

# LESBOS BULLETIN

## Update on the EU response in Lesbos, by the Greek Council for Refugees & Oxfam



People washing their dishes on the shores of Lesbos. September 2020. Photo by Yousif Al Shewaili

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- Though progress had been made on the new camp's ongoing winterization, Mavrovouni (or 'Moria 2.0', as it is called) still lacks basic necessities, such as heating, warm water, and laundry facilities. Overall living conditions are poor. As tent-based accommodation is unsuitable for prolonged periods of stay, many residents will be struggling to cope with conditions in the winter.
- Amid an increase in COVID-19 infections, a new general lockdown in Greece is once more disproportionately affecting people in the camp. Though masks are being provided with the support of donations, COVID-19 preventive measures distinguish between locations and populations. Those in need of services and support are hit hardest, as essential services are becoming more difficult to access due to increased restrictions on people's movement.
- Almost three months after the Moria fire, it is still unclear how the Greek Asylum Services (GAS) has resumed its operations in Lesbos. The lack of clear guidance and ad hoc mode of working is raising many questions and concerns by legal aid organisations.
- The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) published the report on its *ad hoc* visit to Greece.<sup>1</sup> It raised the alarm on the Greek authorities' reliance on detention to address the challenges of forced displacement. Despite this, on 13 November, the European Commission agreed to fully fund three new closed-controlled Reception Centers on the islands of Samos, Kos and Leros. This decision will quadruple the number of detention

places on these islands, while reinforcing the failed paradigm of mass reception centers at the fringes of the EU.

## CALL TO ACTION

The Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) and Oxfam are calling on EU member state's governments, with the support of the Commission, to act urgently, before more people's lives are put at risk in the 'hotspots' to:

- Share responsibility with Greece for receiving and welcoming people asking for asylum in Europe. Most urgently this should include relocation of asylum seekers who are identified by Greek authorities and NGOs as those most in need of relocation.
- Abandon the 'hotspot' model as a blueprint for future EU migration and asylum schemes. Reception centers at the EU's external borders cannot guarantee the rights and dignity of women, men and children seeking protection, nor the safeguards of asylum procedures, which should take place in suitable conditions, after access to legal rights has been ensured.

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

- Immediately conduct a vulnerability assessment for all of the camp's residents, and swiftly transfer the most vulnerable to safe accommodation in the mainland or relocate them to other member states.
- Improve protective measures against the spread of COVID-19, by accelerating the installation of water infrastructure and sanitation facilities in the Mavrovouni camp.
- Adapt the asylum process and facilities to ensure fair access to asylum during the pandemic. This includes ensuring that all asylum seekers have access to the internet and that measures are in place to support people without an email address, mobile phone, or online orientation. Facilities should ensure confidentiality during interviews and waiting spaces should permit social-distancing to combat the virus.

### **Preparations for the winter ('winterization') are progressing, but crucial gaps persist**

Between mid-October and November, winterization of the new temporary camp (Moria 2.0, official name 'Mavrovouni camp') has progressed. The Reception and Identification Service (RIS), with the support of NGOs, have placed the tents on wooden pallets, and have installed plastic floors inside the tents.<sup>2</sup> Residents have also been provided with mats on top of which they can place their blankets and sleeping bags, which they initially had to place on nylon sheets and cardboard pieces. Yet, as temperatures drop, no other items, such as beds, mattresses or heaters, have been provided. Asylum seekers, many of whom are particularly vulnerable<sup>3</sup>, will thus be struggling to cope for another winter.

According to people living in the camp,<sup>4</sup> there is still no access to electricity. This means having no heating in the tents and forcing people to light fires to warm themselves, which is dangerous and can cause respiratory problems.<sup>5</sup> It also means people cannot cook, heat water, or even engage in ordinary activities, such as listening to music or simply communicating with their loved ones.

People living in the camp also lack access to any on-site activities, since authorities have not yet established recreational areas and child-friendly spaces. Adults are only able to walk around the camp, while children, who constitute 37% (2,720) of the camp's population, have nowhere to play. Additionally, children in the camp cannot go to school, which prolongs their disruption from formal education. All of this is an additional burden on the camp's residents' mental health, especially during the second COVID-19 lockdown. Despite this, according to RIS,<sup>6</sup> on-site medical and mental health support is only accessible in cases of emergency.

### **New lockdown, same distinctions in applicable measures**

Amid an increase in COVID-19 infections and a nation-wide lockdown, masks and hygiene items are distributed by civil society organisations and employees of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, through the support of private donations.<sup>7</sup> Organisations and volunteers continue to promote hygiene activities but neither the asylum seekers nor employees working in the camp are effectively protected against COVID-19. Prevalent conditions in the camp also exacerbate the health of the most vulnerable.<sup>8</sup>

"What we want for our children is safety and education. Since the war in Syria began, 11 generations have not gone to school."

*\*Mahdi, a Syrian father, interviewed on 8 October in Moria 2.0*

The nation-wide lockdown is impacting the people in the camp harder than the residents of Lesbos. Exit from the camp is allowed for those who have medical appointments, asylum interviews, appointments with lawyers or public services – but proof of those appointments (*i.e.* documents) must be provided. Exit is also allowed for one person per family to shop in the nearby markets, but not every day.<sup>9</sup> In comparison, the people residing at the nearby camp of old Kara Tepe only need to notify the camp director in advance, while in Mytilene town, the general population is mainly required to notify authorities of their outdoor activities by sending a codified SMS.

Despite the need to increase hygiene measures, the ongoing lack of water and sanitation facilities means that people have to collect water from barrels in different spots throughout the camp, if they are to serve their daily needs (toilet, personal hygiene, laundry, dishwashing). As of 27 November 2020, there were 384 toilets available for the camp's 7,255 residents<sup>10</sup>, roughly amounting to 1 toilet per 19 residents.<sup>11</sup> This is a welcome development, in compliance with accepted standards<sup>12</sup>, yet not all toilets are operational, and some are out of order.

The installation of sewage and drainage systems has begun as of 23 November. Plans are similarly underway for the installation of 100 additional showers in the camp, while 36 have already been placed<sup>13</sup>. However, they lack hot water, which is not expected to be available before mid-December, and their number won't suffice to ensure equitable access for all the camp's current residents.<sup>14</sup> Currently, the vast majority of people are forced to use 'bucket showers'. Because laundry facilities are also unavailable, there is a rise in scabies amongst the women, men and children living in the camp.

## Asylum procedures during a pandemic

As of 20 October 2020, the Ministry of Migration has commenced the operationalization of its electronic system, through which asylum seekers can book electronic appointments with the GAS. This is a positive development, in line with relevant EU guidance<sup>15</sup> and has been welcomed by legal aid organisations in Greece. However, as pointed in a joint letter of the Legal Aid Working Group, this new system needs to be improved.<sup>16</sup> Based on recommendations from GCR's teams on the ground, these improvements should include ensuring internet access in all Registration and Identification Centers (RICs), alternative solutions for the many people without an email account or mobile phone, and solutions for those who may lack the technical knowledge of how to access this system on their own. Last but not least, all available services and applications on the website should be translated in all the different languages spoken by the asylum seekers in Greece.

Further, in Lesbos, after the Moria fire, the Regional Asylum Office (RAO) has been operating in a remote area outside the camp called Pagani and has suspended all its public service, except for scheduled asylum interviews. If and when asylum seekers' full access to the RAO will be restored remains unclear, as no relevant decision or official announcement has been issued.

Meanwhile, the Greek government is 'fast-tracking' the examination of asylum applications, scheduling more than 100 interviews per day, as reported by legal aid organisations.<sup>17</sup> Despite challenges in terms of access to a lawyer during lockdown, interview invitations are given to applicants on very short notice, in many cases just the day before.<sup>18</sup> This means that they don't have time to prepare for such important interviews, including by seeking legal counsel.

Moreover, GCR and other legal aid organisations based on Lesbos have observed several technical problems and low quality of the asylum interviews, which are being conducted in a secluded facility in Pagani, through online applications (remote interviews and interpreters). An unstable internet connection, poor sound quality and background noise mean participants have to frequently repeat themselves, making an already traumatic process more difficult than it has to be. The facility's thin walls also cannot guarantee the confidentiality of interviews, causing even more stress to the applicants.

Finally, COVID-19 precautionary measures are impossible to implement in practice in the Pagani facility, posing a threat to both asylum seekers and employees of the GAS.<sup>19</sup> Asylum seekers sometimes have to wait for their interview in an overcrowded waiting area for hours, without water and food provided to them, and use toilet facilities, which, as they report, are dirty and lack any sanitation means.

To solve this, authorities must invest in appropriate systems and sites that allow asylum seekers to access online services and a safe and secure environment to conduct interviews.

## **Doubling down on social exclusion and detention, funded by the EU**

According to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum<sup>20</sup>, construction has already started in Samos, Kos, and Leros, for the creation of the new 'closed' or 'controlled' facilities, which will reportedly<sup>21</sup> be ready by autumn 2021. They will consist of controlled entry/exit systems, double barbed-wire fencing and a road in-between, with security guards. Upon their completion, they are expected to have a total capacity of 5,876 accommodation places,<sup>22</sup> and will more than quadruple the number of pre-removal detention places on the three islands.<sup>23</sup>

The three new centres will be fully funded by the European Commission, which has allocated more than 121 million euro for this purpose.<sup>24</sup> On 3 December, the European Commission also announced the signing of an MoU with the Greek government and several European agencies,<sup>25</sup> for the establishment of a new site to replace Mavrovouni in September 2021. The new site will add 5,000 accommodation places to the islands' capacity.

The European Commission estimates the total amount for constructing the new RICs on the Greek islands at 220 million euro and the estimates cost of services in the camps would be 50 million euro.<sup>26</sup> This price stands in stark comparison to the cost of apartment-based accommodation (ESTIA) on the islands which, in 2020, provided more than 25,000 places in apartments for 91.5 million euros.<sup>27</sup> The ESTIA programme offers dignified accommodation to asylum seekers within local societies and facilitates the eventual integration of those recognised as beneficiaries of international protection in Greece. While the costs of the two programmes are not entirely comparable, the constructions of the RICs are expected to cost more than twice as much as ESTIA while provide less than half the reception capacity.

Coincidentally, the publication of plans to increase capacities in detention, in pre-removal detention centers, comes exactly as the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) has again raised the alarm on "the Greek authorities [reliance] on a policy of detention."

# NOTES

\* Names have been changed for privacy

<sup>1</sup> CPT, p. 28

<sup>2</sup> This was necessary, as tents were initially placed directly on the ground. As a consequence, many were flooded during the first autumn rains, while people had to dig around their tents for the water to pass or clear the water with buckets.

<sup>3</sup> According to UNHCR's mapping of the vulnerabilities of the residents of Mavrovouni camp, there are approximately 2,000 people with specific needs. Amongst them, 62% have documented medical conditions (e.g. chronic illnesses), 22% are women at risk (pregnant and lactating women, as well as single women), and 8% are people with disabilities. Several persons with particularly high vulnerabilities have also been identified, including Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, Survivors of Torture, and persons with serious mental health conditions in need of medication and psychiatric treatment. A high number of children with medical conditions have also been identified by the UN agency.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1106834423109127&set=a.122908418168404>

<sup>5</sup> Also see <https://www.lesvosnews.net/articles/news-categories/koinonia/apanthropi-i-katastasi-sto-kyt-toy-kara-tepe-epistol-i-apo-tin>

<sup>6</sup> Reply of the Director of the Reception and Identification Service on "Provision of Clarifications to questions posed by the Legal Aid Sub-Working Group - Lesvos regarding procedures in the new Site in the area of Mavrovouni" on 18 November 2020, p.2.

<sup>7</sup> <https://migration.gov.gr/dorea-500-000-maskon-prostasias-gia-kentra-metanaston-sta-nisia/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.stonisi.gr/post/13211/sto-mati-toy-voria-me-varidia-stis-tsepes>

<sup>9</sup> As of Tuesday 10 November, each day 3 groups of approximately 350 focal points (one person per family) each are allowed to exit the RIC on a specific time and date based on the asylum number of the focal point. During the week asylum seekers can exit from 8 am to 8 pm, on Saturdays from 8 am to 3 pm. On Sunday and on public holidays they are not allowed to exit.

<sup>10</sup> According to UNHCR estimates as of 22 November

<sup>11</sup> Information provided by RIC Lesvos Mavrovouni WASH Working Group.

<sup>12</sup> <https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/sphere/#ch001>, p.116.

<sup>13</sup> Information provided by RIC Lesvos Mavrovouni WASH Working Group

<sup>14</sup> For instance, as per international (Sphere) standards, the proportion of persons per bathing facility should not exceed 50. Based on the camp's population at the time of writing (7,255), 36 showers would amount to more than 200 persons per such facility. See <https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/sphere/#ch001>, p. 106; [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/watsan2005/annex\\_files/Sphere/SPHERE2%20-%20chapter%202%20-%20Min%20standards%20in%20water,%20sanitation%20and%20hygiene%20prom.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/watsan2005/annex_files/Sphere/SPHERE2%20-%20chapter%202%20-%20Min%20standards%20in%20water,%20sanitation%20and%20hygiene%20prom.pdf); <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/prosfygiko-metanastefiko/>.

<sup>15</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0417\(07\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0417(07)&from=EN)

<sup>16</sup> LAWG letter of 12 November on the "Problems of the online platform - Letter addressed to the Minister, Head of Asylum Service and Secretary General for Reception"

<sup>17</sup> Legal Centre Lesvos, "WHILE EUROPE STRUGGLES WITH SECOND WAVE OF COVID-19 INFECTIONS, GREECE RUSHES ASYLUM SEEKERS THROUGH PROCEDURES IN LESVOS", 25 November 2020, available here <https://legalcentrelesvos.org/2020/11/25/while-europe-struggles-with-second-wave-of-covid-19-infections-greece-rushes-asylum-seekers-through-procedures-in-lesvos/>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.politikalesvos.gr/neo-kamp-kara-tepe/?fbclid=IwAR2PJlqeoJK3SWd4mn\\_UxnrrF2UdUZoLsNhf-fojlgUnSe4Nz\\_5dBM3sE8](https://www.politikalesvos.gr/neo-kamp-kara-tepe/?fbclid=IwAR2PJlqeoJK3SWd4mn_UxnrrF2UdUZoLsNhf-fojlgUnSe4Nz_5dBM3sE8)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.stonisi.gr/post/12197/elegxoys-apo-ygeionomiko-kai-ika-zhtoy-n-sthn-yphresia-asyloy?fbclid=IwAR14\\_U20oeVhWOGnHodXyavbD3iw7k9k5yczwHcNxpjvawZ7poaKbmdPpP4#.X4qXkRAoBlk.fac\\_ebook](https://www.stonisi.gr/post/12197/elegxoys-apo-ygeionomiko-kai-ika-zhtoy-n-sthn-yphresia-asyloy?fbclid=IwAR14_U20oeVhWOGnHodXyavbD3iw7k9k5yczwHcNxpjvawZ7poaKbmdPpP4#.X4qXkRAoBlk.fac_ebook)

[https://www.politikalesvos.gr/neo-kamp-kara-tepe/?fbclid=IwAR2PJlqeoJK3SWd4mn\\_UxnrrF2UdUZoLsNhf-fojlgUnSe4Nz\\_5dBM3sE8](https://www.politikalesvos.gr/neo-kamp-kara-tepe/?fbclid=IwAR2PJlqeoJK3SWd4mn_UxnrrF2UdUZoLsNhf-fojlgUnSe4Nz_5dBM3sE8)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.mitarakis.gr/press/6296-20201112-tilesynedriasi>

<sup>21</sup> [https://euobserver.com/tickers/150119?utm\\_source=euobs&utm\\_medium=email](https://euobserver.com/tickers/150119?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.mitarakis.gr/press/6296-20201112-tilesynedriasi>

<sup>23</sup> From 474 detention places current only in Kos, to 2,200 detention places on the three islands. See *ibid* (<https://www.mitarakis.gr/press/6296-20201112-tilesynedriasi>) and *inter alia* <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/prosfygiko-metanastefiko/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ekathimerini.com/259140/article/ekathimerini/news/deal-signed-for-construction-of-new-migrant-centers>; <https://migration.gov.gr/ypografi-chrimatodotisis-gia-ko-samo-kai-lero/>

<sup>25</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/pdf/03122020\\_memorandum\\_of\\_understanding\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/pdf/03122020_memorandum_of_understanding_en.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Information provided to the European Parliament's LIBE Committee by the Commission, ('Second Package of Financial Assistance') as follow up to the debate on 27 October 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 'First Package of Financial Assistance'. Note, in a call for proposal by the Greek government, the reference under the ESTIA II Programme is for most of 2020 and for the whole of 2021. See: <https://migration.gov.gr/prosklisi-gia-tin-ypovoli-protaseon-sto-programma-estia-2021/>. See also <https://migration.gov.gr/egkrithike-i-eyropaiki-chrima-todotisi-ypsoys-92-ek-kai-ypegrafi-symvasi-gia-to-programma-estia-ii-2020/>

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