

LESVOS BULLETIN

Oxfam's update on the EU 'hotspot' of Moria



Child living in the "Olive Grove" adjacent to Moria camp, Lesvos, Greece – September 2019. Photo credits: Giorgos Moutafis/Oxfam.

- With 45,500 arrivals since the start of 2019, Greece has seen more irregular sea arrivals this year than Spain, Italy, Malta, and Cyprus combined¹.
- As a result of the EU-Turkey deal, which stipulates that asylum seekers cannot leave the Greek islands, **some 30,500 people are trapped on the Greek islands** in deplorable and degrading living conditions, which deteriorate their health, safety and wellbeing.
- The registration, medical and asylum services available for asylum seekers in Lesvos are **woefully insufficient** and represent a failure on the part of Greece to meet its obligations under law. Physical health issues are not treated in time, mental health issues might not even be detected, and people have to wait for months or even years before an asylum decision.
- After **three tragic deaths** in and around the EU 'hotspot' of Moria – including two children – since the end of August, people living in the camp describe it as a 'cemetery' and live in a state of fear².
- In September, **over 40% of the people trapped in Moria 'hotspot'** were children, and **over 1,000 of them are unaccompanied**. Due to limited space, most of them are living in extremely unsafe conditions with adults.



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CALL TO ACTION

Oxfam is calling on EU governments to:

- **Share responsibility with Greece for receiving and welcoming people seeking asylum to Europe.** In the short-term, this can be done through temporary arrangements with Greece to relocate and host asylum seekers in other EU countries. In the long term, the 'Dublin Regulation' should be reformed in line with the position of the European Parliament³.

Oxfam is calling on Greece, with the support of other EU governments and the European Commission, to:

- **Urgently increase long-term reception and accommodation capacity on the Greek mainland** ensuring safe and dignified living standards.
- **Evacuate the overcrowded EU 'hotspots'**, prioritizing the transfer of all unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable people to safe and specialized shelters on the Greek mainland.
- **Rapidly deploy additional expert staff in the EU 'hotspots' on the islands**, including doctors, psychologists, child psychologists and cultural mediators, to ensure that all people seeking asylum receive adequate medical and psychosocial treatment upon arrival, and that all vulnerable people are identified as such and can receive the support and treatment they need.
- **End the geographical restriction that entraps asylum seekers in the Greek islands** for an unknown and unlimited period of time and that results in overcrowding of camps and degrading living conditions.
- **Provide free legal assistance to asylum seekers** on the islands by hiring state-funded lawyers and, where this is not sufficient, by funding legal aid organisations and NGOs already providing legal information and assistance to asylum seekers.

OVERALL SITUATION AND STATISTICS

In August and September, the arrivals to the Greek islands continued to increase significantly with a total of **approximately 18,000 people** who made the perilous journey from Turkey by sea⁴. This is more than double the arrivals over the same period in 2018 (7,157 persons) and 2017 (8,470 persons)⁵. According to UNHCR, sea arrivals in September reached the highest monthly level since 2016, with the majority being families from Syria and Afghanistan⁶.

The Turkish coast guard and police also reported an increase in the number of people crossing from Turkey to Greece and claimed to have stopped more than 1,000 boats carrying approximately 35,000 persons trying to cross the Aegean Sea⁷. This is almost five times as many people as over the same period last year. Despite the increase, arrivals into the

Greek islands remain well below 2015 levels and should be manageable by the Greek government with the support of the EU.

Yet, the five Greek islands' EU 'hotspot' camps, also known as Reception and Identification Centres (RICs), continue to be among the worst and most dangerous camps in all of Greece - with Moria 'hotspot' on Lesbos being the largest refugee camp in all of Europe.

As further described below, asylum seekers forced to live in the EU 'hotspot' of Moria are exposed to **severe and daily risks of violence, undignified and unhygienic conditions** and are denied access to fundamental basic services and rights such as health care and information.

Whereas the new government of Greece already transferred around 8,000 people from all islands to the mainland since August⁸, those efforts are **far from sufficient** to end the dangerous level of overcrowding in the islands' 'hotspots'. In fact, due to the latest increase in arrivals, the number of asylum seekers on the islands has been further increasing.

Equally concerning is the fact that there is, at the moment, **no accommodation spaces available on the Greek mainland**. Promises by the government to create 'transit camps' in out-of-use military bases on the mainland to host 10,000 migrants and refugees transferred from overcrowded islands facilities have not yet been acted upon⁹.

The creation of additional accommodation spaces on the mainland is urgently needed and welcome. However, it is questionable whether a new short-term plan for the creation of temporary reception spaces will provide for dignified reception conditions and ensure adequate protection to people during the harsh conditions in autumn and winter and further on.

*At the end of September, there were **some 30,500 migrants trapped on the Greek islands** – the highest number ever since the EU-Turkey deal was entered into force in March 2016. Yet, EU policy prevents their relocation to other parts of Greece and to other Member States.*

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS AND POLICY CHANGES

THE EU 'HOTSPOT' MORIA IS A DANGEROUS PLACE

As a result of the EU policy to stop people seeking asylum from leaving the islands, between June and August the population living in the Moria 'hotspot' in Lesbos has doubled¹⁰.

- **Over 14,000 migrants** are currently forced to live on the island of Lesbos, which has an estimated Greek local population of around 85,000 people. Roughly **8,500 people arrived in August and September**, with a daily average of approximately 140 persons¹¹.
- Moria 'hotspot' is **more than four times over capacity**, with over 13,000 people living in a facility that is designed for 3,000¹². Due to the lack of spaces inside the 'hotspot', **almost half of the people are living in the 'olive grove'** adjacent to the official camp, as well as in new field areas all around it. While most of them live in makeshift tents, some – including families with small children – are forced to sleep outside in the dirt without even a tent, a mat or a blanket.
- The water and sanitation facilities are highly insufficient – with **one shower per 230 people and one toilet per 100 persons** in the "olive grove" area. That is about five times more people than the humanitarian standards allow for in emergency situations¹³. This situation is extremely worrying for the health of the camp's residents.

These deplorable and shameful living conditions have been denounced by various institutions and actors¹⁴, including the UN Committee Against Torture, which highlighted the risk of human rights violations through **inhumane or degrading treatment** and lack of a decent living standard.

At the end of August, employees of the Moria 'hotspot' had already requested urgent support and had openly warned about the dangerous overcrowding of the camp¹⁵. However, no measures have been taken in time to avoid the tragic deaths of three people in and around Moria camp. Making things worse, the head of the camp resigned mid-September, which will make the investigations into the incidents more difficult, and accountable learnings less likely¹⁶.

MORIA'S DEATH TOLL IS INCREASING

The failure of the EU and Greek authorities to protect people asking for asylum in Europe was tragically manifested in three deadly incidents in Lesbos recently. On 24 August, a 15-year-old boy died after being stabbed by another minor, and two others seriously injured during a fight in the 'safe zone' of the Moria EU 'hotspot' that is separated for unaccompanied minors under 15 years old¹⁷.

In May 2019, the European Committee of Social Rights had already indicated that the Greek authorities should take **immediate measures** and urgent action for the transportation of unaccompanied children from the 'hotspots' at the border to facilities appropriate to their age 'in order to prevent **serious and irreparable injury or harm to the children** concerned, including damage to their physical and mental health, and to their safety¹⁸. However, the Greek authorities failed to comply with this decision.

On 24 September, a five-year old boy playing in a cardboard box was run over by a merchandise truck just outside of Moria camp¹⁹. On 29 September, eight containers in the 'hotspot' burst into fire, resulting in the death of a woman²⁰. Over the following days, demonstrations against the deplorable and unsafe conditions in Moria camp resulted in clashes between the police and the people living in the camp. This, in turn, led to delays in food delivery, garbage collection and even more frustration.

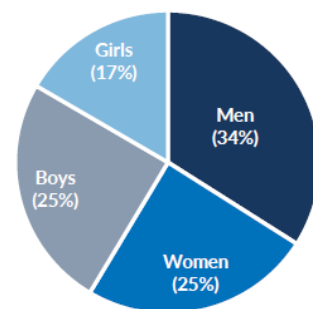
The rise in the death toll is not incidental. It is a **direct result of the overcrowding and lack of adequate living conditions and basic services** provided in the EU 'hotspots', which make it impossible to ensure the protection of the people in camps like Moria.

CHILDREN ARE PARTICULARLY AT RISK

Children make up 42% of the population in the Moria 'hotspot', and more than 7 out of 10 are under 12 years old²¹. UN agencies and NGOs have continuously been raising serious concerns regarding the particularly dangerous conditions they live in²².

At the moment, **over 1,000 unaccompanied minors** are stranded in Lesbos. Given the fact that the only specialized shelter for children on the island has met its capacity of 147 places, most children are living in the Moria camp between the general population of adults and without the specific protection they need.

Due to the understaffing of the registration and state medical services available in Moria, and the consequent backlog created in the asylum process, UNHCR reported at the end of September that 200 minors were not yet registered as asylum seekers, and 430 unaccompanied minors had not yet undergone their vulnerability assessment.



Source: UNHCR Lesbos Weekly Snapshot - Demographics of migrant population in Lesbos – 9-13 September 2019

Legal aid actors in Lesvos are extremely concerned by this backlog, which in some cases is a threat to the right of unaccompanied minors to be reunified with their families in other Member States²³. Lawyers representing unaccompanied minors in Lesvos report that EU Member States rarely agree to extensions to the family reunification application deadline based on humanitarian reasons, a simple act that could help the Greek government to decongest the islands and move children with family in other EU Member States to safety.

As denounced by the Greek Council for Refugees in September, with the start of the new school year, the vast majority of the children living in Moria 'hotspot' camp **cannot enroll in public schools and are denied access to the formal education system in Greece**²⁴. Among other reasons, this is because a pre-requisite for enrollment in public schools is having been vaccinated, which can only be done with a social security number (so-called 'AMKA'). However, since July, the new Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs revoked the decision of the former government to issue AMKA for all third-country nationals, without yet issuing any interim measure for asylum seekers²⁵.

As a result, thousands of asylum seekers, including children, in need of medical care, do not have access to free medical and pharmaceutical services including vaccination.

'HOTSPOT' MEDICAL SERVICES UNDER STRAIN

At the end of August, the two doctors operating for the state medical services in Moria camp (NHPO²⁶) halted their operation for almost a month. During this period, thousands of people arrived in Lesvos, without undergoing the **mandatory medical screening**, including age assessment for alleged minors.

As a result, the backlog of medical screening increased significantly and **only manifestly and visually vulnerable people** – like pregnant women, single mothers with babies, the elderly, people with visible disabilities – were identified as such and allowed to leave the island.

Under EU and Greek laws, the government has the responsibility to identify vulnerable asylum seekers immediately after their arrival and ensure their safety²⁷. In reality, the gaps in the identification of vulnerable people are continuous and asylum seekers who suffer from mental health problems, victims of torture, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, victims of human trafficking, or people suffering post-traumatic disorders frequently go unidentified and without the assistance they need.

This severe shortcoming of the Greek reception system is a violation of rights for undetected vulnerable asylum seekers (following the wrong procedure for non-vulnerable ones) and is also creating significant delays in the asylum process.

NOTES

¹ UNHCR Operational Portal, Mediterranean situation <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

² <https://www.france24.com/en/20191001-hundreds-of-migrants-protest-conditions-on-greek-isle-of-lesbos-1>

³ EU asylum reform: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/world/20180615STO05927/eu-asylum-reform-parliament-s-stance-on-dublin-regulation>.

⁴ UNHCR Sea Arrivals Dashboard, August 2019 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/71287.pdf> and Aegean Islands Weekly Snapshot, September 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/71534.pdf>

- ⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/71287.pdf>
- ⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2019/10/5d930c194/greece-must-act-end-dangerous-overcrowding-island-reception-centres-eu.html>
- ⁷ Aegean Boat Report https://datastudio.google.com/reporting/1CiKR1_R7-1UbMHKhZzE_Ji_cvqF7xlfH/page/oOyx
- ⁸ <http://amna.gr/en/article/391377/Govt-has-relieved-the-citizens-of-huge-burdens--govt-spokesperson-Petsas-says> and *Ibid.* Endnote 7.
- ⁹ <http://www.ekathimerini.com/244952/article/ekathimerini/news/plans-to-relocate-10000-migrants-to-mainland>
- ¹⁰ From a population of around 6,000 persons in June to a population of over 12,000 people at the end of September (see Greek Government's official figures on Eastern Aegean Sea, *Ibid.* Endnote 7).
- ¹¹ UNHCR Lesbos weekly snapshot – 9 to 13 September 2019.
- ¹² Greek Government's official figures on Eastern Aegean Sea (as of 29 September 2019), <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/6253/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-29-9-2019/?lang=en>
- ¹³ UNHCR Emergency Handbook refers to the SPHERE standards and provides 1 latrine per a maximum of 50 persons during the first days of emergency, improved as soon as possible post-emergency to one latrine per a maximum of 20 persons, aiming at one latrine per a maximum of five persons.
- ¹⁴ [https://www.policinglaw.info/assets/downloads/Committee_against_Torture_Concluding_Observations_on_Greece_\(2019\).pdf](https://www.policinglaw.info/assets/downloads/Committee_against_Torture_Concluding_Observations_on_Greece_(2019).pdf) and <https://www.gcr.gr/en/news/press-releases-announcements/item/1257-greek-eu-authorities-urged-to-break-vicious-cycle-of-overcrowded-asylum-seeker-hotspots>
- ¹⁵ <https://vorieoigaio.ert.gr/eidiseis/lesvos/se-apognosi-kai-oi-ergazomenoi-gia-tin-katastasi-sto-kyt-lesvoy/> and <http://www.ekathimerini.com/232690/article/ekathimerini/news/lesvos-asylum-staff-ring-alarm-bell>
- ¹⁶ <http://www.ekathimerini.com/244448/article/ekathimerini/news/im-tired-head-of-overcrowded-migrant-camp-in-lesvos-resigns>
- ¹⁷ UNHCR statement, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190825-un-urges-greece-to-protect-migrant-youths-after-death-at-camp>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.gcr.gr/en/news/press-releases-announcements/item/1242-i-adraneia-kostizei-anthropines-zoes-na-apomakrynthovn-amesa-ta-paidia-apo-ta-kentra-ypodoxis-kai-taftopoiisis>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.ekathimerini.com/244850/article/ekathimerini/news/afghan-boy-aged-5-killed-by-truck-near-moria-migrant-camp>
- ²⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49873950>. Initial reports referred to the death of her baby, but Greek authorities only confirmed that a baby and several other children and adults were hospitalized with injuries.
- ²¹ UNHCR Lesbos weekly snapshot - 9 to 13 September 2019.
- ²² <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2019/10/5d930c194/greece-must-act-end-dangerous-overcrowding-island-reception-centres-eu.html>
- ²³ Among other concerns, legal aid actors in Lesbos reported that some minors might become adults before being formally registered as minor asylum seekers and consequently lose their right to family reunification in other EU member states.
- ²⁴ <https://www.gcr.gr/en/news/press-releases-announcements/item/1249-arxi-tis-sxolikis-xronias-kai-gia-ta-prosfygopoula-anagki-ameson-energeion-tis-politeias>
- ²⁵ <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2019/07/13/minister-blocks-social-security-amka-refugees-non-eu/>
- ²⁶ National Public Health Organisation.
- ²⁷ Articles 17 and 19 of EU Reception Conditions Directive, Articles 14(5), 27(2)(b)(cc) of Greek Law 4375/2016 and articles 10, 17, 20 and 23 of Greek Law 4540/2018.

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This paper was written by Marion Bouchetel. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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