

February 28, 2018  
Lesvos, Greece

## Report on Conditions on Lesvos

Two years after the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement, the devastating effects of the deal continue to bear on the island of Lesvos, where winter has brought ongoing misery and aggravated tensions.

While the beginning of the summer saw a brief period of a remotely decent living conditions, September witnessed a sudden [increase](#) in arrivals which has been ongoing, while deportations average about [50 people a month](#). Despite the Turkish Coast Guard's best efforts at [interception and pull-backs](#), 1,365 people have already arrived on Lesvos since the beginning of 2018. The migrant population on the island currently stands at approximately [7000 people](#), while earlier, in November, the count had risen to more than 8,500 people, the majority "housed" in the Moria Reception and Detention center whose official capacity stands at 2,500.

Following a decision to transfer European Commission funds to the Greek state and to bring the management of support services exclusively under its purview with a view to a sustainable reception and management system beyond emergency response, international humanitarian organizations have [withdrawn](#) in masse. Their abrupt departure over the course of the summer has exposed and exacerbated profound gaps in the municipal and central governments' capacity to respond to even the most basic needs of the migrant population on Lesvos.

In September, summer tents appeared again in Moria, dispersed around the more "luxury" housing of container homes meant for six people and now made to house between ten and fifteen. Those in tents live with no heating and no protection from snow and rainfall beside makeshift scaffolding to keep their tents above ground, and improvised fires kindled out of the garbage amassed everywhere in the camp alongside human waste. Catering arranged by the army continues to provide inedible food; the lines to receive it are so long many migrants prefer to go hungry. In a desperate search for food and heating, a number of migrants have resorted to cutting down trees and taking crops and livestock from the surrounding fields, leading to heated and occasionally [violent](#) protests from the local population whose patience now appears depleted.

The public Hellenic Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KEELPNO), responsible for medical care in Moria, has a capacity to treat only 2,000 people, between one third and a quarter of the camp's population. While the Emergency Response Centre International (ERCI) have contributed to day shifts, with the independent Moria Medical Support team offering aid at night, medical coverage remains grossly inadequate. Delays in initial medical assessments have meant that many migrants with underlying medical conditions go without necessary treatment. As Willemine van de Wiel of Moria Medical Support explains, the inordinately cramped living conditions, weather exposure, malnutrition, inadequate or non-existent hygiene facilities, inefficient waste disposal systems and limited access to clean water. Meanwhile, gastroenteritis, wound infections, skin disease, upper respiratory infections, the flu and a number of cases of tuberculosis spread quickly across the camps due.

Psychological aid remains even [more scarce](#). Migrants suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder are left unaided in living conditions rife with triggers bound to exacerbate their condition. Meanwhile, the attrition caused by the deplorable living conditions and daily violence of the camps allied with the enduring uncertainty regarding the duration and outcome of asylum applications and the haunting threat of deportation have made depression, anxiety, aggression, self-harm and suicide attempts pervade the camp. Unable to provide sustainable psychological support, physicians have resorted to cosmetic fixes by routinely prescribing psycho-pharmaceuticals (primarily antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications and sleeping aids) indiscriminately, with the aim both of making the wretched camps more bearable and of dulling frustrations that lead to frequent outbreaks of violence. The high demand for such drugs among desperate asylum-seekers together with the addictive properties of some has led to the development of a black market in prescriptions – and not only: migrants in desperate search of informal employment have recently been conscripted into local drug cartels as low-end dealers and mules, to which a cognizant police turns a blind eye.

Winter rains and occasional snowfall continues in Lesbos. Last winter, at least three migrants died in the island refugee camps. In an [interview](#) with Der Spiegel from mid-December 2017, Greece's Minister of Migration, Ioannis Mouzalas, issued a controversial statement that Greece could not rule out migrants' deaths during the winter. Earlier, Mouzalas had explained his government's refusal to move people to the mainland, where safe and decent living conditions are more accessible, by arguing that doing so would act as a "pull factor," [encouraging](#) smugglers to send more people through the Aegean crossing. Given smuggler's tactics do not depend on their concern for the living conditions of their passengers once they reach Greece, it is far more likely that news of the squalid conditions of migrants' lives on Lesbos is intended to deter refugees themselves from braving the crossing from Turkey. The implications of this point to a sinister design, suggesting that the squalor and inhumane conditions of the camps are not accidental but *willed*, strategically kept in place to act as a warning to future border-crossers that Europe offers no protection or relief, but only ongoing misery. On February 1, port authorities recovered the body of Saihi, a thirty-three year-old Algerian man who had drowned, ten days earlier, in a desperate effort to climb aboard a ferry bound for Athens.

Since the summer, the administrative and legal machinery of asylum processing has been drastically revised. As Lorraine Leete of the Lesbos Legal Centre explains, where previously, many applications were rejected at first instance and accepted on appeal, under the current mechanisms, first-instance rejections are almost never overturned on appeal. Fees levied by the Administrative Court (the last resort for rejected applications) remain prohibitive for most migrants. With so little hope of success, legal professionals are thus refusing to represent migrants on appeal. Even as asylum applications are rejected, the rate of deportations to Turkey remains far below the projections of the EU-Turkey deal. This means that many migrants remaining on the island whose asylum applications have been rejected take desperate efforts to avoid the police in order to escape deportation but have no legal avenues left to advance their claims to remain.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) continues to push the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) scheme in an effort to encourage "voluntary returns", [exploiting](#) migrants' despair and frustration and coercing them to give up hope and return home without, however, offering safeguards for their protection en route or once they arrive. Once they consent to their "voluntary return", they are jailed in a "pre-removal centre"

pending their deportation, sometimes for months. Meanwhile, though the “pilot program” to detain migrants of nationalities unlikely to be granted asylum officially ended in January 2018, the Greek police [continue](#) to arbitrarily and unlawfully detain migrants upon arrival on little basis beyond nationality.

In spite of Minister Mouzalas’s insistence that the transfer of migrants to the mainland would provide a further incentive to smugglers, the governments’ resistance to transferring migrants to safety in the mainland rests on its refusal to breach of the EU-Turkey deal; it is an admission that the agreement can only be kept effective at the inordinate cost of violating migrants’ basic rights to safety and dignity. For its part, the European Commission has insisted that the hellish conditions on Lesbos are not the consequences of the EU-Turkey agreement or of inhumane border policies, but rather of the [incompetence](#) of the Greek government and mismanagement at the local level. Beginning in November 2017, the municipality and local authorities began to express their own outrage at the conditions on Lesbos, rebelling against the central government. Comparing the island to “the Guantanamo Bay of Europe”, the Mayor of Lesbos called a one-day general [strike](#) and mass protest by the local population for November 20<sup>th</sup>. When a government-chartered ship was sent to provide re-enforcements in container homes for migrants in Moria, the municipality of Lesbos ordered a blockade of the port, arguing that the expansion of Moria would not provide a solution to the congestion of the camp and would contribute to furthering the destruction of the island. The municipality’s acts of revolt against the Syriza government and European policies of containment and quarantine serve two purposes: on the one hand, the Mayor of Lesbos hopes to maintain the popular image of Lesbos as “the island of solidarity” on the international stage, while locally, he hopes to secure popularity among the frustrated island population (many among whom have now been conscripted into the ranks of the far-right) in light of approaching elections. The success of his capacity to navigate apparently contradictory forces was reflected in the spectrum of constituencies responding to his calls to protest: these ranged from cadres of far-right factions on the island, disgruntled shopkeepers from Sappho’s Square whose business had suffered as the result of ongoing migrant protests and members of the police force, to international volunteers and solidarity activists.

At the end of November, unable to break the deadlock with the municipal government and in the face of mounting international pressure, the Syriza government conceded to [transferring](#) some of the migrant population to the mainland, without, however, admitting to a structural deficiency in the EU-Turkey deal. Because the EU-Turkey deal makes exceptions for “vulnerable populations”, which it permits to be transferred to the mainland rather than be quarantined on the island hot-spots, the transfer was facilitated by recognizing more and more migrants as “vulnerable”. Nevertheless, 5,000 migrants remain in Moria.

As tensions from the local population and government mounted, migrants, international and local solidarity groups, and legal specialists have fought to make their own demands heard. Earlier this week, the Greek Council for Refugees and representatives of the Bar Associations of Lesbos, Chios, Rhodes, Samos and Kos publicly contested the legality of constricting migrants’ freedom of movement within Greece and submitted two cancellation requests against the State and the Asylum Service. Their challenge joined a series of campaigns launched to put pressure on the government to respect migrants’ rights to freedom of movement. In October, Greek activists launched [#opentheislands](#). The campaign, which was supported internationally by hundreds of organizations and collectives, called on the Greek government, the European Commission, and European member-states, to end restrictions on freedom of movement, winter-proof migrant facilities, stop deportations, end arbitrary

detention, ensure access to medical and legal aid for all migrants, accelerate family reunification and relocation procedures, end practices of returning migrants to Greece from other member states and, finally, to invalidate the EU-Turkey deal.

Meanwhile, on October 20<sup>th</sup>, following violent riots in Moria, a number of migrant families – the majority from Afghanistan, together with single Iranian migrant men, fled to the main city and began a sit-in in the main square of Plateia Sappous. Their central demand was to be allowed freedom of movement across Greece. Despite continuous intimidation by the municipality, the police, and local thugs, they remained there, day and night for over a month, supported in large part by the Binio Squat, the Lesvos Workers Union, local anti-fascist activists and No Borders Kitchen, until a combination of disgruntled shop-keepers, police intimidation and local mob aggression culminated in the Mayor's call to protest, and the refugees emptied the square. For the following days, negotiations between the protesters and the Mayor were ongoing, with the latter issuing promises of decent housing while shuttling and corralling the families from place to place. On November 25<sup>th</sup>, a march organized by local solidarity networks in support of the protesting migrants ended at the headquarters of Syriza's local branch. Migrants and their allies chose to [occupy](#) the building, seeking to force the Greek government to meet their demands by blocking one of its administrative and symbolic nexuses. Negotiations between the migrants, supported by members of the anti-fascist left and government representatives continued through December until, quietly, the government caved, and the protesters were permitted to travel to the mainland. Their surrender marked a small but deeply significant victory and an instance of what is made possible a conjoined force of migrants and their allies in the Greek and European Left.

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