

Appalling conditions in Greek refugee camps

By Katerina Selin
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The mainstream media has gone silent on refugees in Greece. But the suffering of these people, who fled war and poverty, continues without interruption. At present, more than 57,000 people sit in makeshift tent camps and shelters.

“The majority of these people have been living for months in unbearable and increasingly desperate conditions,” warns the human rights organization Amnesty International in a statement on the situation in Greece. “They receive only limited support from volunteers, activists and NGOs. They are forced to linger in these unspeakable conditions with insufficient information and uncertainty about their futures.”

After the closure of escape routes over the Balkans, thousands of people endured weeks at the muddy camp in the village of Idomeni on the border with Macedonia. After the camp was broken up in May, the people there were divided up among several reception centers. The government of the pseudo-left party Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) had promised the desperate refugees humane living conditions.

The reality is something else entirely. The conditions in the camps are appalling. In several regions, refugees repeatedly protest against the abuses in their shelters and demand the most basic standards of humane accommodations.

In the Vial internment center on the north Aegean island of Chios, one of the so-called “hot spots,” more than 1,300 refugees live crammed together in shelters made from shipping containers. Surrounding the camp is a towering barbed wire fence that lends the hot spot the “appearance of a concentration camp,” as the daily Greek newspaper *To Vima* writes. In the first 25 days, the refugees lived as prisoners. After that, they were able to leave the camp only by special permission.

The refugees are supposed to be registered in the camp and given the opportunity to apply for asylum. Most have requested asylum. So far, 960 interviews, primarily with Syrians, have been conducted. But even though their country has for years been plunged into a bloody civil

war, 69 percent of asylum applications by Syrian refugees are rejected, as the asylum official from Vial, Nikos Papamanolis, explained to *To Vima*.

Since the agreement with Turkey in March, asylum procedures have been reworked in Greece. First, authorities examine whether Turkey is a safe third-party state for petitioners. Only if that is excluded can the asylum application be considered further.

Many refugees are refused asylum because they are alleged to be safe if returned to Turkey and can be sent back to that country. Once there, however, they can expect more war and poverty than ever before. They are even threatened with deportation back to their countries of origin.

Since the establishment of detention facilities on Chios, protest actions by refugees have been a regular occurrence along with violent conflicts with the police and military who operate the camp. Since the end of July, the situation has only worsened.

In a video posted online earlier this month, refugees told aid workers and activists about conditions in the camp. They are often given bad food, consisting of nothing more than rice and beans, and sometimes contaminated with insects. When they throw it away, the military authorities serve the same rations to them again. During a protest, the police treated them with the utmost severity. The same day, no food was provided to them and for the next three days they received only bread and water.

Many children living in Vial are malnourished. Only rarely do they get meat, eggs or fruit. No new clothing or shoes have been provided. One woman reports that the military authorities respond with contempt to any complaint from the refugees. They are told they should go back to their own countries if they don’t like the food.

Faced with this situation, some refugees have tried to cook for themselves. Sneaking through holes in the fence, they go into the surrounding villages and get their own food. Because most of them have no money to shop at the market, they have resorted to breaking into the homes and

gardens of local residents. The items stolen shed light on their desperate situation: fruit, vegetables, chickens or drinks from the kiosk.

The dealings with the people in the Vial camp have provoked regular conflicts with residents. The fascist organization Golden Dawn has exploited the volatile atmosphere for their xenophobic propaganda among the Greek islanders.

Altogether, there are now more than 10,000 refugees in the hot spots on the Aegean islands, though officially there is only room enough for 7,450 people.

On the mainland, the situation facing refugees is also unbearable. Refugees in the Ritsona camp in the Evia region have addressed a letter “to the Greek government, the political parties, the international community and Greek society,” in which they describe their living conditions.

“We are Syrians and Iraqis who have escaped injustice and are now held captive in squalor. We live in tents under the hot sun and in hellish temperatures, while in previous months we spent the nights in bitter cold.” The provisions from the military are inadequate and do not meet the needs of children, pregnant women and the elderly in particular.

“No one is in a position to tell us what the future holds. Such waiting produces an enormously stressful situation and puts a strain on our mental health. We literally live in isolation in the middle of a forest in appalling conditions that lead to infections and illnesses, because we are exposed to insects and animals.”

Twenty cases of hepatitis have recently been reported. The hygienic conditions—no warm water, few and poorly functioning toilets, infrequent waste disposal and insufficient health care—are intolerable. There are too few doctors and at night there are none at all to care for newborns, pregnant woman and the elderly. The refugees ended their letter with a series of demands for humane accommodations and provisions.

Refugees have also demonstrated in the Kilkis region in northern Greece. In the reception centre Nea Kavala, women and children organized a protest march on August 3. At least eight refugee children have contracted hepatitis A thanks to the inhumane conditions there.

Further north, on the border with Macedonia, near the former Idomeni camp, more and more refugees attempt to travel illegally. According to the daily paper *Kathimerini*, the police locate around 60 people hiding in the woods every day and bring them by bus to one of 20 military camps in central Macedonia where 20,000 refugees are

already being held. The people often huddle together for days in the bushes and fields near the border and drink water from the pipes of the irrigation systems.

The conditions in the camps around Thessaloniki are no better. There is only cold water and scarce food rations. Children grow up in an environment increasingly characterized by sickness, drugs and violence.

In recent days, the media and representatives of the government have voiced their fears that the refugee agreement between Greece and Turkey could fail and the number of refugees coming over the Aegean into the European Union could again grow. Following the implementation of the agreement, which provides for the deportation of refugees back to Turkey, between 50 and 150 people a day have made the treacherous journey across the sea to Greece.

In the middle of August, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras interrupted his vacation to hold discussions on refugee policy with his cabinet. The Syriza government is doing everything it can to maintain the cruel deal with Turkey and has announced it will evenly distribute the refugees imprisoned in Greece throughout the country. In accordance with this, 2,000 people are to be resettled in Crete. The Minister for Civil Protection has been instructed to increase police surveillance on the island.

The Syriza government, like its European partners in Brussels and Berlin, treats refugees as a mass that can be moved from place to place at will. They are dealt with like criminals in prison camps, for whom basic democratic rights do not apply.

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