



HUMANITARIANISM IN CRISIS: Lesbos, Greece

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A CRISIS BEGINS

The continued geopolitical instability in north Africa and the Middle East have recently triggered an unprecedented flight to the Mediterranean area, unseen in scale since the beginning the Second World War. Greece, with its unique geomorphology and strategic geographic location, finds itself at the center of this crisis, disproportionately impacted by the volume of refugees and migrants flowing into the country. On the heels of an ongoing sovereign debt and economic crisis and in the midst of political instability, Greece struggles to assist and provide for the vast number of men, women, and children fleeing and fighting for survival throughout their journey towards Western Europe.

Since the beginning of 2015, the number of immigrants and refugees entering Greece from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and other countries of Asia and Africa has surged into a full-scale humanitarian crisis, reaching a record 856,743 for the year. According to the latest figures from Greek authorities, 132,177 people arrived in Greece from Turkey within the first two months of 2016.

The main entry points into Europe for these successive migratory waves are the islands of the eastern Aegean Sea, in particular those islands closest to the shores of Asia Minor and with the most accessible coastlines. Of these, the island of Lesbos is at the forefront, receiving the bulk of immigrants and refugees. Figures for Lesbos alone for January through December 2015 place this number at 506,919 (UNCHR, 2016). During the same period the previous year, that number was 6,336 (Greek police data, a). Within the first 2 months of 2016, the number of arrivals to the island reached 76,858, showing no signs of a slowdown.

THE ISLAND OF LESBOS

Lesbos is the third largest island in Greece, located in the northeastern Aegean Sea, with a total population of 86,000 as of 2011. Its coastline stretches 199 miles, 80 of which face Turkey, and offers easy access to boats due to its sandy and smooth terrain. The closest point between Lesbos and the Turkish shores measures 6 miles, a distance that can be easily traversed by boat in 2 to 3 hours under favorable conditions.



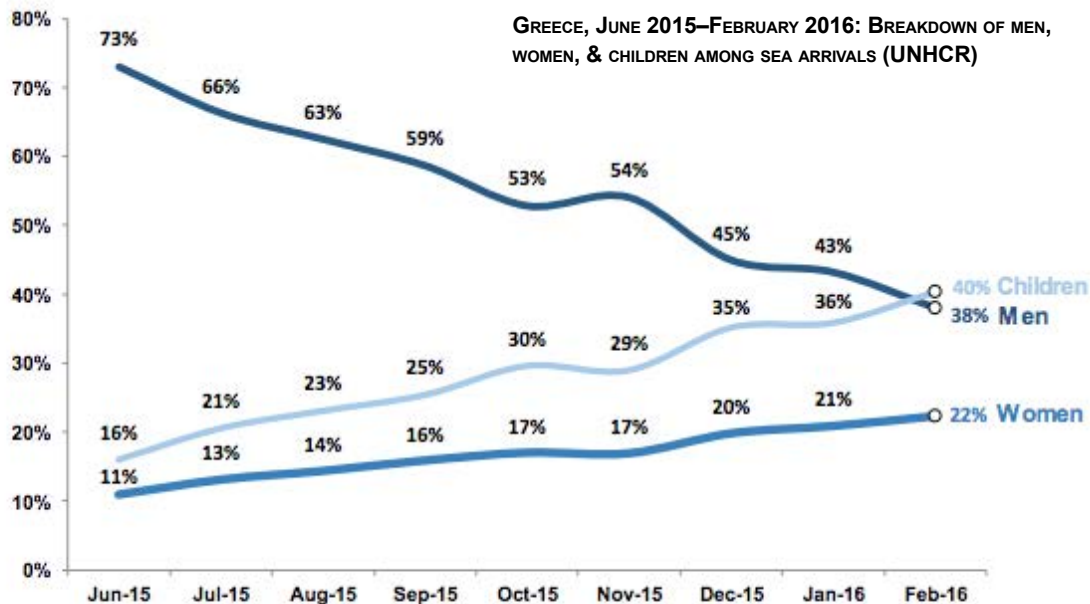
GREEK REFUGEE CAMP, LESBOS 1916.

CREDIT: P. PARASKEVAIDIS

Historically, the island of Lesbos has been a refuge to those fleeing persecution. In 1916, an estimated 42,783 Greek refugees (Ministry of Welfare, 1920) arrived on the island from Asia Minor, escaping the Greek genocide.¹ A hundred years later, the island has once again become a beacon of hope for those fleeing persecution, this time on an unprecedented historical scale. Despite the economic and political instability crippling the country, Greece continues to welcome refugees and immigrants daily without racial or religious discrimination and without bias, providing perhaps the only safe haven in the whole of Europe.

STATISTICS

The first warning signs of the crisis appeared in early 2013, when the number of immigrants and refugees entering the island via the Aegean Sea surpassed 3,793, doubling the figures from the previous year (Greek police data, 2016). Startling as this increase was, the Greek Coast Guard was for the most part able to effectively manage



the influx. This was due in part to the comparatively low number of crossing attempts and to a clear mandate by the Greek government to enforce border control.

According to Coast Guard testimonies,² no incidents of capsized boats or loss of lives were documented during these patrols and interventions. However, growing instability and conflict in Syria and the surrounding region led to ever increasing daily attempts to cross the Aegean into Greece, rendering the Coast Guard impotent in its attempts to patrol the borders or provide assistance to boats in distress, inevitably resulting in increased loss of life.

¹ The Greek genocide was the systematic ethnic cleansing of the Christian Ottoman Greek from Anatolia.

² 7 Coast Guard Officers were interviewed for this report.

In 2014, officials documented 12,187 arrivals on Lesbos (Greek police data, c). In 2015 that number jumped to 506,919—an increase of 1,566 percent. Of the 988,920 immigrants and refugees who entered Greece from January 2015 to March 2016 (UNHCR, 2016), Lesbos received more than 50 percent, with Kos, Chios, Samos and Leros splitting the remaining number.

The majority of arrivals are Syrian refugees, followed by immigrants from Afghanistan and other neighboring countries. Greek police records for 2015 list 455,363 Syrian refugees, 186,500 Afghani refugees, 23,318 Pakistani immigrants, 63,421 Iraqi refugees, 4,259 Somali immigrants, 4,137 Bangladeshi immigrants, 5,240 Palestine immigrants, and 19,612 Iranian immigrants, with the remaining numbers hailing from Albania, Eritrea, Congo, and Mali (Greek police data, 2016). Police data confirms that the vast majority of arrivals are males (55%), followed by children (28%) and women (17%). The largest concentration of women and children is to be found among Syrian, Afghani, and Iraqi refugees (UNHCR, 2016), indicating that many refugees flee in family units.

In August 2015 alone arrivals averaged well over 2,000 per day, at times exceeding 3,000. In September and early October, despite dangerous weather on the Aegean Sea, the number reached 4,000 per day, at times even exceeding 6,000. On October 23, 2015, local authorities announced that arrivals had exceeded 15,000 for the two preceding days, sharpening their growing concern for the safety and protection of immigrants and refugees amidst worsening winter weather. During the months that followed, the rate of arrivals slowed slightly, only to start increasing again in March as weather conditions improved.

LESBOS, A STOP ALONG THE WAY

The majority of refugees arrive in inflatable rubber dinghies from a stretch of Turkish coastline opposite northern Lesbos. Most dinghies chart a course to the small fishing village of Skamias in northern Lesbos, the closest land point to Turkey, some 6 miles away. The main port of Mytilene, which, until October 2015 was Lesbos's sole registration point for immigrants and refugees, lies about 35 miles to the south. Other popular crossing routes lead to Molyvos, another small village in the northeastern part of the island; to Tsonia; or even to Mytilene itself.

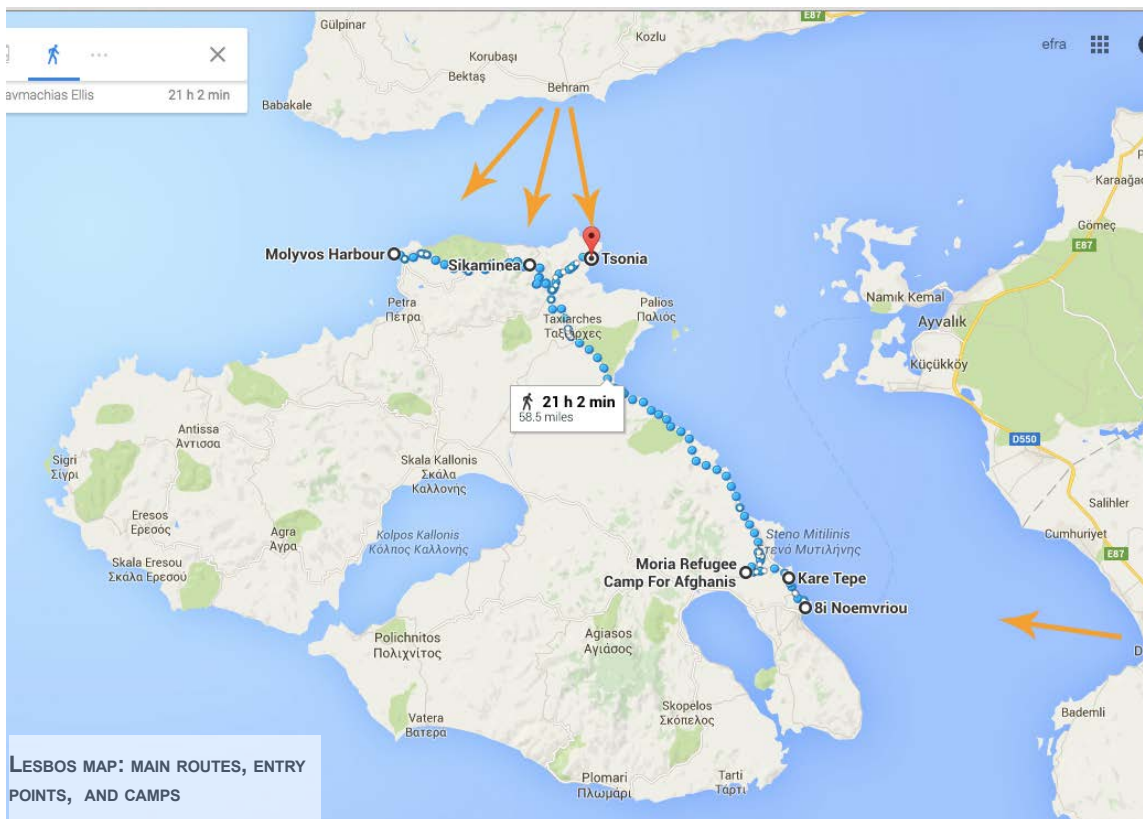
Having arrived in Turkey, immigrants³ and refugees⁴ meet with smugglers in the city of Izmir. Those traveling towards Lesbos are transferred by buses mainly to the ancient port of Assos (Berham in Turkish) and its surrounding area, or to the coastal area of Dikili. Boats leaving the Assos area arrive primarily at Skamias and Molyvos, while boats departing from Dikili and surrounding areas arrive closer to Mytilene.

Dinghies range in length from 20 to 30 feet and cost upwards of US \$1,200 per person to board. Documented cases exist of migrants paying as much as \$2,800 per person for the privilege of using "safer," non-rubber boats.⁵

³ Based on testimonies of 20 Afghani people. Eighteen were middle-aged males traveling with their wives and children; 2 were young males accompanied by their elderly parents.

⁴ Twenty Syrian refugees were also interviewed: 10 young males, 2 females traveling unaccompanied but with children, and 8 middle-aged males traveling with families.

⁵ On September 19, 2015, 14 people lost their lives when one of these "safer" boats ran out of fuel, leaving 26 passengers stranded at sea. Unheard and unseen, the boat sank, taking with it a baby and a 5-year-old girl.



Despite a maximum capacity of 20 people for a larger-sized boat, these dinghies are routinely packed with as many as 50 people at a time, seriously jeopardizing the lives of those on board, most of whom have no experience being at sea. Despite having paid more than 10 times the cost of a plane ticket or 150 times the cost of a ferry ride from Turkey, these people cannot choose when to leave or with how many people to travel and are entirely at the mercy of their smugglers.

In response to worsening weather and an increasingly violent sea, smugglers began to decrease their fees. According to the refugees and migrants interviewed for this report, those who aren't able to afford the crossing in good weather are forced to wait

BOATS DEPARTING TURKEY.

CREDIT: H. CESME



for poorer weather, an inhumane practice that has caused an increase in the number of shipwrecks and deaths.

Though the trip to Lesbos lasts no more than 2 to 3 hours, it is perhaps the most dangerous part of a journey that has likely already spanned more than 2,300 miles, with another 1,500 miles to go for those hoping to reach Germany or northern Europe. From start to finish, the journey to relative safety often requires exorbitant financial outlays, much of it paid to smugglers. For those crossing the Syrian/Turkey border, the fee for safe passage is US \$300 per person, with additional costs for those able to secure ground transportation to Izmir. Refugees travelling from Syria need approximately 50 days to reach Izmir.

For Afghans, the trip is much longer and costs substantially more money. Each Afghani pays around US \$4,000 to embark on the 2-month journey to reach Izmir. What follows next is the same for everyone, regardless of country of origin. As noted above, refugees must then find yet another smuggler and await their turn to cross the sea into Greece. Of those interviewed, most indicated waiting 4 or 5 days in Izmir. Those more fortunate are able to afford a hotel, but the majority waits along the coast without shelter.

When the time for departure finally comes, it comes quickly and without warning, many times without regard to optimal crossing conditions. People describe being aggressively forced to board boats under chaotic, disorganized, and terrifying conditions, while many testified to being beaten and kicked to make loading faster. The violence is not only physical but also psychological. People reported being told by the smugglers that if they are seen or caught by the Greek Coast Guard, they will be sent back to Turkey and will have to pay again for another attempt at crossing. In reality, the Greek Coast Guard routinely rescues boats in distress and transfers them to the port of Mytilene.

There is no doubting the criminality of human smuggling rings and the highly lucrative industry that has strengthened around the plight of these people. When asked why they simply did not buy their own boat and cross safely and on their own terms, the answer was unanimous: those who tried were hunted down, capsized, and forced to return to Turkey to face increased violence and increased crossing fees, many times under the watchful eye of and with the assistance of the Turkish Coast Guard.

“People described being aggressively forced to board boats under chaotic, disorganized, and terrifying conditions...”



A BOAT CRASHES ON A REEF WHILE APPROACHING LESBOS.

CREDIT: LESVOS.NET



BOATS APPROACH LESBOS IN POOR WEATHER.

CREDIT: O. SALIAMBOUKOU

CROSSING THE AEGEAN SEA

For even the most experienced sailors and fishermen, the sea can be a terrifying place. For those crossing in the black of night, in overcrowded rubber boats and without knowing how to swim or navigate a boat, the experience adds further pain and trauma to people who have in many cases already endured catastrophic hardship. Prior to the launch of the boats, migrants are given strict instructions to leave any passenger who falls overboard behind, as stopping to turn the boat around and provide assistance would allegedly prove fatal for all.

When engines fail, boats are typically stranded in the middle of the sea at the mercy of the elements, while fellow migrants in other boats ride past, adhering to the orders of their smugglers. As the Turkish coast fills with more and more people wishing to cross, and with the financial incentive at an estimated minimum of US \$50,000 per boat, smugglers ignore weather conditions, use faulty engines, and even take to sea without sufficient fuel.

The months between June and mid-September offer the best chances at a safe crossing. Unfortunately, these favorable conditions incentivize smugglers to further exploit migrants, overfilling boats to further increase profit. Overloaded boats sit so low in the sea that they take on water at a perilous rate, forcing passengers to remove water by any means possible, at times by throwing their belongings overboard to improve buoyancy.

In cases of engine failure or fuel shortage, it is only a matter of time before boats begin to sink. Additionally, lack of knowledge about the unique geomorphology of the Aegean Sea and about sailing has played a significant role in numerous crashes on reefs and shoals, many of these fatal. According to Greek Coast Guard data, between January 2015 and March 2016 a total of 368 people lost their lives, with an additional 186 missing.

REACHING LAND

When they first arrive in Lesbos, migrants and refugees are often euphoric. Many laugh or cry uncontrollably, while others fall to the ground, kissing the sand and thanking each other and anyone nearby. But this jubilation quickly turns to despair when they realize what lies ahead. Exhausted, hungry, and seasick, they are faced with a 30 to 40 mile walk (approximately 2 days) on hilly terrain without any protection from the elements. In summer, this can mean outdoor temperatures of 100 degrees Fahrenheit; in fall and winter it can mean being battered by heavy rainstorms and enduring low temperatures. For pregnant women and those traveling with children or the elderly, this walk can easily exceed 2 days.

The transportation of refugees by locals remains forbidden by law under the premise that doing so would equate to people-smuggling. Many of those inclined to help are further deterred by fines of up to Euro 150 and the threat of prosecution. During the summer, only in cases of emergency or injury were some transferred by ambulance or police to the local hospital.



LATE AUGUST 2015: MIGRANTS WALK THE 30 TO 40 MILES FROM THE SHORELINE TO THE CAMPS.

CREDIT: FREEDOM HOUSE

In August, under heavy pressure from the growing number of arrivals, the Coast Guard began busing people between the port and the camps. By September, with the arrival of many international NGOs, more buses were being used to transfer migrants from points of arrival to the camps, and more locals and tourists were individually transporting refugees using private vehicles, after informing the police of their intentions in order to avoid a fine. Nevertheless, the simultaneous arrival of almost 3,000 to 4,000 people per day made providing transportation for everyone nearly impossible.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN LESBOS

Responding to a crisis of this magnitude would be a difficult task for any developed nation. For Greece, facing such a crisis during a full-blown political and economic collapse seems an impossible task. The Greek people are themselves confronting a bleak reality: years of unemployment of over 50 percent and capital controls that strangle family and business income plus political instability and new, more severe austerity measures. For refugees, the conditions are simply catastrophic.

Housing

Kare Tepe Refugee Camp. When the first wave of refugees and immigrants arrived in the Spring of 2015, the mayor of the city of Mytilene set up an informal, temporary camp around an open car park area, 2.5 miles from the main port. Designed to host 500 people, the camp quickly became overcrowded as more than 3,000 people settled

there. The tents provided were not nearly enough for everyone, forcing people to seek makeshift shelters and live in cardboard boxes. Access to clean water was scarce, with sanitation facilities limited to 5 toilets and 2 showers – well short of meeting the needs of such a large number of people.

As the number of arrivals continued to grow, refugees and migrants settled themselves along the unlit main road leading into the camp, placing themselves at serious risk of being hit by traffic while sleeping. The decision was made to transfer the arrivals to a former military base close to the village of Moria, in the hopes that a reduction in the number of those settled in Kare Tepe would lead to an improvement of the situation on the ground.

Unfortunately, the rate of new arrivals quickly outpaced any potential for relief, causing already strained living conditions to deteriorate further. Despite efforts to construct a cleaning canal and to expand access to water and sanitation, it became clear that Kare Tepe camp, and Lesbos by extension, was unable to manage the crisis alone. As conditions grew worse, the distinct possibility of a public health disaster grew, with uncontrolled garbage accumulating close to water sources and unsanitary conditions increasing the risk of infections and diseases.



A CHILD REFILLS A WATER CONTAINER IN KARA TEPE CAMP.
CREDIT: G. PAPADOPOULOS/VCL

Moria Reception Camp. Moria camp is 4 miles from the city of Mytilene. Beginning in September 2013 it functioned as a reception camp for first-time migrants, with a capacity of 180 people. Plans for constructing a pre-departure camp, with an expanded capacity of 800, were never realized.⁶

Due to the overwhelming number of inhabitants, conditions at Moria camp quickly deteriorated. Clean water was limited and uncontrolled piles of garbage multiplied. The majority of people were settled along the camp's outskirts in tents, others in makeshift shelters adapted from nets used to harvest olives; some stayed beneath trees, without protection from the elements. In addition to the threat of disease, there were also significant fire hazards, as open fires were the only available method for cooking. The closest convenience store is located 1.2 miles away, forcing refugees to walk a long distance in order to buy food or water.

Over the summer, arrivals stayed an average of 7 days in Lesbos, waiting for their registration and papers to clear and for the trip to Athens. As their numbers increased, the average wait time also increased, seriously compounding existing problems and jeopardizing the continued sustainability of the situation.

⁶ The camp was renamed the Moria Detention Center after the March 18, 2016, agreement between the European Union and Turkey. Reflecting newly implemented measures, the center is no longer an open facility but an open detention center for all migrants and refugees arriving in Greece. For an analysis of the implications of the EU-Turkey agreement, see "The Mean Bargain: The EU/Turkey Refugee and Migrant Deal" at <http://fxb.harvard.edu/the-mean-bargain-the-euturkey-refugee-and-migrant-deal/>



CHILDREN PLAYING AND KEEPING WARM, MORIA CAMP (NOW MORIA DETENTION CENTER). CREDIT: G. PAPADOPOULOS/VCL

As of October 2015, the increased number of arrivals and deteriorating weather conditions had dramatically worsened the situation at Moria camp. Nonstop rains and limited access to shelter meant refugees were fighting to survive in a wet, muddy environment without dry clothes, food, water, or medication. Despite the continued efforts of local people, national and international NGOs, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to winterize shelters, condition remained critical. As of late March 2016, Moria continues to host more than 3,000 people, subject to the March 18, 2016, European-Union deal with Turkey.

Port of Mytilene and the City of Mytilene. With camps unable to contain the growing number of migrants, the port of Mytilene was transformed into a makeshift shelter during the Summer of 2015. Over 6,000 migrants settled in its parking lot and along its perimeter. Living conditions there were markedly worse than in the camps. There were no sanitation facilities or any designated areas in which to dispose of waste of any kind. Those more fortunate resided in tents, but the majority were sleeping under parked cars,



AN AD-HOC FAMILY SHELTER, MORIA.



PEOPLE WAITING IN LINE FOR FOOD, KARA TEPE CAMP.

seeking shelter and protection from the elements. As the port became saturated, many refugees were forced to settle in the center of the city, in parks and squares, sleeping mostly under trees or on cardboard boxes, straining an already delicate relationship with locals trying themselves to cope with a changing city and the extent of the crisis.

Lack of food

As the camps lack the proper infrastructure for cooking or food storage, the task of preparing or storing food for daily consumption is a challenge for all. Those who have money can buy food in the local stores, but the majority does not have this ability. These people depend on the limited ability of the local people and of international NGOs and other volunteers to provide food, but these efforts are unable to meet the needs of all those in need.

Among these efforts is Social Kitchen “The Other Human,” a communal movement with the goal of providing free food, whose members work alongside locals as well as with members of the migrant and refugee population. According to volunteers, distributing food is a heartbreaking process in which they are forced to turn away children whom they know have not eaten for days in order to feed those who had been waiting for hours in line.

Lack of proper health care

The island’s health care system was quickly overwhelmed with cases of malnutrition, exposure, and exhaustion. From the beginning of 2015 until early September, 773 refugees and immigrants were treated in the emergency room of Mytilene’s Vostaneion General Hospital; 326 were hospitalized. By November, according to hospital records and interviews with doctors, only one individual was diagnosed with tuberculosis and two with Hepatitis B, assuaging a growing fear of an exogenous health epidemic or a contagion effect.

Doctors contend with a shortage of medical equipment and supplies, along with language barriers. Despite these difficulties, they offer their help generously, without

regard for the cost which, according to hospital records, surpassed Euro 168,920 as of September 2015.

The situation was improved when Doctors Without Borders started conducting health screenings and medical checks in Kare Tepe. Doctors of the World did the same in Moria. Patients were referred to the hospital in cases of emergency. These efforts were further helped by the presence of Greek NGOs as well as by international NGOs who began arriving in September to offer aid.

Problems at the registration point

Until late September 2015 registration was conducted in a small, rundown shipping container turned processing center in the port of Mytilene, staffed by a small number of police and Coast Guard officials, resulting in long queues and frustration for everyone. Registrants receive documents that prevent them from being arrested/deported for a period of 30 days.

The process was hampered by a lack of translators, which contributed to verbal conflicts between officials and refugees. Tensions between nationalities added to the frustrations caused by the delays; some demanded their registration be prioritized ahead of others, leading to growing conflict between refugees, at times necessitating the presence of riot police to dissipate outbreaks.

On October 16, the registration point was relocated to the Moria reception camp, which became the first “hotspot”⁷ in Greece. Following criticism about Greece’s screening and registration shortfalls, the European border agency Frontex, which systematically targets the identification and screening of “illegal” immigrants trying to enter the European Union, has been handling registration. Their registration approach focuses more on identifying those who have no grounds to seek asylum and deporting them. This policy marks the first known instance on the island of systematic discrimination.

The absence of the necessary management infrastructure and the lack of a functioning queuing system or any form of crowd control has resulted in registration lines that extend several miles. People are forced to stand in line for days on end exposed to rain, mud, and cold while suffering from exhaustion, fatigue, and malnourishment.

“People are forced to stand in line for days on end exposed to rain, mud, and cold while suffering from exhaustion, fatigue, and malnourishment.”



WAITING IN LINE, MORIA REGISTRATION CENTER.

CREDIT: G. PAPADOPOULOS/VCL

⁷ A hotspot is a key arrival point for migrants and refugees, where screening and fingerprinting are conducted.

During the winter, doctors had documented cases where pregnant women had miscarried due to the stressful circumstances, as well as cases where families had become separated. They expressed growing concerns about gangrene and other diseases brought on by the cold, wet conditions.

DEPARTURE TO ATHENS

Until as late as July 2015 only one commercial ferry boat connected Lesbos with Athens, carrying both locals and tourists, forcing registered refugees to compete for a limited number of tickets. The cost of such a ticket is approximately Euro 50 per person. In August another ferry, Eleftherios Venizelos, with a capacity of 2,000-2,500 passengers, was permanently stationed in the port of Mytilene and charged with exclusively transporting registered migrants. Later, Terra Jet, with a capacity of 1,300 passengers and a departure schedule of every 2 days, was sent to assist. These efforts, however well intentioned, proved insufficient to alleviate the growing frustration of refugees on the ground who struggle daily to survive under inhumane conditions.

Groups of migrants often took to demonstrating in front of the port and in the middle of the city, blocking main roads as they demanded faster processing times and causing increased tensions with locals struggling to cope. This frustration reached a boiling point when a group of over a hundred Afghans tried to forcibly board Eleftherios Venizelos without tickets and without having completed the registration process. This prompted a response from riot police. Despite the frustration and growing tension, however, no serious incidents of violence have been reported between locals and migrants, speaking to the unique tolerance of the island population.

On September 7, the Greek alternate minister on migration policy announced new short-term measures aimed at addressing some of the most pressing humanitarian needs facing Lesbos. Hoping to alleviate the long delays during registration and departure to Athens, additional staff and increased ferry routes were temporarily added. These new measures, which went into effect immediately, resulted in the identification and registration of 17,000 people as well as their departure to Athens within 3 days, helping to ease the pressure of a by then 30,000-strong migrant population in Mytilene.

During November 2015, the economic and financial difficulties facing Greece, along with the implementation of new austerity measures, led many shipping industry employees to demonstrate against the government, with strikes lasting 4 to 5 days at a time. This caused major delays in the flow of migrants from the island to Athens. During this period thousands upon thousands of refugees found themselves stranded in Lesbos, with more and more arriving from Turkey daily.

Unfortunately, those who eventually make it to Athens are faced with yet more problems. Recent developments in Europe led to a unilateral sealing of borders by the majority of Balkan countries, blocking primary routes towards destination countries in northern Europe (see page 20).

“These efforts ... proved insufficient to alleviate the growing frustration of refugees ... who struggle daily to survive under inhumane conditions.”



A LOCAL MAN PULLS A STRANDED BOAT TO SAFETY NEAR SKAMIA.

GREECE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Greece has been criticized for its failure to respond quickly and manage the crisis properly. An objective analysis places the greatest responsibility at the feet of the new government, especially in light of promises made when it came to power on January 25, 2015. At that time the new government announced an “open borders” and an “absence of maritime borders” policy, potentially triggering the ensuing flow of migrants into the country by way of Lesbos and the other islands of the eastern Aegean Sea.

The idea itself is certainly commendable as it lies, in principle, firmly on the side of human rights. What is inexcusable, however, is when such a policy is not accompanied with adequate preparation and infrastructure, such as proper reception centers, registration points, transportation facilities, and a rational, pre-determined geographic distribution of the incoming population. Such a failure is tragic, instilling hopes in the hearts of millions who risk everything to embark on an arduous month-long journey only to arrive at a destination where even their most basic needs go unmet.

In retrospect, Greece's failure to predict the sheer numbers of those who would make the trip lies in a deeper, more fundamental failure to understand the human trafficking and smuggling industry and its incredible capacity for exploiting and moving vast numbers of people in short periods of time. Ultimately, the consequences fell on the shoulders of the native populations who were forced to shoulder the burden for caring for hundreds of thousands of migrants without proper preparation or infrastructure.

THE EFFORTS OF THE LOCAL POPULATION

As the first boats began to land on Lesbos, the local population responded in a uniquely humanistic manner, characteristic of the island and its history. Many locals saw themselves and their own past in the migrants, knowing that only a short generation before, their own parents and grandparents had made the journey across the sea when

fleeing the Greek genocide. At those shores where boats most frequently arrive, people can be seen waiting with water, food and clothes, while in village centers others organize clothing collection and gather first aid kits to provide help to those with the greatest need.

Locals describe the migrants with dignity and self-respect and speak of moments when migrants have offered to pay volunteers for their help and supplies. When payment is refused, the reaction is one of surprise and gratitude, as, according to their own testimony, no part of the migrants' journey has come without a monetary cost.

Volunteers can also be seen assisting children and elderly people to disembark boats, and many fishermen can be seen daily towing stranded boats and the people in them to shore. A typical example is the September 12 rescue of 250 migrants stranded at sea. Locals were awakened by the sound of a large wooden boat crashing onto the rocks. During the rescue operation that ensued, rescuers were notified of another boat,⁸ equal in size, and heading in the same direction. Despite darkness, unfavorable weather, and dangerous sea conditions, local fishermen didn't hesitate to leave their homes and rescue the second boat, which was sailing rudderless and very close to the rocks.

Another noteworthy example is the rescue of 35 people by the ferry Blue Star 1. The captain, while en route from Athens to Mytilene, spotted the half-sunk boat 4 miles from the southeastern coast of Lesbos and without hesitation stopped the 2,500 passenger ferry and recovered the migrants, among them a 7-month old baby and an elderly man.

The Greek Coast Guard echoes this humanitarianism and has for the past 5 years shown a propensity for rescuing people without causing loss of life. All documented loss of life has been a result of poor weather conditions which delayed the Coast Guard from reaching those in need in time.

Although transportation of immigrants by car or bus is illegal, some locals, in direct defiance of the law, transport migrants from northern Lesbos to the camp. In early July 2015, two women were brought to court after having been arrested for transporting refugees. The case mobilized other locals to demonstrate outside the courthouse in support of the women, and while the law remains in effect, enforcement has given way to the will of the people, with police largely turning a blind eye to those who assist.

For those who have to walk the 30 to 40 mile journey to the camps, locals from villages along the way provide them with food, snacks, and water. In the village of Kalloni, the local NGO Agkalia, formed by the local priest Papa-Stratis Dimou, offers shelter, food, and health care to those who walk from the northwestern part of the island. Memorable is the moment that Papa-Stratis shared with a pregnant migrant who had been in serious need of medical assistance and had become separated from her husband during their journey. After he had cared for her and helped her locate her husband, Papa-Stratis, the husband, and his wife shared a moment of affection that truly transcended religion and culture.

“As the first boats began to land ... the locals responded in a uniquely humanistic manner, characteristic of the island and its history.”

⁸ This incident marked the first time that a boat of such size and material was seen in Lesbos, indicating the changing tactics of smugglers who continuously find new ways to exploit the situation and maximize profit.

The husband knelt before the priest, kissing his hands, thanking him for having saved his wife and unborn child. Hundreds of such moments have been documented, not just between locals and immigrants, but between refugees, immigrants, and tourists who assist in times of need.

In the camps, locals routinely bring food and medicine and provide supplies or pledge their time working with the Social Kitchen “The Other Human.” Many migrants and refugees are surprised to learn that these people are volunteering their time and paying for supplies out of their own pockets, having assumed that these efforts were funded by the Greek or European governments.



AN OVERCROWDED WOODEN BOAT IS RESCUED.

CREDIT: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Additionally, many locals welcome refugee families into their houses, offering warmth, food, and the chance to take a shower before continuing their difficult trip, while others share their own clothes with them.

GROWING TENSIONS

As Greece teeters on the verge of total economic collapse, the unchecked arrival of migrants compounds the systemic problems locals struggle with daily. Many fear the impact of littered streets and polluted beaches on tourism, the local economic lifeline.

Attempts by locals to control the accumulation of rubbish are not enough to prevent the situation from turning into an environmental disaster. Locals cannot properly dispose of all of the boats that arrive each day, for instance, and these boats, when abandoned, take on water and become impossible to move without substantial effort. Abandoned dinghies dot the shore well beyond the main landing points of Skamias and Molyvos, with piles of deflated, rotting rubber boats and hundreds of life jackets drifting to inaccessible points along Lesbos' extensive shoreline.

Overwhelmed, especially during the summer, locals were reaching boiling point. Many went on record saying that “our city does not belong to us anymore” and expressed frustration at not being able to go to work or take their children to school. Feeling abandoned by their government and left to sort out the crisis on their own, the community grew divided. Verbal conflict between locals is a daily occurrence, with altercations between those who desire to help the migrants and those who blame them for their troubles. In most cases these altercations are non-physical and reflect emotional rather than rational beliefs; those who are one day seen arguing against providing assistance to the migrants can be found helping to rescue them in times of peril.

Throughout the entirety of the crisis to date, there has been one isolated incident of violence towards immigrants by locals. In late summer two 17-year-old boys threw Molotov cocktails into a park where migrants were sleeping. No injuries were reported and the two were immediately arrested and prosecuted. Nevertheless, the continued inability of the government to properly manage the situation places at risk the relative calm and peace that exists between locals and migrants.

THE FAR-RIGHT REACTION

Throughout the more than six years of austerity Greece has endured, a growing fascist presence has taken hold, with around 7.5 percent⁹ of all Greeks holding extreme fascist beliefs and hostile ideologies towards immigrants and refugees. These groups try to incite panic by spreading lies and misinformation about abuses committed by the migrants. Such tales fill people with fear about a pending Muslim invasion and further polarize the local people. Among the rumor-generated fears expressed are sentiments such as “the Muslims will rape our daughters or will break into our houses.”



ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT.

LOCAL EXPLOITATION

Some locals have taken to exploiting the situation, attempting to profit by charging inflated prices for prepared food or transportation. Based on their own testimonies, immigrants and refugees are approached by profiteers claiming that the price of goods or services is different for refugees versus immigrants, that pricing depends more on how much the seller stands to make rather than on an established, fair pricing system. Numerous small businesses have been set up outside the camps for many months, selling overpriced food, water, and clothes and requesting money for charging mobile phones.¹⁰

Additionally, there is a small percentage of people who aim to make money directly off of the smuggling industry itself. These islanders lurk at the shores, targeting the engines of the boats on which migrants arrive. According to the testimony of local fishermen, those who can get their hands on an engine can sell it for at least Euro 300. Though this act does not cost migrants anything directly, and while in fact numerous times migrants can be heard telling fishermen who assist them to take the engines for themselves as reward, it further polarizes locals who don't tolerate this practice.

⁹ The elections of September 20, 2015, showed an increase from 5% to 7% for Lesbos and 8% for Greece as a whole, strengthening fears over a growing intolerance and potentially hostile treatment of migrants.

¹⁰ Locals have successfully filed lawsuits against local businesses who engage in exploitative pricing policies, but the practice continues.



AD-HOC CAMP AT EIDOMENI.

CREDIT: FREEDOM HOUSE

THE EFFORTS OF THE NGOS

Since September 2015, 81 non-governmental organizations have settled on the island, an outsized number for an island the size of Lesbos. Thousands of volunteers operate at key points, helping to reinforce humanitarian efforts. Many NGOs operate at the shores, providing lifesaving assistance to the disembarking refugees. Others provide transportation from the shores to the reception camps, saving the arrivals an otherwise long and difficult walk.

NGOs operating within the camps offer food, water, and dry winter clothes. Medical teams also operate inside the camps and also at the shoreline, alleviating some of the strain placed on the local hospital. A few NGOs provide interpretation services to facilitate communication between migrants and local authorities or doctors. Many NGO workers also advise migrants about the registration process and the difficulties they will face during the rest of their trip. Other NGOs have organized garbage removal campaigns and provision of rubbish bins, while others have created safe areas for children. A small number of NGOs has provided local authorities and the hospital with specialized equipment.

However, a lack of coordination between the large number of NGOs and volunteers, along with the relatively small size of the island, has caused difficulties. As of early March, only 30 NGOs were properly registered and cooperating with the local municipality and authorities. This disregard of the law, along with the poor treatment that some NGOs show towards local volunteers, has raised concerns amongst officials, particularly about those NGOs which appear to provide medical care without employing properly trained medical professionals. The need for coordination and management of the volunteers on the ground is ever more crucial (Boris Cheshirkov, UNHCR spokesperson) to avoid duplication of effort, misidentification of the needs of refugees and to avoid backlash from locals who are treated disrespectfully and whose efforts are often dismissed.

RECENT CHANGES IN THE EUROPEAN SCENE AND THEIR IMPACT ON REFUGEES

By the time immigrants and refugees reach Greece, settle into a camp, and complete the registration process, they have experienced more injustice, maltreatment, and suffering than most will encounter in a lifetime. In the face of this reality, many take the humanitarian response of locals and the government for granted. However, as they begin their attempt to journey past Greece into northern Europe through the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYRoM), Serbia, Hungary, and Bulgaria, a new realization takes hold.

Once reaching mainland Greece, refugees and migrants must pay more for ground transportation to reach the country's northern border to go to fYRoM and continue towards their destination countries. Those who provided testimony for this report said that their destination country is often based on the speed of asylum processing, the economic condition of the country, and whether they have family in those countries.



CHILDREN PASS THE TIME WHILE WAITING IN EIDOMENI.

However, political developments in neighboring Balkan countries have now led to the placement of many restrictions on those wishing to continue their journey to asylum. Last September, Slovakia announced the closure of its borders with Hungary. In October, Hungary, a major crossing point into Austria and Germany, blocked its borders with Croatia. This decision forced a detour in the migration route, cutting instead through Croatia.

During the same month, Austria announced that it had built a metal fence along the borders with Slovenia, creating the first barrier between two Schengen-area countries, where the movement of people is supposed to be free and unrestricted. In December, fYRoM erected a fence along its border, allowing only Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis to cross. This forced the Greek police to transfer more than 2,250 people back to Athens and house them in government controlled emergency transit centers.

February 2016 may be considered the month when Balkan countries turned their backs on the refugees, with the rest of Europe witnessing the situation and Greece facing a heightened humanitarian emergency. On February 19, 2016, Austria imposed a daily entry limit of 3,200 and a daily limit of 80 asylum applications, resulting in changes throughout the Balkans and more stranded refugees. On February 22, Slovenia announced the erection of a fence at the borders with

Austria and Hungary, while the border with Croatia was secured with the aid of military troops. Under pressure, Croatia warned that blocking the main migration route through Croatia to Austria and Germany would also lead to the closing of Croatian borders, as the country could not alone house all those prevented from entering Austria and Germany (*The Guardian*, February 25, 2016).

On the same day, February 22, fYRoM also sealed its borders, forbidding entrance to Afghanis and allowing only a limited number of Syrians and Iraqis to cross, imposing at the same time additional, stricter controls¹¹ (UNHCR, February 25, 2016) On February 24, Albania warned that it too would close its borders if fYRoM fully sealed its border with Greece. Bulgaria, being a major transit country for those who do not cross the Aegean Sea but instead travel by land through Turkey, extended the fence it had already built on its border with Turkey. Hungary called for an anti-refugee quota referendum, and Czech Republic called for the formation of a special migration police unit (*The Guardian*, February, 25, 2016).

These political developments led to a build-up of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers stranded on the Greek side of the fYRoM border. By February 26, more than 15,000 refugees were stranded at the border and in need of accommodation and food (UNHCR, 2016).

On March 18, EU leaders signed a historic deal with Turkey aimed at shutting down the main migration route used by refugees and migrants and offloading the crisis to another country. Under the terms of the new deal, new migrants entering Greece by way of Turkey after March 20, 2016, will be deported to Turkey. Those deemed eligible to seek asylum will be placed in refugee camps in Turkey, while those deemed ineligible will be returned to their home countries. In exchange, Europe will provide Turkey with an additional Euro 3 billion in financial support and a pledge to resettle one Syrian refugee within Europe for each Syrian refugee returned to Turkey, capped at a maximum of 72,000. Deportation began on April 4, when 202 migrants and refugees were deported to Turkey under heavy security. Ironically, arrivals of migrants and refugees from Turkey to the Greek islands have not ceased, with 1,276 arrivals between April 1st and 4th and 26,623 for the month of March (UNHCR). It is impossible to overlook the desire of these people to reach Europe by any means possible.

As of April 5, 2016, 52,352 migrants and refugees were stranded in Greece, with 35,088 located in transit camps in mainland Greece; 11,280 in Eidomeni at the border with fYRoM; and 5,984 on the Greek islands generally. Despite the Greek government's attempts to evacuate the camp at Eidomeni due to the squalid living conditions and due to the large (4,000) number of children living there, refugees refuse to leave, hoping against all hope to cross the sealed border towards northern Europe. In the Moria detention center,¹² 3,149 migrants and refugees are now detained, 2,800 of whom have requested asylum within the past few days in response to the new deal.

“It is impossible to overlook the desire of these people to reach Europe by any means possible.”

¹¹ They must present a photo ID in order to cross.

¹² Under the new deal, the hostpots have now become detention centers.

A GROWING INDUSTRY IN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING

It is expected that the number of refugees and asylum seekers who will be exploited by smugglers and traffickers will rise in proportion to the stricter and very selective entry mechanisms put in place by transit and destination countries. It follows that as long as there is no governmentally established method for refugees to cross into Europe, those out of money and unable to feed their families will increasingly look to the smuggling and trafficking industry as their only choice. There is a growing concern that governmental efforts to stem the flow of migrants could lead to more covert smuggling, higher prices, and more violence against already vulnerable and traumatized people. If migrants and refugees are unable to pay the increased prices, they may engage in forced labor or subject themselves to sexual exploitation in an effort to secure the funds to pay for their journey. Those at highest risk tend to be from poorer economic backgrounds (UNHCR, 2016), as well as unaccompanied children.

As established routes through the Balkans become inaccessible, many will be steered toward alternative routes, including those that they had previously avoided due to the presence of anti-immigration and far-right ideologies. In countries such as Bulgaria and Hungary, for instance, there have been documented cases where migrants were abused, beaten, robbed, and attacked with police dogs. Such cases are of particular concern, as these migrants have no access to health care to tend to their wounds (Human Rights Watch, January 20, 2016). In light of these events it remains unclear whether the measures put in place to combat smuggling and trafficking are doing more harm than good.

Of particular concern is the new European Union-Turkey deal and its far reaching implications. In protest of the deal and its terms, many NGOs have scaled back or suspended operations in the Moria camp, refusing to “be instrumentalized for a mass expulsion operation and be part of a system that has no regard for the humanitarian or protection needs of asylum seekers and migrants” (M.E. Ingres, MSF Head of Mission in Greece). The deportation of these vulnerable people to Turkey will likely place them at increased risk for many types of exploitation, including child exploitation, as echoed by recent reports from Human Rights Watch (2015).

MIGRANTS ATTEMPTING TO CROSS RECENTLY SEALED BORDERS.

CREDIT: FREEDOM HOUSE



INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE

This chaotic and massive flow of people marks the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. It is a crisis that Greece and the whole of Europe were not prepared for and are not currently able to handle. The disparate approaches by countries inside and outside the European Union have led to deep political divisions amongst neighboring nations that threaten the unity and cooperation the Union has strived to achieve.

Beyond Europe, the crisis has sparked global debate and widespread outrage, and has even influenced domestic policies far beyond the European Union. This global crisis requires a global humanitarian response. None of the European countries, despite unilateral attempts to implement responsive measures of one kind or another, are able to halt the momentum of this movement. The safety and economic prosperity Europe has created, along with its established social welfare systems, act as magnets attracting those fleeing from war, oppression, and persecution.

History and human nature show that people will face every risk to save themselves and their families, yet the response by many countries in Europe seems to ignore this fact. Through attempts to “stem the flow of immigrants,” they ignore the potential for shattering the European Union and for dismantling the Schengen Zone. Also, the policy that Europe has adopted paradoxically seems to encourage illegal immigration, empowering the smuggling and trafficking industry more and more.

The actions taken by sovereign nations to protect and care for those lucky enough to reach their borders will indeed define the legacy of those nations. Europe’s responsibility is dictated by its values and founding principles, “the protection of fundamental human rights and freedom and to ensure freedom, security and justice.”

If there is to be hope for Europe and for the rest of the world, Europe must not turn its back on its own history nor on the promises it made to the world. Europe must stand united and resolute in its response, committed to upholding the human rights of those risking their lives to reach her doorstep.

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