

# Refugees left to die as COVID-19 spreads across Greece

By George Gallanis  
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Nearly 42,000 refugees housed in overcrowded, festering detention camps remain trapped on Greece's islands as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across Greece. With refugees lacking access to soap and water—as part of a lack of basic health care—and crammed into clustered living quarters, the camps on the islands Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Samos and Leros are the perfect breeding grounds for the virus.

Yet, the right-wing New Democracy (ND) government has stalled moving refugees off the islands to mainland Greece, allowing for the virus to infect and possibly kill thousands.

The COVID-19 death toll in Greece rose to 73 yesterday, with total confirmed cases standing at 1,735. According to the daily *Kathimerini*, the economic strain caused by the pandemic may lead to cuts in workers' wages in the public sector, and possibly massive unemployment in the coming weeks or months, while Finance Minister Christos Staikouras said recently that “no such issue is being discussed given that we expect a return to normality soon.”

Greece's health care system can barely keep up with the required amount of testing needed to contain the virus, let alone treat those infected. Years of European Union (EU) austerity, enforced by the previous pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government, have gutted Greece's public health care.

Attempting to wipe its hands clean of the growing social disaster, Alexis Charitsis, a Syriza representative, accused ND of “insisting on focusing its rhetoric entirely on the citizens' personal responsibility” and it “cannot and should not overshadow the government's responsibility to immediately support the health system.” He added that the “sloppiness, ineffectiveness and interventions” are “clearly an issue of political will.”

Syriza laid the groundwork for ND's anti-refugee policies with a brutal campaign including attacks by riot police, forced evacuations and the establishment of concentration camps. In 2016, the EU, Turkey and the Syriza government brokered a deal establishing Greece as the EU's prison camp for refugees at its southern border. It then forced all refugees entering Greece via “irregular” routes—those

making the dangerous journey via boat from Turkey to Greece—to be deported back to Turkey. In other words, most refugees.

The ND government is continuing and building upon these anti-refugee policies. Refugees have been shot at by Greek police and been the victims of fascistic violence, while the government allows the continued practice of illegal pushbacks where refugee boats are forced back as they approach the Greek shoreline.

The government is using the limited number of COVID-19 tests and the growing threat of the virus on Greece's native-born population as a reason to leave refugees trapped in a hell in which the pandemic can spread like wildfire in the camps. Hundreds or even thousands of refugees, including children and the elderly, may die.

The pandemic has already made its way to Greece's islands. On Lesbos—where some 20,000 people live in and around the notorious Moria detention camp designed to house 3,000—a 40-year-old woman returning from holidays in Egypt and Israel was confirmed positive for COVID-19 over two weeks ago and was placed in quarantine.

The limited amount of testing in Greece points to a very real possibility that COVID-19 is spreading undetected on Lesbos and other islands. This poses a looming nightmare for those housed in refugee camps. It could easily be spread by new arrivals who could also receive the virus from asymptomatic detainees. A lack of space means 120 people who recently arrived on Lesbos have not yet found shelter on the island as they have to be placed into separate shacks from those already present.

Last week, it was revealed 20 refugees tested positive for COVID-19 at the mainland camp of Ritsona, home to 2,300 refugees and 43 miles north of Athens. The camp is now on lockdown for two weeks, with police on hand to enforce the action and prepare the way for possible attacks on refugees.

Tests are being administered and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is onsite tending to refugees. On Sunday, the government was forced to place a second migrant camp on the mainland under quarantine.

After a 53-year-old man tested positive for coronavirus, the Malakasa camp 25 miles north of Athens was locked down for two weeks and is also being guarded by police with reinforcements to arrive.

Ritsona and Malakasa have the benefit of being on the mainland, putting them closer to much needed resources in Greece's major cities like Athens, as opposed to camps located on the islands. Nonetheless, with so many refugees forced to live in packed quarters, the camps face the possibility of a rapid outbreak.

EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson has requested the ND government move refugees with the highest risk of contracting COVID-19—the elderly and children—from the overcrowded island camps to mainland Greece.

“We are working together with the Greek government and the Greek authorities to agree on an emergency plan to help reduce the risk as much as possible in the overcrowded hotspots on the islands,” Johansen said. “It could be relocation of the most vulnerable individuals from the overcrowded camps to other areas on the islands.”

But as many NGOs and refugee groups have said, there are virtually no tests available for refugees and therefore it is nearly impossible to determine who in the camps may be positive for the virus.

The ND government is stalling, putting at risk thousands of refugees.

For the past few weeks, human rights groups have urgently called upon ND to act. One group said, “Thousands of people, including older people, those with chronic diseases, children ... pregnant women, new mothers, and people with disabilities, are trapped in dangerously overcrowded, deplorable conditions on the islands amid the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, said over three weeks ago. “We must act now. ... When the virus hits overcrowded settlements in places like Iran, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Greece, the consequences will be devastating.”

The conditions in the camps make it nearly impossible for refugees to protect themselves from an outbreak.

George Makris, a medical doctor and a coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) in Greece, said the water and sanitary conditions in the Moria camp on Lesbos and others are “tragic.” He added: “The transmission of the virus cannot be contained there. We have warned this repeatedly in the past in the context of other infectious disease outbreaks like meningitis and measles. Our message is simple. ... As health authorities are saying all mass gatherings are prohibited, mass containment should also be avoided.”

Gerald Knaus, one of the leading architects of the 2016 deal between the EU, Greece and Turkey, which resulted in thousands of refugees being forcibly returned to Turkey, said refugees could be moved to safety in a matter of weeks.

Speaking to DW.com as the devastating human toll of his policies becomes ever more apparent with the pandemic, Knaus said, “You have to evacuate 35,000 refugees as quickly as possible from the islands to the Greek mainland. You could quickly have 15,000 additional beds in temporary tent camps. The International Organization of Migration (IOM) is capable of building these within a few weeks.

“Another 10,000 people can be accommodated in now-vacant Greek hotels. Finally, 10,000 people could easily be accommodated in places already paid for by the EU—places where recognized refugees are hosted right now. If countries like Germany could take in these recognized refugees quickly, they would create space for families from the islands immediately. This would also send a strong signal to the Greeks that they're not alone.”

The reality is that Germany, the EU's leading power, has played a critical role in the formation of the bloc's refugee policy and bears central responsibility for the terrible plight facing refugees and immigrants imprisoned on the Greek islands.

The role of the EU, ND, Syriza and capitalist government across the world in facilitating attacks on refugees and allowing COVID-19 to spread uncontrolled makes clear the urgent need for the working class to intervene and place life over profit.

The spread of COVID-19 in Greece has been grossly exacerbated but the socioeconomic policies of ND and Syriza. The defence of refugees in Greece must be taken up by the Greek and the international working class, in opposition to the policies of ND and Syriza who represent the interests of the upper middle class and the financial elite.

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