

‘We’re never getting out of here’: How refugees became stranded in Greece



A Syrian man sits inside his tents at Ritsona refugee camp north of Athens, which hosts about 600 refugees and migrants on Sept. 22, 2016. (Petros Giannakouris/AP)

By [Anthony Faiola](#) October 14

DIAVATA REFUGEE CAMP, Greece — When Europe abruptly closed its land borders last spring to refugees fleeing war, it made a much-heralded promise: Wealthy nations across the European Union would take in tens of thousands of desperate Syrians and Iraqis who had made it as far as near-bankrupt Greece only to find themselves trapped.

But one by one, those nations have reneged, turning primitive camps such as this one into dire symbols of Europe’s broken pledge.

Amid allegations of Greek mismanagement, this site on the grounds of an abandoned toilet-paper factory still lacks basic heat, even as nighttime temperatures dip into the low 50s.

Mosquitoes infest the white canvas tents of refugee families stranded here for months. A 14-year-old Syrian girl was recently raped. There are reports of stabbings, thefts, suicide attempts and drug dealing.

“I won’t go out alone anymore,” said Rama Wahed, a 16-year-old Syrian girl hugging herself in her family’s tent.



Lamis Wahed, 48, center, sits with two of her four children, Rama, 16, left, and Kamal, 17. All five have been stranded in Greece for seven months. (Anthony Faiola/The Washington Post)

In the opposite corner, her 17-year-old brother, Kamal, stared blankly ahead. Since their father died in Syria, he is the “man of the family.” But he looks like a lost little boy. Like so many other families here, their family of five has been waiting for word to go somewhere, anywhere but here. Caught in a broken system, they are losing hope.

Kamal swatted at the mosquitoes swarming his legs, both of them bandaged and infected after he could not stop scratching at the bites. To keep the bugs at bay, they run a cheap fan inside the tent, even though it makes cold nights feel even colder.

“We’re never getting out of here,” he said. “Never.”

In June 2015, as asylum seekers were rushing into Europe in growing numbers, E.U. leaders met until the wee hours in Brussels. Two countries were bearing the brunt of the crisis — the Mediterranean entry points of Greece and Italy. In what leaders heralded as a remarkable show of “solidarity,” the rest of the E.U. agreed to share the burden.

The E.U. would relocate 40,000 refugees, mostly Syrians, to member countries stretching from Portugal to Finland. They would be given shelter, aid and a chance to rebuild their lives. As the number of asylum seekers surged, the E.U. later boosted its pledge — promising to relocate up to 160,000.

But 16 months after its initial decision, the E.U. has lived up to only 3.3 percent of that pledge, relocating 5,290 refugees — 4,134 from Greece and 1,156 from Italy.

At first — and to some extent, still — the problem in Greece has been an overwhelmed asylum system that takes months to register migrants. Although the number of refugees entering the program has recently increased, its future faces an even greater obstacle.

Citing concerns about cultural differences and militants masquerading as migrants, nations are breaking their promises to take in refugees. Those countries that are offering spaces are offering fewer than they originally pledged. Others are offering none at all. Last week, Austria's foreign minister became the latest senior European official to suggest the bloc should simply drop the pretense and scrap what he called a "completely unrealistic" program.

In Greece, the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is laboring to get as many refugees as possible into hotels and apartments, but most are still facing harsh conditions in unheated camps. There, according to a new report by Amnesty International, they face threats because of poor security and the approaching winter, and there are serious lapses in support for vulnerable refugees, including minors and pregnant women. Some of the refugees, the report charged, are going without adequate food.

The Greeks say they are taking steps to improve conditions for the 50,000 refugees the UNHCR says remain in the country. But given the amount of E.U. money available to aid refugees in Greece — more than 1 billion euros (\$1.11 billion) — critics say the camps should not be as bad as they are.

Odysseas Voudouris, formerly Greece's general secretary for migrants at the Interior Ministry, resigned last month, protesting what he called a mishandling of the camps by the country's Migration Ministry. He described the Diavata refugee camp as a symbol of a larger problem.

Initially, he said, a German nongovernmental organization had proposed a camp here in the outskirts of Greece's second-

largest city, Thessaloniki, using 2.5 million euros in E.U. funds. But the Migration Ministry overseeing the camps insisted that it spend much more — 8.5 million euros, including hundreds of thousands earmarked for a local construction firm.

Voudouris said he then asked the UNHCR to estimate the costs, to which it replied that a camp for 1,500 refugees — there are now about 1,600 here — should run about 1.5 million euros. But, he said, the Migration Ministry still insisted on spending far more, dragging out the process to the point where there is still no agreement on what to build or by when.

"In the meantime, the conditions are bad, and these people are sleeping outside," he said. "Winter is almost here."

The Migration Ministry declined to comment. But Maria Stavropoulou, head of the Greek asylum service, a different unit not directly involved with the camps, insisted that her country was improving its handling of the refugee crisis every day. She said that she remained optimistic that European nations will ultimately fulfill their pledges to take in refugees — but that her country was prepared if they did not.

“If the pledges don’t come in, then [the refugees] will have to stay here,” she said. “They have to live with that, and so do we.”

An hour after dawn on a recent weekday, Abdelwahab, 14, the youngest son in the Wahed family, walked to school with his 10-year-old sister, Joudy.

“We used to walk to school together in Aleppo,” he said. “It’s different now. Everything is.”

For starters, school isn’t real school. The Greeks this week were rolling out a pilot program, allowing up to 1,500 refugee children into public schools. But some Greek parents — including those who send their children to a school not far from this camp — have staged protests to stop them. They argue that the refugee children may carry contagious diseases and live in such unhygienic conditions that they pose a health risk.

In this former plant where the Waheds are forced to live, the best education on offer is a few hours a day in an impromptu schoolhouse run by Save the Children. Some of the children here, according to Ahmed — their teacher and a Syrian refugee himself — have been out of school for four years.

“They need to be settled,” he said. “They are missing out on their futures. They need a real home.”

During Arabic class, their teacher tried to engage the few children who turned up — about 10 kids out of about 150 in the camp ages 6 to 14. Some of the refugee parents said they are afraid to send their children to school alone. Others said their children don’t want to go and they don’t have the strength to force them.

The teacher asked the class for a saying in Arabic to practice their writing. Abdelwahab was the first to speak up.

“Heaven,” he said, quoting the Koran, “lies under the feet of our mothers.”

Earlier at the family tent, his mother, Lamis — a widow struggling to care for four children — was doing what she does best: trying to cheer them up.

She is a young 48. Spirited and jovial, she comforted them two years ago when the war didn’t kill their father but cancer did. When they crossed the Aegean Sea in March in a packed raft, her children came ashore in Greece wet and afraid. She cracked a joke about wet cats. All the kids, she said, laughed.

But humor is not working now.

Rama, her 16-year-old daughter, said she is terrified after the recent rape of another girl. The culprit, another Syrian refugee, was brutally beaten by camp residents soon afterward. Although there are a few Greek police officers stationed at the camp’s entrance, residents say they rarely intervene.

“We are stuck here,” Rama said. “Nobody cares what happens to us.”

“Don’t say that,” Lamis said with an encouraging smile. “They promised to let us in. They will keep their word. It’s taking a little more time than we thought. I’m telling you, they will keep their word.”

“That’s not true. We’re never leaving,” Rama said. “I told you — we never should have left home.”

“It’s done, and we can’t go back,” Lamis said, suddenly growing serious.

“Why not? We should,” said Rama, provoking her mother. “There is nothing here for us. They do not want us.”

“Have you seen the pictures of Aleppo?” Lamis said. “There is nothing left, my daughter. Go back to what?”

Lamis was crying now, and her daughter relented.

“I’m sorry,” Rama said softly. “I just want to leave.”