

EUROPE'S SHAME: MIGRANTS STRANDED IN GREECE

An explainer

How bad is the situation on the Greek islands?

From Lesvos to Samos, Kos to Corinth, 35,000 are currently stuck on Greek islands in unacceptable conditions.

Although not as numerous as those from 2015-2016 - due in part to the immoral EU-Turkey deal - the number of asylum seekers has risen in 2019.

Overcrowding is now at a critical level with serious concerns ahead of the winter. The situation also creates major challenges on local communities.

The new, xenophobic Asylum Law that was rammed through the Greek parliament by its new right-wing government is expected to seriously worsen the situation.

The EU's 'Hotspot approach'

This came out of the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016, which saw EU-run reception centres established in frontline member states like Greece and Italy to identify, register and deal with the asylum requests of asylum seekers arriving by sea.

The agreement is dehumanising, and conditions at these centres are appalling. Overcrowding is one reason but also the lack of 'know-how' in how to run them. Moreover, the whole idea of the EU-Turkey deal was essentially to funnel asylum seekers to these Greek islands, thus creating bottlenecks and all the consequences that they entail.

Although at least 29 000 people were transferred to Greek mainland from the islands in 2018, they have been dramatically reduced since this summer.

Daily images of the challenges that local authorities face, are also helping to fuel xenophobia and far-right extremism.

BEHIND THE NUMBERS...PEOPLE!

70 000+

migrants and refugees
across Greece

 **15 000**
PEOPLE CURRENTLY
IN MORIA CAMP

 **20 000**
PEOPLE ALTOGETHER
IN LESVOS

4 900 unaccompanied minors throughout Greece

1 500 of them in 'hotspots'

1000+ also homeless

250 detained in police cells

Source: Human Rights Watch. Photo: Marienna Pope-Weidemann

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What our MEPs say



Miguel Urbán
(Podemos, Spain)

"Europe must stop its deadly and human rights abusing migration policy as a deterrent to migrants. Moria and all other camps on the Greek islands must close."



Kostas Aravanitis
(Syriza, Greece)

"The Greek minister Chrisochoidis has no plans! This was evident during his visit to the Parliament last week. He even used the term "tsunami of refugees"! But they are not a 'wave' - they are people with names & families & human rights"

In the meantime, the financing of the EU-Turkey deal is set to expire at the end of 2019 just as the Turkish President continues to instrumentalise the issue by threatening "to open the Turkish border".

What has Greece's right-wing government introduced?

As soon as the new government came to power in June 2019 it dismantled the Ministry of Migration Policies and transferred all the responsibilities to another branch of the government that oversees the police.

Just a few days ago, they pushed through the highly-controversial 237-page Asylum Law only just five days of public consultation.

The new Minister for 'Protection of Citizens', Michalis Chrisochoidis, ignored protests and pleas from opposition parties and NGOs that the new legislation was unlawful and inhumane as it focusses on prolonged detention policies and fast track procedures for returns.

What's in the new asylum law?

In short, the strictest and most intrusive of checks have been introduced to the asylum process and will likely result in more applicants being returned to their countries of origin. Vulnerable applicants and individuals such as children, those with post-traumatic stress syndrome and victims of rape are targeted.

Applications now take longer, meaning some asylum seekers could be detained for as long as three years - twice as long as EU law allows. There have also changes to the definition of safe 'third country' and the first asylum country.

The appeal procedure has also become more complicated, with extra documentation needed, and now only judges with no independent experts as adjudicators. In another change, asylum interviews can now be conducted by police or army personnel as opposed to trained professionals and experts.

Meanwhile, access to jobs, education and health services for asylum seekers have become severely restricted. Legal rights and representation have also either become much more difficult or been abolished completely.

The reaction?

The UNHCR warned the new law will weaken the protection of refugees. Due to new government restrictions, NGOs are finding it harder than ever to operate on the Greek islands.

Some like the Hellenic League for Human Rights said the new law will create an even bigger logjam, which currently stands at over 68,000 applications. If more people arrive, many could be left undocumented and stranded in camps.

For Médecins sans frontières, the law further restricts the limited medical supplies available to refugees and migrants. This means no immunisation for children; a 40% increase in attempted suicides and self-harm cases; one toilet for every 300 people on Samos; and one shower shared by 506 in Moria camp, Lesbos.

What should be done instead?

An immediate solution is to evacuate all the people from the islands and so-called 'hotspots' to the Greek mainland making sure that they are swiftly relocated to other EU member states.

The Greek government must also shift away from a policy of 'punishing' asylum seekers.

Finally, there needs to be a fair, comprehensive and long-term solution on European level so that the EU and all its member states are consistent with their obligations under international law.