

# GCR's mission to Leros island



*Photo: Aris Messinis / AFP / Getty Images*

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## 1. Introduction

During the period of 21-22-23 October, GCR carried out a mission on the island of Leros, which included two (2) lawyers, one (1) social worker and two (2) interpreters for Arabic, Kurdish (Kurmanji) and Farsi/Dari.



Source: <http://sailingissues.com/greekislands/leros.html>

Leros is part of the administrative district of Kalymnos, Prefecture of Dodecanese, Region of South Aegean; it is the ninth island of the Prefecture in terms of size, with a surface area of 53 square metres and a coastline 71 km long. The Municipality of Leros consists of one Municipal Division that includes Leros island, Levitha and Farmakonissi islets, as well as Arhaggelos, Velona, Glaros, Mavra, Megalo Livadi, Piganousa, Plaka, Stroggyli and Trypiti islets.<sup>1</sup>

This small island has been receiving a considerable number of third country nationals amongst the ones arriving overall in the country. Their vast majority arrives on Farmakonissi islet, considering that it is only 6 nautical miles away from the Turkish coast. According to a relevant statement by the police director of the Second Police Division of Dodecanese, 23,700 arrivals have been recorded on Leros and Farmakonissi from the beginning of the year till the end of October 2015.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that arrivals within 2015 have skyrocketed as compared to the respective period in 2014. According to official statistics by the Hellenic Police (in Greek ELAS), in the first three quarters of 2015 new arrivals for the whole of the Second Police Division of Dodecanese reached 66,216, while in the respective period in 2014 they were 6,044.<sup>3</sup> Typical of the continuous flow of new arrivals is the fact that September marked only a slight decrease in the overall number of new

<sup>1</sup> Municipality of Leros – official website, *General Presentation of Leros*, <http://www.leros.gr/main/index.php?categoryid=62>

<sup>2</sup> I RODIAKI, *Over 80,000 immigrants have arrived on Kos, Kalymnos and Leros, 22-10-2015*, <http://www.rodiki.gr/article/323357/xeperasan-tis-80-000-oi-afixeis-metanastwn-se-kw-kalymno-kai-lero#ixzz3qKpAUJpb>

<sup>3</sup> Hellenic Police, *Non-legal immigrants arrested for illegal entry and stay by police and port authorities at the borders*, ref. Table at: [http://www.astynomia.gr/images/stories//2015/statistics15/allodapwn/9\\_statistics\\_all\\_2015\\_methorio.png](http://www.astynomia.gr/images/stories//2015/statistics15/allodapwn/9_statistics_all_2015_methorio.png)

arrivals as compared to August, which for the time being has been the month with the highest number of recorded arrivals in 2015.

To be more exact, according to information provided by Leros' Harbour Master during our visit to the Port Authority, 6,800 third country nationals entered Leros in August, against 6,700 that entered in September. During our mission, daily arrivals ranged around 600-700 people. According to the same source of information, approximately 70% of arrivals are of Syrian origin, followed by citizens of Afghanistan and Iraq, which makes the nature of new arrivals almost purely refugees. We were further informed that during our visit, the number



*Farmakonissi*

Source: <http://defencenews.gr/index.php/ethniki-amina/1789-diapsefsi-apo-to-geetha-sta-peri-ypososis-tourkikis-simaias-sto-farmakonisi>

of newly arriving Afghans had risen in comparison to the past. This development may be connected with the discount of the fees charged by human traffickers because of the deterioration of the weather and the general dire financial status of Afghans.

During our stay on the island, meetings were held with Leros Harbour Master, the Mayor, the Head of Leros Police Department, the coordinator of Doctors without Borders mission, a delegate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, including representatives of the independent Leros Solidarity Network. The Network engages many volunteers from Greece and abroad, with its nucleus consisting of 12-15 people. Visits were further held both to the Port Authority and the camp nearby, including “Villa Artemis”<sup>4</sup>. Finally, we contacted and spoke with new arrivals.

## 2. Findings

### 2.1. Registration procedures

Approximately 85% of new arrivals take place on Farmakonissi islet, a military base; they are then taken to Leros either on a small cruise boat that serves this route after the intervention of the Minister of State, or on a Port Authority vessel. Their transfer to Leros takes place within one or

<sup>4</sup> Regarding “Villa Artemis”, see below, section 2.2. “Accommodation Spaces”.

two days, but there may be a delay where weather conditions do not allow the travel. Therefore, newcomers may stay on the islet four to five days. In this time, no provision has been made for providing them food and water, while according to testimonies, where Hellenic Army soldiers are not able to offer any available packaged food, newcomers themselves are forced to buy food from the Army Cafeteria of the military base. Newcomers are then transferred to Lakki, one of the islet's two ports, which also hosts the headquarters of the Port Authority.

Less frequently, new arrivals may take place directly on Leros, in various places throughout the island. In such cases, the Coast Guard is informed by fishers, passing boats, residents or via calls to the European Emergency Number, 112. Their subsequent transfer to Lakki is made either with vehicles of the coast guard, when the overall number of arrivals is small or one of the two buses conceded by the Municipality, when the number are high. There are setbacks regarding the use of the two buses offered, considering that the drivers are employees of the Municipal Administration that offer their work outside the context of their responsibilities at work, meaning that their availability is limited and there are no funds to cover fuel expenses, let alone on a daily basis. Identification of nationalities and registration takes place upon the newcomers' arrival in Lakki by the Coast Guard, assisted by Frontex and its exclusive interpreters that however, do not work on a daily basis. During Frontex



Source: <http://www.lerosnews.gr/component/k2/item/6636-leros-entopismos-kai-diaswsh-136-paranomwn-metanastwn-sta-glaronhsia.html>



personnel off days, the Coast Guard handles the process itself. Note that the Coast Guard, which in addition to the administrative registration of newcomers is also involved in their criminal proceedings, has no interpreters.

Next, the Police takes fingerprints and prepares its own records based on the evidence already collected by the Coast Guard, to save time and complete procedures as soon as possible, considering that arrivals are non-stop. During

Source: <http://defencenews.gr/index.php/ethniki-amina/1789-diapsefsi-apo-to-geetha-sta-peri-yposisis-tourkikis-simaias-sto-famvakonisi>

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our visit on Leros island, the Police handled the said procedures on site in Lakki, to avoid the transfer of a large number of newcomers to the area of the Police Department at the island's second port, Agia Marina, as was the case in the summer months, which hindered the expedited handling of the whole process.

As of their arrival on the island or their rescue by the Coast guard, new arrivals are considered arrested by the Coast Guard, thus triggering their criminal prosecution. Thereafter, up to the point that the Prosecutor abstains from pressing criminal charges for illegal entry in the country, newcomers are considered Coast Guard detainees and remain in custody at the courtyard of the building that houses Leros Port Authority. Note that for reasons of decongestion, during weekends and holidays, the Coast Guard receives verbal instructions from the Prosecutor of his intention to abstain from criminal charges and lift detention orders. As of the decision for abstention, the Police, which as a rule has already completed the registration process, issues service notes or certificates on non-removal for humanitarian reasons in those cases where the principle of non-refoulement applies, which are serviced by Police officers by calling the names of those registered.



Source:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/11810075/Syrian-refugees-drown-trying-to-reach-Greek-islands-from-Turkey.html>

These official notes and certificates offer newcomers the possibility to buy boat tickets to continue their travel to Piraeus. There are routes from Leros to Piraeus three (3) times a week, on Sundays, Wednesdays and Thursdays; many of the people concerned, however, –depending also on the capacity of the ships– choose to take ships to go to neighbouring islands that have more frequent connection to continental Greece.



Source: <http://www.dimokratiki.gr/07-11-2015/unchr-stous-20-000-i-prosfiges-sta-ellinika-nisia/>

Right after the Prosecutor has decided to abstain from criminal charges, newcomers are guided to a plot of land next to the Port Authority headquarters, which has been set up

as a provisional camp.

There is no documented practice for giving priority to registering vulnerable cases, or Syrian nationals, as remarked in other entry points of Greece. In any case, procedures are completed within a reasonable time, or approximately 24 hours, thus adopting this practice may be unnecessary in the case of Leros.

## **Reception Conditions**

### *Accommodation Spaces*

One of the most important issues that newcomers in Leros face is the lack of spaces of accommodation or provisional stay, while they wait for the completion of their registration. The absolute lack of a state provision for reception is striking. Note that while they are inside the Port Authority headquarters, newcomers are forced to remain in the courtyard of the building, regardless of weather conditions. Some makeshift tents, a few thin carpets and a few blankets are available for the population waiting to be registered. As highlighted, the cold is particularly strong at night and there is much humidity, meaning that detainees suffer. As winter comes, it is obvious that cold and humidity will significantly worsen. There are four (4) toilets in the courtyard that are connected with the sewer network that are being cleaned every 3 to 4 days by the newcomers detained themselves, including volunteers; there are bad odours everywhere and extremely deficient health conditions. Water is provided by plastic tanks. During our visit, we detected particularly vulnerable cases, such as a man with a mutilated limb, an elderly woman with a broken arm, a girl with cerebral palsy, kids with apparent skin conditions caused by bites, including a woman suffering from gastric haemorrhage, who had previously been transferred to Leros General Hospital and had been advised to follow a specific diet. Further, part of the people we contacted was wearing wet clothes, despite the fact that they had arrived many hours ago.

A few metres away from the Port Authority, there is a makeshift camp with tents and some small lodges offered by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and Doctors without Borders, where newcomers may be accommodated after their registration by the port authority has finished. We were informed that the High Commissioner



intends to replace the existing tents with more lodges. This area includes eight (8) chemical toilets and showers offered care of Doctors without Borders. There is a two-storey building in the area of the camp connected to the power network costs borne by the Municipality that functions as accommodation for a large part of the population after the torrential rain that fell before our mission. This space was to be renovated care of and expenses borne by the High Commissioner.



Source: <http://www.lerosnews.gr/component/k2/item/6253-%C2%ABboyliazei%C2%BB-h-leros-apo-toys-paranomoys-metanastes.html>

There is an area available on the island that attempts to cover for accommodation needs, “Villa Artemis”, which is an old building located in the premises of Leros General Hospital. This building had been previously used as a detention area by the Coast Guard but was then conceded to Leros Solidarity Network, due to a security incident that occurred. Specifically, a large number of Coast Guard detainees, much higher than the overall capacity of the building, were temporarily transferred to “Villa Artemis”. However, the congestion and the fact that

the Coast Guard had locked the building sparked a state of unrest, and the detained newcomers set fire to their mattresses and a fire broke out that caused material damage. After volunteers of the Network repaired “Villa Artemis”, with care and costs of their own, they are now exclusively responsible for the management of the building. After vulnerable cases are identified among the Coast Guard detainees, mainly women, minors and the ill, they are conducted to “Villa Artemis”, where they are allowed to stay overnight. The building is very clean and includes six (6) rooms, each with 2, 3 or 4 beds. There are some cradles, a well organized kitchen area, a toilet and a playroom. Overall capacity is approximately (20) people. These people await the completion of

their registration process by the Coast Guard and a decision for abstention from criminal charges by the First Instance Prosecutor. In extraordinary cases (e.g. strong rainfall) more people may be accommodated (up to forty [40] have been accommodated in the past), including men. Volunteers are responsible for cleaning the building.

Considering that “Villa Artemis” cannot accommodate all new arrivals, and notwithstanding the initiative of the Network of Volunteers, there is evidently the need to find a different space, capable to host all new arrivals during their stay on the island. The Network of Volunteers has already suggested the PIKPA building in Lakki, where the Port Authority offices are located, i.e. where registration takes place. During the mission, Frontex had installed two (2) small buildings in the areas of PIKPA that were already power-connected and had access to the internet, intended for the registration and identification process. Moreover, the First Reception Service intends to use the space -after its concession by the Ministry of Health, or Leros State Clinic-, to establish a First Reception Centre (in Greek, *KEPY*). According to information provided by volunteers of Leros Solidarity Network, approximately €50,000 necessary for the construction of the Centre are expected to come from private, rather than public funds.



*Recommended space in Lepida*

Source: <http://www.lerosnews.gr/component/k2/item/6313-leros-to-prwhn-dioikhthrio-sta-lepida-proteinei-to-dhmotiko-symboylion-gia-th-stegash-twn-paranomwn-metanastwn.html>

The Municipal Authority was opposed to the solution of using PIKPA building as a *KEPY*, counter-suggesting a space in Lepida area, i.e. a land area within the Psychiatric Hospital of Leros. The principal argument of the Mayor was the amplitude of this area that would allow for the installation of all Services and Bodies involved in the registration and the support of the population arriving, including the latter’s restriction outside the centre of the island, i.e. its port. The Network of Volunteers and the UNHCR have strongly expressed their disagreement with this suggestion, with regards to its distance from the port, and the symbolic negative connotations attached to this decision. Similar disagreements have been also expressed by the Head of the Psychiatric Hospital, the medical staff and the director of the clinic, who consider that “the self-evident association in society between hundreds of people belonging to two

vulnerable population groups (mentally ill and refugees) will have tragic consequences.”<sup>5</sup> However, according to Leros’ Mayor and the Press, it seems that it is a suggestion that the competent Ministry has agreed to and the preparation of the premises has already begun.<sup>6</sup> However, until premises are ready, which is expected to take a long time, Leros Municipality has accepted the provisional solution of using PIKPA.

Lastly, according to information provided by representatives of Organisations operating on the island, including the Network of Volunteers, several cases newcomers being exploited by hotel owners’ documented, whereby the latter overcharge for rooms and related facilities.

### *Health care and vulnerable groups*

A Doctors without Borders team based on Kos also operates on Leros island. The team consists in doctors, nurses, a psychologist and interpreters in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Pashto and French. They offer primary care and medicine. The representative of the Organisation informed us that in most severe cases, patients are transferred to the General Hospital, with which they have excellent cooperation. Interpretation needs in the General Hospital are covered by Doctors without Borders and the UNHCR, while sometimes the Hospital’s doctors file a request for an interpreter directly to the Port Authority; however, the process followed in such cases is not exactly clear.

Regarding the population examined by the team of Doctors without Borders, there is no restriction in relation to the stage of the registration process that the newcomer requiring medical care is in. If a newcomer needs to see a doctor and their registration by the Port Authority has not been completed, which means that he or she still remains in custody, practical setbacks may arise, which are however in most cases overcome. These setbacks may be owed to the fact that permission by the Coast Guard, the authority for their detention, must be sought to transfer the patient, to and from the premises of the Coast Guard to the Doctor’s Practice and back. Doctors without Borders’ intention is to cover all needs, however this depends on the number of arrivals and the nature of the medical issues emerging. It was reported that priority regarding health services is given to vulnerable

<sup>5</sup> Editors’ Newspaper, *Leros, as in Kos*, 01-09-2015, available online at: <http://www.efsyn.gr/arthro/leros-opos-kos>

<sup>6</sup> Editors’ Newspaper, *Refugees will be housed in Leros’ PIKPA building*, 23-10-2015, <http://www.efsyn.gr/arthro/sto-pikpa-tis-leroy-tha-stegastoyn-oi-prosfyges>, and Leros News, *LEROS: HOT SPOT for immigrants in Lepida and PIKPA*, 22-10-2015, <http://www.lerosnews.gr/component/k2/item/6705-sta-lepida-kai-to-pikpa-tha-egkatastatheito-hot-spot-gia-toys-metanastes.html>

people, i.e. minors, people with disabilities, pregnant women, the elderly (over 64 years old) and those suffering from chronic illness. For people who must receive regular medication (e.g. diabetics), Doctors without Borders see to first stabilise their state of health that has eventually been disturbed because of the hardship of their travel, their living conditions and lack of medication, including the provision of medicine in sufficient quantity to cover the person's needs for one month. Finally, Doctors without Borders take care of forwarding cases that need further hospitalisation to the General Hospital.

Doctors without Borders' practice is housed on the ground floor of the building next to the Port Authority, where the camp for the new arrivals has been installed and where the new arrivals remain after the Prosecutor has abstained from the detention order, and up to the completion of all aforementioned procedures intended to release them from the island.

As regards vulnerable groups, excluding unaccompanied minors, as the Coast Guard Commandant reported, officers have no time to identify them and identification is made by the High Commissioner. It was highlighted that failing any standard reception procedures, the identification of vulnerable cases ranges from extremely difficult to impossible and relies on Services (Coast Guard, Police) that have not been qualified to that effect. The lack of interpretation services and the registration formalities further aggravate the identification of vulnerable persons. In all cases, even after identification, vulnerable persons do not enjoy particular care, lacking appropriate structures or services. Thus, families with minors, even infants, ill people, pregnant women, elderly, victims of violence/trafficking/torture, are either not identified at all or –if identified– do not enjoy any particular treatment or support. Particularly with regards to unaccompanied minors, Doctors without Borders and the UNHCR report that following their identification by the Port or Police Authorities, the District Attorney is informed accordingly and a request for their accommodation is conveyed to the National Centre for Social Solidarity (in Greek EKKA). In the meantime, until an accommodation structure is found (a period that lasts from a few days to one week), the minors stay in the area of the holing pen of Leros Police Department in Aghia Marina, a clearly inappropriate space, considering that it is a detention area with grim conditions. However, in the past five months, no more than three (3) unaccompanied minors have been registered, a number that shows the failure to identify them, considering that in the past numbers of unaccompanied minors entering Greece

have not been low.<sup>7</sup> If the case concerns a minor who states that he or she is accompanied by a relative other than the parents, then the Authorities' practice is to register him or her as an accompanied minor and to issue a common service note. Erroneous registration of the age is owed to the fact that in fear of being detained and thus delaying their registration process, minors avoid to state their actual age or state that they are accompanied by adults of the same nationality. With regards to victims of torture, the representative of Doctors without Borders reported that if they identify newcomers, victims of torture, they see to referring them to the headquarters of the Organisation in Athens, within the framework of a rehabilitation unit for victims of torture, which is operated in Athens through the cooperation of three (3) NGOs: the Greek Council for Refugees, Babel Day Centre and Doctors without Borders.

### *Food and provisions in kind*

With regards to the provision of food, a sum of euro 5.75 per person is offered by the Police and the Port Authority, which accounts for two (2) portions of food per day. However, because of the fact that, as mentioned before, the registration process is completed fast enough and often takes place simultaneously by both the Port Authority and the Police, newcomers usually receive a meal by one of the two Services, depending on the stage of their registration process (i.e. whether abstention by the District Attorney has been given). During the mission, food provision by the Port Authority had stopped due to certain financial/logistics matters, but the matter was to be resolved soon. There is no special provision for people with particular diet needs. In addition to the authorities, the Network of Volunteers also offers snacks, water and juices to people not accommodated in "Villa Artemis", including the camp near the Coast Guard. There are water boilers in the kitchen of "Villa Artemis" available, which are being used by mothers to prepare baby milk.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example: National Centre for Social Solidarity, Service for the Management of Request for Accommodation by Asylum-seekers and Unaccompanied Minors, Statistics for 2014, [http://www.ekka.org.gr/portal\\_docs/forceaccount/picture/23\\_1067.pdf](http://www.ekka.org.gr/portal_docs/forceaccount/picture/23_1067.pdf), p. 1, referring characteristically to the fact that in 2014 there were 2,390 requests by unaccompanied minors, more than double the number of requests filed in 2013 and almost triple the number of 2012.



Source: <http://www.lerosnews.gr/component/k2/item/6640-oi-syroi-poy-den-einai-syroi-kai-h-katagrafh.html>

The said population's needs in terms of basic necessities are covered by the UNHCR, Doctors without Borders and the Network of Volunteers. Note that all items offered by the Network of Volunteers (food, personal hygiene items and clothes) come from donations. As the volunteers informed us, there are three (3) warehouses (two (2) of which have been conceded by individuals), where they sort the items and distribute them to the population, depending on the needs. Doctors without Borders and the High Commissioner also

distribute sleeping bags, mats and personal hygiene items. A representative of the High Commissioner reported that in extraordinary cases they may also cover other needs, such as wheelchairs and crutches. All persons we met with reported that needs in terms of sleeping bags, blankets and towels are particularly pressing and existing supplies are not enough.

## 2.2. Information on the asylum process and legal assistance

Information provided to newcomers on their rights and obligations in Greece and Europe is made by the representatives of the UNHCR active on the island, assisted by the interpreters of NGO METAdrasi. Despite the upward trend in the arrivals of Afghans, live interpretation, in person, was offered only in Arabic. Interpretation needs in other languages were being covered through teleconferencing. The number of UNHCR staff on the island varies, being at times reinforced depending also on the needs emerging. During our visit in Leros, High Commissioner staff included two (2) regular Associate First Reception Experts, one (1) extraordinary Protection Officer and one (1) Emergency Field Officer.

It would be worth mentioning that individualised legal assistance is not offered on the island of Leros. However, none of the newcomers we spoke with wished to file a request for international protection in Greece. Their vast majority, if not in whole, seemed to treat our country as an entry point and a transit country in their voyage to northern parts of Europe. As a matter of fact, there is

no Regional Asylum Office on Leros, which means that even if they expressed their willingness to file a request for asylum, this would only be possible upon their arrival in Athens.

### 2.3. Shipwrecks

The particularly increased arrivals of third country nationals in the autumn months, coupled with the gradual deterioration of the weather and the dangerous means used for their transport, which are deficient in terms of quality and make, and also overloaded with people, has fatally resulted in shipwrecks and drowning in their effort to



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/lerosn/photos/pb.618656514928693.-2207520000.1448894816.738313999629610/?type=3&theater>

reach Greece. Just a few days after our mission on Leros, one more shipwreck cost the lives of four (4) third country nationals, all adult males, the bodies of whom were located at sea north of Farmakonissi islet, while six (6) more people are still missing.<sup>8</sup>

## 3. Key findings

1. Complete absence/no provision for reception conditions by the state;
2. Absence of interpreters in most stages of the process;
3. Lack of central planning, both in the short, but most importantly in the long-term;
4. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and Doctors without Borders substitute the State in key matters, such as temporary accommodation and health care, failing however to meet all needs that far exceed existing capacity;
5. The strong active presence of volunteers and people standing in solidarity reinforces the aforementioned organisations present, by covering many of the gaps created by the absence of the state in reception conditions, it is however evident that is not enough, nor could this be considered a given fact;
6. Failure to identify vulnerable cases, because of the deficient screening processes, and in particular the failure to identify unaccompanied minors, extending to an unwillingness to

<sup>8</sup> Reuters, *Four refugees drown, six missing off Greece: coastguard*, 02-11-2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/11/02/us-europe-greece-migrants-drowning-idUSKCN0SR0YI20151102>, Leros News, *New Tragedy in Farmakonissi*, 02-11-2015, <http://www.lerosnews.gr/component/k2/item/6762-nea-tragwdia-sto-farmakonhsi.html>

identify them, both on the part of authorities and the organisations, considering that if in fact identified, they must be then be detained in particularly harsh conditions until their transfer to an accommodation structure, coupled with the delay in their registration;

7. Inevitable impact of the deterioration of the weather is a rise in shipwrecks and amplified risk of losing more human lives in the Aegean.

## 4. Recommendations

1. The state should take the initiative and the responsibility as soon as possible for the coordination and planning to manage and deal with this phenomenon as soon as possible;
2. Provide for the development of safe routes to Europe to avoid further tragedies;
3. Imminently trigger state mechanisms of first reception and provide sufficient conditions of first reception by state agencies;
4. Further reinforce the staff and the structures of central services, i.e. of the Hellenic Police and the Coast Guard;
5. Begin the necessary renovation of the PIKPA building as soon as possible to launch its use as a first reception area for the temporary accommodation of newcomers waiting to be registered;
6. Find an appropriate space for the temporary stay of unaccompanied minors pending their transfer to an accommodation facility;
7. Organise an appropriate mechanism to identify all vulnerable cases in general and make special provision for their referral and care;
8. Enhance dialogue among all agencies involved on the island, namely: Hellenic Police – Coast Guard – Local Administration Agencies – UNHCR – Doctors without Borders – Groups of Volunteers and Solidarity Networks;
9. Carry out actions to inform and raise the awareness of the local society.