

Greek riot police attack child asylum seekers and refugees at Moria camp

By John Vassilopoulos
10 September 2019

Greece's conservative New Democracy government has stepped up its attack on migrants, with riot police brutally attacking a protest of around 50 child asylum seekers at a refugee internment camp.

The assault took place last Wednesday at the Moria camp in Mytilini, the capital of the island of Lesbos, where refugees and asylum seekers are forced to live under intolerable conditions. Protestors were reportedly chanting, "Athens-Athens" as per their demand to be moved out of the camp and onto the mainland.

According to reports, protestors broke down the camp's door and attempted to set fire to rubbish bins, at which point riot police descended and attacked them with tear gas. A small group of the protestors then temporarily blocked the main entrance preventing the flow of vehicles in and out of the camp. The standoff lasted around 40 minutes before the migrants finally withdrew after negotiations with the police.

The protestors were part of the 300 unaccompanied child asylum seekers recently interned at the camp. Due to overcapacity in housing units for minors they are still being kept at the large new arrivals tent. Moria currently has nearly 10,000 inmates—more than three times its actual capacity of 3,000. The total number of refugees and migrants in Mytilini is over 11,000, of which 750 are unaccompanied minors.

There are more than 70,000 refugees interned in Greece in overcrowded camps on the mainland and islands as a result of the filthy deal cut between the EU and Turkey in 2016 by the Syriza government. This stipulates that all refugees crossing into Greece from Turkey be interned until their case is processed—with the plan being ultimate deportation back to Turkey.

Noting the sadistic nature of the EU's policy, Tommaso Santo, who heads the Doctors without Borders (MSF) mission in Greece, said in a statement last week, "This is not a new emergency: the severe overcrowding in the reception centres is a policy-driven crisis harming thousands of men, women and children every day, for years. We have seen it in the past and we continue to see it today. More than three

years after locking up asylum seekers in desperate conditions on the Greek islands, should we conclude that the Greek and EU authorities are hoping to rely on this shameful reception failure as a way to deter new migrants' arrivals to the EU?"

While inflows of migrants and refugees substantially reduced since the agreement, there has been a spike in recent months of arrivals by sea at levels not seen since 2016. Last month, about 7,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece by boat, the highest number for three years. On August 29 alone, 13 boats carrying around 540 people landed at Skala Sikamias in Lesbos, the largest number in a single day since the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement.

This has exacerbated an already intolerable situation, with the most vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors, bearing the brunt. Just a few days before the protest, a 15-year-old unaccompanied Afghan boy killed another boy and injured two others in a brawl that broke out in the unaccompanied juvenile section of the camp.

Commenting on the mental health crisis faced by young children, a recent article on MSF's website noted: "MSF's paediatric mental health teams working on Lesbos saw child referrals double in July compared to previous months. In July and August, 73 children were referred to our teams: three had attempted to kill themselves and 17 were self-harming. Ten of the 73 children were under the age of six, with the youngest just two years old."

According to Katrin Brubakk, MSF's mental health activity manager on Lesbos, "More and more of these children stop playing, have nightmares, are afraid to go out of their tents and start to withdraw from life. Some of them completely stop talking. With the increasing overcrowding, violence and lack of safety in the camp, the situation for children is deteriorating day by day. To prevent permanent damage, these children need to be removed from Moria camp immediately."

Mental health problems are only one facet of the health problems faced by interned children. MSF's paediatric clinic on Lesbos currently has almost 100 children, all of

which are waiting to be transported to the mainland to receive the specialist treatment they need. According to MSF, all of them “have complex or chronic medical conditions, including young children with serious heart conditions, diabetes and epilepsy as well as injuries from war.”

In response to the increased inflows of refugees and resting on the repressive internment apparatus developed by Syriza in collaboration with the EU, the New Democracy government recently announced a series of police-state measures to clamp down even harder on asylum seekers and migrants.

Following an emergency session of the Council of Foreign Relations and Defence (KYSEA) at the end of last month, plans were announced to introduce even tighter border controls, in collaboration with NATO and the EU’s border agency Frontex. There are plans to adopt the National Integrated Maritime Surveillance System (ESTHET), a €50 million system that will upgrade the Coast Guard’s surveillance capability by equipping it with new technologies, such as thermal cameras and drones. Original proposals for the system were made as early as 2010, but it was under the Syriza administration when the initial discussion with private-sector companies interested in bidding to provide the technology took off.

KYSEA also announced plans to speed up deportations of rejected asylum seekers by abolishing the second-order right of appeal currently in place, while also intensifying police controls on the islands and on the mainland to identify people whose application for asylum has already been rejected.

These measures are part of a wider phenomenon internationally as ruling elites are adopting authoritarian forms of rule in order to impose their draconian austerity agendas in the face of a resurgence of working-class struggle. Anti-immigration measures and scapegoating of asylum seekers and refugees are aimed at diverting social anger into reactionary channels by dividing workers along national lines.

Other measures announced by KYSEA include spreading the numbers of those interned on the island to camps on the mainland, supposedly to avoid overcrowding. In the same week as the protest, a total of 1,500 mainly Afghan asylum seekers were transferred to two camps in Northern Greece—one in Thessaloniki and the other in Nea Kavala. Conditions in the new camps are just as bad, if not worse, with new arrivals complaining of lack of access to electricity and water.

“We thought Moria was the worst thing that could happen to us,” said father-of-three Mohamed Nour to news and information site *Infomigrants* shortly after he arrived at the

Nea Kavala camp. He added, “They told us it would only be a temporary stay, but we’ve been here for two days now and the conditions aren’t good.”

The spike in the number of refugees arriving in Greece from Turkey has led to recriminations on both sides of the border, with the Greek government repeatedly accusing the Turkish authorities of failing to adequately police the sea border. In response, last week Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to “open the gates” unless his government received more help. He complained that Turkey had only received €3 billion of the €6 billion pledged by the EU as part of the 2016 agreement.

Erdogan’s regime has launched a huge crackdown on “undocumented migrants” and refugees in Istanbul. The Istanbul governor’s office has given migrants not registered to live in the city until the end of October—after first setting an August 20 deadline—to leave or face forcible removal. Thousands have already been rounded up. The *Financial Times* reported September 2, “Already, between mid-July and late August, more than 16,000 illegal migrants and 4,500 unregistered Syrians were deported from Istanbul and sent either to deportation centres or temporary shelters, the governorate said...”

Far from seeking to ease tensions, the EU closed ranks with Greece and dismissed Erdogan’s claims. EU Commission spokeswoman Natasha Bertaud claimed that €5.6 billion had already been disbursed.

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