



Weekly Briefing

Greece Social briefing:
The situation in Moria refugee camp
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The situation in Moria refugee camp

Since 2015 Greece has undertaken the responsibility of hosting refugees who attempt to reach Europe via Turkey. Although the Greek government has been praised for its humane approach, it has been also criticized for the problematic distribution of aid and delays in proceeding to necessary infrastructure works. The case of the Moria refugee camp is currently on the agenda. Dramatic living conditions for refugees have led international organizations and media to urge the Greek government to provide solutions. The Greek government is embarking on a plan to transfer many refugees from Moria to mainland Greece but the general situation remains difficult.

The contribution of Greece to the management of the refugee crisis is critical. The country is the first entrance point for refugees coming from Africa and the Middle East (from countries such as Afghanistan, Congo, Iraq, Sudan and Syria) and seeking to reach Europe. The EU has financially supported Greece to host a significant number of them on the islands of the Aegean. One of its obligations has been the efficient functioning of reception and identification centers – commonly known as hotspots – which concern the first residence days of the third country nationals that enter Greece without legal formalities as well as refugees. Their establishment and operation constitute part of the Greece's national strategy that is in line with the European acquis and the international agreements regarding the human rights.

Lesbos, located very close to the Turkish coast, has taken a significant burden. The island was at the core of international media attention in 2015 and 2016. In April 2016, for instance, Pope Francis went to Lesbos to closely monitor the situation. At that time, he chose to be driven to the reception and identification center outside the village of Moria and close to Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos. 'I am here to tell you, you are not alone [...] The Greek people have generously responded to your needs despite their own difficulties',

the Pontiff, inter alia, said. Approximately 2,5 years later, the Moria refugee camp is making headlines again. The reason is the deterioration of humanitarian conditions (although this essay focuses on the Moria refugee camp, similar problems exist on camps on the islands of Chios, Kos, Leros and Samos). Refugees themselves are complaining against living conditions in the Moria camp. Some do march towards Mytilene and the police has to set up road blocks to stop them.

There are many humanitarian organizations which criticize the situation in Moria. Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), for example, reports there are currently more than 7,500 people in a camp made for a maximum of 2,500. As a result, refugees are now staying in an informal extension of the camp known as Olive Grove. According to this Organization these conditions have had a dramatic impact on health of refugees. A clinical psychiatrist working for it, Alessandro Barberio, argues he never witnessed such overwhelming numbers of people suffering from serious mental health conditions. For its part, Action Aid focuses on sewage system problems as well as sexual violence and abuse while the International Rescue Committee warns asylum seekers contemplate suicide in alarming numbers.

International media also pay attention to the situation in Moria. Recently, Deutsche Welle played a documentary exploring the potential presence of Islamic State members in Moria and saw an infiltration of terrorist organizations in the camp. Further to this, the New York Times illustrated the hotspot as ‘epidemic in misery’. On the same wavelength, BBC considered it as ‘the worst refugee camp in the world’. Moreover, Newsweek magazine published an article about sexual assaults against people under 18 years old. Moria Director Yannis Balbakakis associated this article with fake news though. As he explained the number of reported rape cases is very small based on information from forensic officials.

Under these circumstances, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHRC) is urging the Greek government to deal with the overcrowding problem. In its view, the

current level of overcrowding has not been seen since March 2016, when arrival rates had been far higher. Subsequently, the UNHRC proposes the acceleration of procedures for those eligible for transfer to the mainland, the increase of reception capacity on the mainland to host them, the improvement of conditions in reception centers and the providing of alternative accommodation for the most vulnerable. Also, it is ready to support the Greek government with building capacity and strengthening its operational response as well as with transfers of eligible people to the mainland but believes it has faced challenges in delivering on previous commitments despite receiving European funding.

The situation in Moria hotspot also became a theme of serious disagreement between the Regional Authority of the Northern Aegean and the Ministry of Migration Policy. In September, the former warned the latter it could close down the refugee center if not decongested. Specifically, the Minister of Migration Policy Dimitrios Vitsas said Moria does not fall under the jurisdiction of the Regional Authority. But the regional Authority referred to relevant law which arguably allows it to prohibit the operation, temporarily or definitively of any premises or houses used for living, should there is a risk to public health. Additionally, leader of the main opposition New Democracy party Kyriakos Mitsotakis has blamed the government by saying ‘what is happening in Moria is a disgrace for our country’.

The Greek government has responded to domestic and international criticism by transferring some refugees from Lesbos to mainland Greece. As Migration Policy Minister, Dimitrios Vitsas, said in the Parliament on 6 October, 2,214 refugees had been transferred in September. To this end, Greece has initiated a program to place migrants in apartments, using €5 million donated by Parliament. For example, from 21 September until 5 October 1,567 people had been moved into apartments in Volvi, central Macedonia. Another 792 spots were created by renting nine hotels in Grevena, western Macedonia, of which 400 have already been covered.

Some allegations for a misuse of EU funds have been also part of the political and media agenda. According to Greek newspaper Fileleftheros Defense Minister Panos Kammenos was arguably connected to some businessmen who received funding. The newspaper report suggests refugees have benefited little but businesses that were awarded projects – ranging from catering to plumbing, often without competitive tenders – habitually overcharged for their services. Subsequently, Kammenos, filed a defamation action against three journalists, including the editor-in-chief of the Fileleftheros. Under Greek law, a complaint against a person for defamation can result in that person’s immediate detention. The three journalists were released almost immediately because the prosecutor decided to investigate whether the minister had been defamed but did not press immediate charges.

At the beginning of October, Greece’s Reception and Identification Service Director Andreas Iliopoulos gave an interview in Fileleftheros newspaper encouraging prosecutors to intervene in the alleged mismanagement case. Subsequently, Vitsas gave a few days’ notice to Iliopoulos to resign from his position considering the content of his interview unacceptable. But Supreme Court prosecutor Xeni Dimitriou ordered an investigation into media reports alleging that EU funds given to Greece for the migration crisis were mismanaged. For its part, the European Anti-Fraud Agency (OLAF) has also confirmed it was investigating alleged irregularities concerning the provision of EU-funds for refugees in Greece.

The Greek government denies any misuse of funds. Defense Minister Panos Kammenos, for example, said the ministry used about €90m of EU funds with full transparency. And Minister of Migration Policy Dimitris Vitsas gave an interview arguing every control is welcome and necessary. On the whole, the Greek government believes it has responded to the challenge of the refugee crisis by respecting human rights. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras reiterated this position talking in the UN General Assembly in September 2018. In the words of Tsipras, the people of Greece opened their arms to incoming migrants,

showing the world what solidarity means. Greece expects from other European countries to follow the same path and accept more refugees instead of easily criticizing it for its management of the crisis on the islands.

Conclusion

The Greek Migration ministry estimates over 20,000 migrants and refugees are currently registered at detention centers on Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos. The task is challenging as their capacity does not respond to the needs. One of the detention centers encountered with serious problems is that of Moria on the island of Lesbos. Conditions for refugees are difficult indeed. The Greek government is attempting to decongest this hotspot by transferring some of them to mainland Greece. While it is doing so, it is being criticized for an alleged misuse of EU funds. Although allegations are certainly serious, the European countries have to offer more solidarity to Athens. The Greek islands are the often first stop for millions of people trying to make their way to mainland Europe. Therefore, the mission of Greece is – a priori – almost impossible, taking also the current economic crisis into account. The providing of funds to Greece cannot alone solve the problem. The country expects a rise in quota refugees in order for the refugees to be resettled in additional European states.