

LESBOS BULLETIN

Update on the EU 'hotspot' Moria 2.0, by the Greek Council for Refugees & Oxfam



Two boys at the new 'temporary' site, known as Moria 2.0. September 2020. Photo by Yousif Alshewaili

- More than 12,000 people were left in destitution, following the fires that swept through Moria camp on 8 and 9 September. Nearly 8,000 have been moved to a new emergency camp in the area of Kara Tepe where they are living in precarious conditions with no access to running water or protection from the weather. Many residents have described conditions as worse than Moria and dubbed the new camp 'Moria 2.0'. People are having to live in flimsy tents pitched too close to the sea, meaning they are battered by wind and prone to flooding. The new camp was also built on the site of a former military shooting range, which had to be swept for unexploded landmines and grenades.
- 'Moria 2.0' represents another missed opportunity by Greece, the EU and EU Member States to address the underlying causes of a 5-year reception crisis experienced on the Greek islands. Amid the chaos that ensued in the aftermath of the fire in Moria, refugees and asylum seekers have been left with no access to medical, psychosocial and legal support. The Greek authorities have started processing asylum applications again, in spite of lacking necessary guarantees. This reflects Greece's and the EU's political choice to speed-up the asylum process irrespective of the cost in human lives.
- The Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) and Oxfam are deeply concerned that this approach is being replicated in the European Commission's proposal on a new Migration and Asylum Pact. Based on initial assessments, the Pact copies the same mistakes that defined the massive failures of the current EU 'hotspot' approach in Greece.

CALL TO ACTION

The Greek Council for Refugees and Oxfam are calling on EU member states' governments to urgently:

- Share responsibility with Greece for receiving and welcoming people seeking asylum in Europe through a mandatory relocation mechanism. We continue to call on member states to act on their commitments to relocate unaccompanied, separated, and sick children from Greece and to work with NGOs and professionals who support these children to make sure they can understand the process.
- Show genuine responsibility sharing and respect for human rights, by working towards durable solutions for refugees and asylum seekers, particularly now during a severe humanitarian and psychological crisis. Although material and staff contributions by Member States are a welcome support in times of urgent need, they only address short-term needs.

GCR and Oxfam are also calling on the European Parliament and the European Commission to:

- Support the Greek government and NGOs to make sure camps and refugee hosting localities are properly equipped with medical supplies and health facilities and residents have suitable accommodation as well as access to clean water and sanitation. All such initiatives should also take into consideration the local communities' needs to ensure equal treatment.
- Work with the Greek authorities to swiftly find a better and more suitable location for asylum seekers in Lesbos, especially ahead of winter. As long as people are hosted in the emergency camp, authorities should make sure its infrastructure includes at least safe access to running water, food provision and dedicated services for vulnerable people.
- Conduct a full review of the practices and policies that led to the failure of the EU 'hotspot' Moria¹, including an investigation of any allegations of human rights violations, before adopting the same approach in the new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

In addition, GCR and Oxfam are calling on Greece, with the support of other EU member states' governments and the European Commission, to:

- Respect and speed-up their commitment to transfer all asylum seekers off Lesbos to suitable accommodation on the mainland, which needs to be expanded. Until that time, urgent steps must be taken to ensure that living conditions in the new camp in Lesbos are compliant with human rights standards and Greece's international obligations.
- Preserve best-case examples of reception, such as PIKPA (a community run independent, open refugee camp in Mytilini) and the former Kara Tepe camp. Considering the invaluable support PIKPA has offered since its creation in 2012, and the ongoing need of its services, all efforts should be made in keeping its operations going.

Overview

In the aftermath of the fires that consumed the infamous EU ‘hotspot’ camp of Moria on 8 and 9 September, more than 12,000² people spent a week or even more sleeping in the streets of Lesbos. In the following days, police violence was also reported³, amid the protests that ensued, as asylum seekers and refugees called for transfers off the island. Instead, the Ministry of Migration & Asylum made it clear that they would have to either enter the newly built camp in the area of Kara Tepe or lose the possibility to continue with their asylum applications.⁴

The new camp was built by the Ministry with the assistance of the army in a former military shooting range, which first had to be swept for potential landmines and unexploded grenades. It is currently composed of 1,100 summer tents, each with the capacity to host 8 people. However, critical infrastructure is still lacking (see below).

The new camp is supposed to be a temporary facility and plans on the gradual transfer of all its residents off the island by Easter have been announced by the Minister of Migration & Asylum, Notis Mitarakis, and the Minister of Citizen Protection, Michalis Chrysochoidis. It remains unclear, however, how this can be accomplished without further stretching the already overburdened capacity of the Greek mainland facilities, while safeguarding asylum seekers’ and refugees’ health amid the pandemic.

In the meantime, far from being an actual shelter, the new camp has earned the moniker ‘Moria 2.0’ from its residents, while many consider it even worse.

A new camp, worse than the old one

Over the last 4 weeks, more than 2,500 asylum seekers and refugees have been transferred off Lesbos and another 1,300 are expected to be relocated to other member states by Christmas.⁵ But conditions in the ‘Moria 2.0’ camp remain dreadful. The camp hosts 7,660⁶ people, primarily consisting of families (women account for 22%, men for 44% and children for 34%⁷).

The flimsy tents, many of which are pitched only 20 meters from the sea, lack a solid foundation and provide no protection against the weather, including strong sea winds and rains. The first rainfall of the season on 8 October was sufficient to flood more than 80 tents and several areas of the camp. The rains turned the ground to mud and caused more damage to what little asylum seekers have left. Considering the placement of the camp by the sea, this should have been foreseen. However, the camp lacks critical drainage and sewerage systems, raising further concerns ahead of the coming winter period.⁸

Lack of access to basic provisions

Between 21-25 September, Oxfam conducted a rapid protection assessment in the new camp and found substantial gaps. Food is only provided

“I witnessed the police throwing tear gas. I was with my youngest daughter who got very scared and passed out from the tear gas.”

Farid, a Syrian father*

“The camp is really horrible; it’s like a hell. I think Moria was better. Here, we don’t have any good houses. We don’t have showers. We don’t have toilets.”

Ali, a young Afghan boy who aspires to be a star football player*

“I have undergone two surgeries. I have problems with my spine, I have pressure in my eyes and my head. I cannot stand on my feet for long. They always promise me an orthopedic. I went to one yesterday and they told me I need a neurologist, [so] they just gave me 6 pills and a painkiller. We have been in Moria since January. Only god knows how my situation is here.”

Yasmin, 74-year-old Syrian grandmother who was wounded during the war*

once or twice per day. Many people complain about the quantity and quality of the food. In the first days of the camp's operation, women and children fainted from hunger.

On 6 October, there were 349 toilets, each one shared by more than 20 people⁹, yet inaccessible to anyone with physical disabilities. There is hardly any running water and showers are yet to be built. Consequently, many people have to wash themselves in the sea. This poses a safety risk, especially for children, both in terms of risk of drowning and because of the potential to get infected water contaminated by sewage.

Access to healthcare services is similarly lacking. Medical teams in the camp are mostly focused on COVID-19 testing and prevention, as is the local hospital in Mytilene. Meanwhile, the only competent Greek authority to conduct vulnerability assessments or refer asylum seekers to the hospital (the EODY) operates with only two doctors. This exacerbates the gap for those in need of a doctor or medication, or to those who need to have their vulnerability assessed in order to get access to the support their particular condition requires. Vulnerable asylum seekers now go unnoticed even though the Greek authorities have an obligation to provide adequate reception conditions under EU and Greek law.

Due to the lack of (sufficient) toilets and showers, their cleanliness, as well as the lack of sufficient lighting in the new camp, women are exposed to significant heightened sexual and gender-based violence.

Lack of protection against COVID-19

Meanwhile, despite the added focus on COVID-19 prevention and response, the situation in the new camp is a stark reminder of the previous EU 'hotspot' of Moria.

Since August, Lesbos is on a 'level 3' alert due to the increased COVID-19 cases. In nearby Mytilene town, masks are required everywhere.¹⁰ But the Greek authorities do not provide asylum seekers with masks, even though people are forced to remain in tightly packed tents. The lack of running water and handwashing stations means that asylum seekers are not able to wash their hands frequently, putting them at greater risk. Similarly, during the daily line up for food distribution, it is impossible to practice social distancing.

Disrupted legal and mental health services

Amid this chaotic situation, and in the aftermath of the fire, the Greek authorities announced that asylum interviews would restart as of 21 September. However, under the current circumstances, procedural guarantees cannot be safeguarded, which further jeopardizes asylum seeker's fundamental rights.

"We are all vulnerable. There is no one here who is not vulnerable. We came in January 2020. I have an 11-year old son who suffers from panic attacks. We went to the hospital, but they didn't give him medication. They always tell us 'come tomorrow, come tomorrow'. Every 2 to 3 days, these panic attacks occur and there is no therapy for him."

Mahdi, a Syrian father*

"The camp is much worse than Moria. There are no Covid-19 hygiene provisions. We are being treated differently because we are refugees. We don't want clothes or tents or even shoes. We just want to live in safety. And we want our children to have access to education."

Nabil, a Syrian father*

Since the fire, asylum seekers have practically been deprived of what little access they previously had to medical, psychosocial and legal support, due to the resulting precarious conditions and the disruption of regular communication channels.¹¹ Severe lack of information and guidance by the competent authorities, the restriction of movement in the camp, the prohibition of lawyers' access to the people they are assisting, on account of COVID-19 measures, and the ongoing suspension of Lesbos Regional Asylum Office's activities to the public since the fire, continue to pose insurmountable obstacles to a fair asylum procedure.

Severe impact on mental health

All of this has further exacerbated the mental health conditions of those residing in the emergency camp. After the daily horrors of the previous EU 'hotspot' Moria camp, they are now forced to remain in another substandard camp, which in many respects presents more dangers than Moria. Everyone in the new camp has to learn again how to survive and who to ask for help, how to re-establish a semblance of routine, after experiencing yet another displacement in their lives.

"We came here to feel like humans, not be treated worse and worse every day. There are two types of war: one with guns, like in Syria, where you are waiting for a bomb at any moment. And the other is here, a psychological war."

Rita, a Syrian mother*

"We see a constant feeling of futility. People who first lived in Moria once more find themselves in a camp without any provisions. It becomes very difficult to actually assist them in such a situation. We can at best accompany them through this [new] journey, hoping at some point to be able to establish the groundwork for the therapeutic process to begin, even though this cannot be accomplished in the current camp. We have to keep in mind that this is not only a humanitarian, but also a psychological emergency."

Christina Maragkou, psychologist working for Greek Council for Refugees

Meanwhile, the Greek government intends to close two sites in Lesbos that have for years been offering alternative care for vulnerable asylum seekers - PIKPA and the old Kara Tepe camp. Both are considered best-practice examples for providing a safe space for children, people with severe disabilities or illnesses, and victims of torture and violence. Despite their success in offering humane living conditions, the intended closure of these facilities jeopardizes their residents' uninterrupted access to specialized care and a safe space to life. No formal decision has been issued to PIKPA and its residents, who were only informed of the imminent eviction through a leaked letter of the Greek authorities which ordered the police to evict the facility by 15 October.¹²

UNHCR and NGOs have protested against this plan.¹³ Following the success of the #savepikpa campaign, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs unofficially informed PIKPA that it would temporarily remain open, until further notice. This ongoing uncertainty is harmful for the residents of the camp as well for long-term support that NGOs can offer to asylum seekers and refugees in the most vulnerable positions. Meanwhile, GCR has applied for interim measures before the European Court of Human Rights, in support of a case of a highly vulnerable single woman who survived

gender-based violence and resides in PIKPA with her new-born baby. Reacting immediately, the ECtHR requested the Greek government to reply in writing if there is indeed a decision to remove this woman and her child and close-down PIKPA; if they can submit an appeal against the decision before the Greek courts; when the woman and her child are to be removed from the facility and whether they have been provided with any alternatives. The government now has to reply by 22 October.

A note on the EU Migration and Asylum Pact

On 23 September, the European Commission launched its new Pact on Migration and Asylum, with a proposal for setting up new Centers for 'screening' of third country nationals arriving irregularly "at or in proximity to the external borders".¹⁴ According to the proposal, screening should be completed within 5 days. Accelerated examination should then take place of "applications of applicants who are nationals of a third country for which the share of decisions granting international protection is lower than 20%".¹⁵

At the launch of the Pact, European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson said that "conditions in Moria, both before and after the fire, were unacceptable. It is not good enough to say never again, we need action and all Member States must play their part."¹⁶ It is therefore very disappointing that the details of the proposal are strikingly similar to the mechanisms and laws regulating the EU 'hotspots' in Greece. This similarity ranges from the registration process to the use of expedited processes to determine (in)admissibility of asylum applications. These procedures seem inspired by the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, albeit with a new touch: though physically within EU borders, the proposed Pact seems to point that, upon arrival, persons seeking asylum in Europe will be technically deemed as not yet having entered EU territory. This raises serious concerns with respect to accountability and the human rights of people seeking asylum; particularly since it is indicated that this initial pre-screening phase will take place under conditions of *de facto* detention.

Furthermore, it is concerning that the measures envisioned for addressing growing pressure on services resembles the same methods which have been tested and failed in the EU 'hotspot' of Moria and the rest of the Greek island camps. This includes that authorities can deny asylum seekers a meeting with a doctor if they are "satisfied that no preliminary medical screening is necessary".¹⁷ It overlooks the reality on the ground: people with less visible vulnerabilities, such as victims of torture or those with mental trauma, are mostly left without support, exposed to inhumane conditions in camps like Moria. The lack of a (psychosocial) vulnerability assessment violates their rights and needs.

In addition, it is also concerning that state authorities have the discretion to decide on fast-tracking applications behind closed doors, based on "any elements which seem at first sight to be relevant to refer [the applicant] into the accelerated examination procedure or the border procedure".¹⁸ Unfortunately, the new Pact does not address gaps in service provision

at the new ‘hotspot-like’ screening centers or create real safeguards that ensure that women, men and children are safe and that basic conditions are met before decisions are made regarding their fate in the EU.

NOTES

- ¹ See also Oxfam, ‘No-Rights Zone. How people in need of protection are being denied crucial access to legal information and assistance in the Greek islands’ EU ‘hotspot’ camps’ (6 December 2019), <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/no-rights-zone>.
- ² As per the data published by the General Secretariat of Information and Communication, on 8 September 2020, Moria ‘hotspot’ accommodated 12,767 persons. See <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/10326/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-8-9-2020/?lang=en>.
- ³ See, amongst others, Ta Nea, ‘Moria: Stones and tears in the path of refugees and migrants’ (12 September 2020), <https://www.tanea.gr/2020/09/12/greece/moria-petropolemos-kai-dakrygona-se-poreia-prosfygou-kai-metanaston/>.
- ⁴ Greek government, Ministry of Migration & Asylum (17 September 2020), <https://migration.gov.gr/en/respect-and-solidarity/>.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* See also On the island, ‘The goal is for the new accommodation to be ready by summer’ (9 October 2020), https://www.stonisi.gr/post/12010/stoxos-to-neo-kyt-na-einai-etoimo-ws-to-kalokairi?fbclid=IwAR1rjnlPyfxwBZWrrR-FwgNydRrCXjLKMuLpQe8EIlkQws_ddrq4Hi-XXDs.
- ⁶ Greek government, National Situational Picture Regarding the Islands at Eastern Aegean Sea (14 October 2020), <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/10741/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-14-10-2020/?lang=en>.
- ⁷ Gender and age statistics accurate on 9 October 2020.
- ⁸ Efsyn, ‘The story of Mitarakis sunk in the mud’ (8 October 2020), https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/263371_boylaxe-sti-laspi-afigma-mitaraki. On the island, ‘Kara Tepe, no good’ (8 October 2020), <https://www.stonisi.gr/post/11996/kara-tepe-no-good-pics> and UNHCR, ‘A month after Moria fires, UNHCR warns of worsening conditions ahead of winter’ (9 October 2020), <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/10/5f80111c4/month-moria-fires-unhcr-warns-worsening-conditions-ahead-winter.html>.
- ⁹ According to information provided by the International Rescue Committee.
- ¹⁰ Gov. gazette n. 4484 /11 October 2020. There are 4 levels of alert, level 3 is for increased supervision
- ¹¹ Joint Press Release (17 September 2020), see <https://www.gcr.gr/en/news/press-releases-announcements/item/1506-press-release-of-legal-organisations-operating-in-lesvos-about-the-procedures-regarding-asylum-seekers-during-the-on-going-emergency-situation>.
- ¹² <https://stonisi.gr/post/11720/ekkenwste-to-pikpa-ews-tis-15-oktwvrioy>
- ¹³ Joint Statement of Greek and International organizations on the decision to terminate the operations of PIKPA and Kara Tepe facilities, see <https://www.gcr.gr/en/news/press-releases-announcements/item/1522-joint-statement-of-greek-and-international-organizations-on-the-decision-to-terminate-the-operations-of-pikpa-and-kara-tepe-facilities>. See also UNHCR, ‘A month after Moria fires, UNHCR warns of worsening conditions ahead of winter’ (9 October 2020), <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/10/5f80111c4/month-moria-fires-unhcr-warns-worsening-conditions-ahead-winter.html>.
- ¹⁴ European Commission, ‘Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council introducing a screening of third country nationals at the external borders’ Brussels, 23.9.2020 COM(2020) 612.
- ¹⁵ European Commission, ‘Amended proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union’ Brussels, 23.9.2020 COM(2020) 611.
- ¹⁶ Press release: A European Taskforce to resolve emergency situation on Lesbos” 23 September 2020 (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1728)
- ¹⁷ Article 9 of the European Commission proposal for a screening regulation.
- ¹⁸ Article 14 of the European Commission proposal for a screening regulation.

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This paper was written by Natalia-Rafaella Kafkoutou and Spyros-Vlad Oikonomou. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.