasons.

*“There are families, there are vulnerable people: single mothers, single women, men, they all need support. They need child support, they need health support, but there is nothing. It is like a crisis all over again. They don't know where to go, so they will be on the streets. These people do not have any choice. Where will they go? Where will they sleep? What will they eat? They don't have any work. There is no job, there is no house, there is no plan!”*

Barlin\*, single refugee woman from Somalia, living in the Moria hotspot for over a year

- <sup>1</sup> European Commission, COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals, 7 June 2016, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication\\_action\\_plan\\_integration\\_third-country\\_nationals\\_en.pdf\\_p.17](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_action_plan_integration_third-country_nationals_en.pdf_p.17).
- <sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/zubeyirkoculu/status/1270300261198827521>
- <sup>3</sup> Border Violence Monitoring Network, 'Police raid humanitarian distribution site and pushback people in need', 8 June 2020, available at: <https://www.borderviolence.eu/police-raid-humanitarian-distribution-site-and-pushback-people-in-need/>; Deutsche Welle, 'Migrants accuse Greece of forced deportations', 21 May 2020, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/migrants-accuse-greece-of-forced-deportations/a-53520642>; The Wall Street Journal, Greek Police Are Rounding Up Asylum Seekers and Forcing Them Into Turkey, Migrants Say, 20 May 2020, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/greek-police-are-rounding-up-asylum-seekers-and-forcing-them-into-turkey-migrants-say-11589989139>.
- <sup>4</sup> As enshrined in Art. 33(1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, as well as numerous other human rights treaties.
- <sup>5</sup> For instance, GCR, Reports of systematic pushbacks in the Evros region, 20 February 2018, available at: <https://www.gcr.gr/en/news/press-releases-announcements/item/1028-the-new-normality-continuous-push-backs-of-third-country-nationals-on-the-evros-river><https://www.gcr.gr/en/ekdoseis-media/reports/reports/item/790-reports-of-systematic-pushbacks-in-the-evros-region>; GCR, Arsis & HumanRights 360, The new normality: Continuous push-backs of third country nationals on the Evros river, December 2018, available at: <https://www.gcr.gr/en/news/press-releases-announcements/item/1028-the-new-normality-continuous-push-backs-of-third-country-nationals-on-the-evros-river>.
- <sup>6</sup> Just Security, 'Tents at Sea: How Greek Officials Use Rescue Equipment for Illegal Deportations', 22 May 2020, available at: <https://www.justsecurity.org/70309/tents-at-sea-how-greek-officials-use-rescue-equipment-for-illegal-deportations/>; Spiegel, 'Greece suspected of abandoning refugees at sea', 16 June 2020, available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/videos-and-eyewitness-accounts-greece-apparently-abandoning-refugees-at-sea-a-84c06c61-7f11-4e83-ae70-3905017b49d5>; Efsyn, 'They pushback refugees from the islands on special sea tents', 7 April 2020, available at: [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/238226\\_epanaproothoyn-prosfyges-sta-nisia-me-eidikes-thalassies-skines](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/238226_epanaproothoyn-prosfyges-sta-nisia-me-eidikes-thalassies-skines) and 'Ongoing push-backs with floating tents', 30 April 2020, available at: [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/241320\\_synehizontai-oi-epanaproothiseis-me-plotes-skines](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/241320_synehizontai-oi-epanaproothiseis-me-plotes-skines).
- <sup>7</sup> For instance, see Efsyn, 'SOS in the Aegean on two pushback incidents off the coast of Lesbos', 4 June 2020, available in Greek at: <https://www.efsyn.gr/node/246433>, 'Efsyn brings to the light video from a pushback operation in the Aegean', 4 June 2020, available at: [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/246465\\_i-efsyn-fernei-sto-fos-binteo-apo-epiheirisi-epanaproothisis-sto-aigaio](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/246465_i-efsyn-fernei-sto-fos-binteo-apo-epiheirisi-epanaproothisis-sto-aigaio) and 'New video on illegal pushbacks in the Aegean', 6 June 2020, available in Greek at: [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/246632\\_neo-binteo-apo-paranomes-epanaproothiseis-sto-aigaio](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/246632_neo-binteo-apo-paranomes-epanaproothiseis-sto-aigaio); Aegean Boat Report, 7 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/AegeanBoatReport/videos/560961651287529/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Who are visible in at least one of these videos? See Watch the Med – Alarmphone, 4 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watchthemed.alarmphone/videos/661521751370317/>
- <sup>9</sup> To Vima, "Refugee Issue: a boat with a woman giving birth left adrift for 18 hours", 14 June 2020, <https://www.tovima.gr/2020/06/14/society/prosfyqiko-mesopelaga-qia-18-ores-varka-me-gynaika-pou-gennouse/>; Watch The Med-Alarmphone, 13 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watchthemed.alarmphone/videos/315105312840957/>
- <sup>10</sup> UNHCR, 'UNHCR calls on Greece to investigate pushbacks at sea and land borders with Turkey', 12 June 2020, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/6/5ee33a6f4/unhcr-calls-greece-investigate-pushbacks-sea-land-borders-turkey.html>; IOM, 'IOM Alarmed over Reports of Pushbacks from Greece at EU Border with Turkey', 11 June 2020, available at: <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-alarmed-over-reports-pushbacks-greece-eu-border-turkey>.
- <sup>11</sup> Pressenza, "Push-backs: the chronic denial of Greek governments", 13 June 2020, available in Greek at: <https://www.pressenza.com/el/2020/06/epanaproothiseis-i-diaxoniki-arnisi-ton-kiverniseon/>
- <sup>12</sup> The latest reported pushback took place on 17 June near the island of Lesbos. The incident concerned a dinghy carrying 67 persons of whom 27 children. [https://twitter.com/alarm\\_phone/status/1273173859592802304](https://twitter.com/alarm_phone/status/1273173859592802304).
- <sup>13</sup> Joint Ministerial Decision on the "Extension of the duration of JMD nr Δ1α/ΓΠ.οικ.20030/ 21.3.2020 (B' 985) of the Ministers of Citizen Protection, Health and Migration and Asylum up to 5.7.2020, <https://www.taxheaven.gr/circulars/33534/d1a-gp-oik-38739-19-6-2020>.
- <sup>14</sup> European Commission. (16 April 2020). COVID-19: Guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement, p. 3, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/guidance-implementation-eu-provisions-asylum-retur-procedures-resettlement.pdf>
- <sup>15</sup> The data provided only includes the 15,913 asylum seekers who remain in the Moria camp at the time of writing. See General Secretariat for Information and Communication, National Situational Picture Regarding the Islands at Eastern Aegean Sea (22/6/2020), available at: <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/refugee-migration/?lang=en>.
- <sup>16</sup> 2 doctors in Lesbos, 2 in Chios, 1 in Samos and no paramedical personnel .Stonisi, 'The medical office of the Moria RIC once more operational', 11 June 2020, available at: <https://www.stonisi.gr/post/9493/ksana-se-leitourgia-to-iatreio-toy-kyt-morias>; ert, 'The medical offices in the RIC start operating again on Monday, but with 2 doctors and no nurses', 11 June 2020, available at: <https://vorieoigaigo.ert.gr/eidiseis/lesvos/epanaleitourgoy-n-epo-ti-devtera-me-dyo-omos-varadies-ta-iatreia-sta-kyt/>.
- <sup>17</sup> ThePressProject, "Mitarakis announces the closure of 60 refugee sites - "everyone should support themselves on their own", 9 June 2020, available in Greek at: <https://thepressproject.gr/klisimo-60-prosfyqikon-domon-proanangelli-o-mitarakis-o-kathenas-na-syntirisi-ton-eafto-tou/>

<sup>18</sup> See IOM, Supporting the Greek Authorities in Managing the National Reception System for Asylum Seekers and Vulnerable Migrants (SMS): factsheets (May 2020), available at: [https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/Consolidated%20Factsheet%20booklet\\_LO\\_1.pdf](https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/Consolidated%20Factsheet%20booklet_LO_1.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> See Notis Mitarakis, 'Exit of recognized refugees and non-asylum seekers from the Greek reception system', 29 May 2020, available in Greek at: <https://www.mitarakis.gr/gov/migration/6153-dt-yma-apoxwrisi-prosfygwn-estia>

<sup>20</sup> According to art. 30 of the IPA it is ensured that beneficiaries of international protection shall receive the necessary social assistance as provided to Greek nationals.

<sup>21</sup> Also RSA, Lack of effective integration policy exposes refugees in Greece to homelessness and destitution, while returns from European countries continue, 4 June 2020, <https://rsaeean.org/en/lack-of-effective-integration-policy-exposes-refugees-in-greece-to-homelessness-and-destitution-while-returns-from-european-countries-continue/>

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