

Pressure growing on Greek island of Lesbos, as 2015 refugee and migrant crossings of the Mediterranean top 100,000

Briefing Notes, 9 June 2015

This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Adrian Edwards – to whom quoted text may be attributed – at the press briefing, on 9 June 2015, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

In Greece, record numbers of refugees are continuing to arrive in rubber dinghies and wooden boats on Lesbos, straining the island's capacity, services and resources.

Around 600 refugees, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, arrive every day in the Greek islands. Half of these are coming ashore in Lesbos. Arrivals there have grown from 737 in January and 1,002 in February, to 3,348 in March. Almost 5,000 arrived in April and over 7,200 in May. Hundreds of refugees leave the island for the Greek mainland every day after being identified, screened and registered. At present, however, there are around 2,200 to 2,500 on the island waiting for registration by the authorities.

A screening centre in the village of Moria, a former detention centre for migrants waiting to be deported, is currently housing over a thousand refugees, more than twice its official capacity of 410 people. In addition, an education park in Kara Tepe is being used as temporary accommodation for around 1000 refugees.

Two NGOs, Metaction and Medecins du Monde, are providing urgently needed services in Moria. Metaction is responsible for the identification, follow up and referral of unaccompanied children, while Medecins du Monde provides medical attention and psychosocial support. The Ministry of Interior's First Reception Service is responsible for the registration of the new arrivals.

UNHCR has a permanent presence in the island's main town, Mytilini, and is working with people at the Moria centre. UNHCR has been present on Lesbos and other Greek islands since 2011, supporting the authorities' efforts to improve reception conditions and procedures, providing legal advice to newcomers about the asylum procedure in Greece, as well as their right and responsibilities, and identifying and referring people with specific needs such as unaccompanied children, people with disabilities, the elderly and victims of torture or trauma. In recent weeks, UNHCR has been distributing sleeping bags and hygiene kits to refugees in greatest need in Lesbos and other Greek islands.

To deal effectively with the challenges posed by the large number of arrivals in Lesbos and other Greek islands, UNHCR is calling for urgent reinforcement of personnel and resources of all the state services and civil society organisations dealing with the reception of refugees. We are also seeking increased support to the affected island communities.

UNHCR, for its part, is stepping up its presence and activities in Greece and southern Italy in response to the dramatic increase in the number of refugee and migrants arriving by sea in southern Europe this year.

As of information received today, there have been 103,000 refugee and migrant arrivals in Europe via the Mediterranean in 2015: 54,000 in Italy, 48,000 in Greece, 91 on Malta and 920 in Spain. This total includes around 6,000 migrants and refugees who were disembarked in southern Italy this past weekend following a major rescue operation coordinated by the Italian Coast Guard and joined by navy ships deployed by Frontex and from Italy, Germany, Britain, Ireland, Spain and MOAS. The migrants and refugees rescued are mostly sub-Saharan Africans and include children and pregnant women. They are now being taken care of at reception centres in Italy.

<http://www.unhcr.org/5576bd836.html>