

Indignity at the gates of Europe

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Humacoop-Amel France is one of those activist organisations that never forget the tragic situation of the exiled people “at the gates of Europe”, particularly considering that Greece is regarded as an airlock for people making their way to other countries on the continent.

Over a period of six years, hundreds of thousands of desperate people travelled from across the borders of Turkey or Libya and ended up on Greece’s shores. They were then taken to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) camps by well-intentioned locals or the Greek police. This was all going on before anyone realised that infuriated and fanatical citizens as well as police officers acting outside the law were illegally and inhumanely turning people away. During this whole time, these migrant populations were aided through their ordeal of extreme daily hardships and administrative failures by a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including Med’EqualiTeam, International Rescue Committee, Glocal Roots, Samos Volunteers, Doctors Without Borders, Still I Rise, Just Action, Movement On The Ground, *Les Amis et Anciens Stagiaires de l’IFAID Aquitaine* (AASIA) and many others¹.

As of October 2021, there were 1,822 people living in the five camps (and in an equal number of “Reception and Identification Centres”²) on the islands of Kos, Chios, Samos, Lesbos and Leros³, while the population was around 12,700 people at the beginning of March 2021⁴. At the same time, there are a further thirty-two camps in mainland Greece, known as “Temporary Accommodation Facilities”⁵ which, according to a UNHCR report from September 2021, house 103,136 refugees, consisting of 60,873 asylum seekers and 4,705 people categorised as “other” (stateless people, refugees with subsidiary protection status, etc.)⁶.

These camps all share common features such as overcrowding, insecurity, lack of privacy and squalor, not to mention a lack of humanitarian, medical, administrative and educational assistance. Moreover, both aid organisations and migrants are having to deal with the rise of nationalism and its xenophobic and racist “anti-migrant” discourse. As elsewhere in Europe, there has been a rapid shift from “refugee crisis” to “reception crisis”, with migration issues fuelling a mistrust of immigration, among Greek citizens

¹ See the list of NGOs operating in Samos in the report on Laureen Baud’s mission in August 2021: https://www.amel-humacoop.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Rapport-mensuel-aou%CC%82t-2021-Samos2_compressed.pdf

² Greece has six RICs (Reception and Identification Centres) at its borders: five on the above-mentioned islands and one at its land border with Turkey, in Fylakio in the Evros region, where there are approximately 4,000 persons. Note that the new Samos camp is no longer designated a RIC but a CCACI (Closed Controlled Access Centre of Islands) (KEDN in Greek).

³ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Refugee Situations, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

⁴ General Secretariat for Information and Communication, *National Situational Picture Regarding the Islands at Eastern Aegean Sea*, 2 March 2021, <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/12428/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-2-03-2021/?lang=en>

⁵ Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Migration and Asylum, *Facilities/Temporary Reception*, <https://migration.gov.gr/en/ris/perifereiakes-monades/domes>

⁶ OCHA, “UNHCR Greece Factsheet - September 2021”, *ReliefWeb*, <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/unhcr-greece-factsheet-september-2021>

and in the government, resulting in the exclusion of migrants from certain public services such as health and social security, education and even sport and culture.

How are international aid organisations taking action in Greece’s migrant crisis to try and fight against the rise of extremist, xenophobic and nationalist groups, whose members have already committed hate crimes against migrants? To answer this, we need to understand the most pressing issues facing the humanitarian aid and international solidarity sectors in this period of political and health crisis by looking closely at the problems in the Greek migrant camps which, in addition to the pre-existing problems of lack of access to basic services such as housing and primary care, are having to tackle other constraints and difficulties related to Covid-19. In this respect, the pandemic has reinforced xenophobic discourse and attitudes by presenting Covid-19 as a disease from abroad and targeting migrants as being responsible for its spread.

Migrants in peril from the rise in xenophobia

The Greek government’s decision in 2017 to create a register of all the stakeholders in the voluntary sector on the pretext of streamlining humanitarian activities has in fact resulted in a clampdown on humanitarian activity in the country. NGOs had until the end of June 2020 to register with the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, which would then examine whether these organisations met the criteria required by law. In May 2021, the Ministry reported that thirty-six organisations had registered, seventy-eight applications had been rejected and ninety-seven were pending⁷. The desire to monitor humanitarian action is a symptom of the increasing mistrust of immigration in Greece and more widely in Europe.

Xenophobic and nationalist behaviour can also be seen within the Greek population. For example, local people staged a demonstration in February 2020 to protest against the construction of a new migrant camp in Mytilene, many demanding simply that their island of Lesbos should not have to cope alone with the influx of migrants. The destruction of the Moria camp in the night of 8 September⁸ by fire⁹ did however force the Greek prime minister, Kyriákos Mitsotákis, to confirm that a permanent camp would soon be rebuilt on the island, which has since been done, although this has only stoked the anger of local xenophobic groups, some of which have directly targeted migrants. This trend is reflected in the rise of nationalist parties (Golden Dawn and Greek Solution), which took more than 6% of the Lesbos vote at the last parliamentary elections in July 2019.

Police forces have perpetrated acts – similar to those seen in Italy or France – in violation of the principle of non-refoulement¹⁰. According to the Norwegian NGO Aegean Boat Report, 569 boats carrying 17,254 people have been turned back in the Aegean by Greek coastguards since the beginning

⁷ Refugee Support Aegean, “Registry of NGOs working with refugees and migrants in Greece under scrutiny”, 26 May 2021, <https://rsaagean.org/en/registry-of-ngos-working-with-refugees-and-migrants-in-greece-under-scrutiny>

⁸ OCHA, “Greece Update, Moria Fire Emergency, 25 September 2020”, *ReliefWeb*, <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greece-update-moria-fire-emergency-25-september-2020>

⁹ See the reportage published in our review, “Bye bye Moria?”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, issue no.16, March 2021, p.144-163, <https://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2021/03/26/bye-bye-moria-en> [Editor’s note].

¹⁰ The principle of non-refoulement prohibits the extradition, expulsion or return of any person to a country where they face prosecution. This principle linked to the rights of refugees is the basis of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Furthermore, a principle of non-refoulement linked to human rights prohibits the expulsion or the return of any person to a country where they are in danger of being subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment and/or where their life or liberty would be threatened.

of 2021¹¹, men, women and children who were just left adrift at sea and pushed back towards Turkish territorial waters. These violations appear to be a direct manifestation of the rise in nationalism in Greece and are obstacles that the NGOs are attempting to overcome.

Multiple challenges for NGOs

The Hotspot Approach¹², adopted by the European Union (EU) in 2015 to determine who exactly needs protection and who does not, failed to improve the situation of the migrants rounded up in the camps. Under this policy, anyone considered potential refugees would be relocated to other member States, while those branded as “economic migrants” would be expelled from the territory. The outcome of the Hotspot Approach¹³ is far from satisfactory: thousands of people are confined in conditions where their human dignity as defined by European law is denied while others are expelled at random.

Although the Dublin procedure¹⁴ has been a failure and the relocation of people from Greece to other member States has decreased, the Greek State has received scant outside help, financial aid aside, from the EU and had to single-handedly manage the huge numbers of migrants arriving on Greek soil. In 2019, 59,726 people landed on the Greek islands, which had already been turned into open-air prisons for people seeking protection. In 2020, the figure totalled 9,714 and, in 2021, 2,047¹⁵, undoubtedly an effect of the restrictions brought about by the pandemic.

To cope with this situation, humanitarian stakeholders – NGOs and Greek civil society organisations alike – have sprung into action. Some have opted for assisting the people living in the camps, with the continued backing of the Greek authorities since they now control the number of NGOs and their activities. This is demonstrated by the involvement of *Humacoop-Amel France* in partnership with *Med’EqualiTeam*, notably in the Vathy camp on the island of Samos where there is a need for medical intervention: sanitary and healthcare facilities are deplorable and access to care is a major problem. To this end, basic medical consultations, and other additional health checks such as ultrasound scans, physiotherapy, wound dressing and such are provided by humanitarian workers.

Other NGOs have decided to help migrants individually by providing a listening ear and finding ways to make their everyday life more bearable. Doctors Without Borders, for example, has focused on providing primary and mental health care in the Samos and Lesbos camps since May 2016 by setting up psychological counselling sessions. Others are committed to offering educational, cultural and sporting activities to enable the migrant populations to keep themselves occupied and distracted during the long months – sometimes years – waiting for administrative decisions.

¹¹ Laureen Baud, Rapport mensuel de mission, mars 2021, Humacoop-Amel France & Med’EqualiTeam, <https://www.amel-humacoop.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Rapport-MARS-2021-Laureen-Baud-1.pdf>

¹² The Hotspot Approach is aimed at containing asylum seekers in camps on the borders of Europe, based on a rationale of confinement and deterrent. See http://migreuop.org/IMG/pdf/notes_plaidoyer_fr.pdf

¹³ Articles from *La Cimade* published in 2018 and 2020, available at <https://www.lariposte.org/2020/04/sante-des-refugies-les-droits-humains-pietines-une-question-de-sante-publique> and <https://www.lacimade.org/laproche-hotspots-leurope-en-faillite-sur-les-iles-grecques>

¹⁴ Explanation of the Dublin procedure on the *Asile en France* website, https://asile-en-france.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=64:la-procedure-dublin&catid=8&showall=1&Itemid=117

¹⁵ Simon Sutour, background report no.490 (2019-2020), written on behalf of the European Affairs Committee of the French Senate, 4 June 2020, <https://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2019/r19-490-notice.html>

Other NGOs still are involved in helping the migrants defend their rights, drawing on charters such as the 1966 United Nations Covenants¹⁶ or the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees¹⁷. Lawyers Without Borders – France, for example, offers legal advice and support through all stages of the asylum process, from preparing individuals for asylum interviews to assisting applicants or providing information on procedures for family reunification applications or appeals when asylum applications have been rejected.

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

These last few months, the effects of the pandemic have been widely felt, to the extent that NGOs have had to adapt to these unprecedented circumstances. It is true that the situation itself caused a sharp decline in the numbers of migrants arriving in 2020 and 2021 compared with the same period in 2019 (59,726 in 2019 *versus* 9,714 in 2020 and 2,047 in 2021), not that this has made humanitarian activities on Greek soil any easier. As a result of travel restrictions, some volunteers were forced to cancel their assignments and others to return home, while the need for healthcare workers in the camps increased during the final months of 2020.

The Greek government used the detection of the first case of Covid-19 in Moria, in April 2020¹⁸, as justification for further restrictions on asylum seekers on the islands and for proposals to set up new detention centres. The fires at the Moria camp in September 2020, which destroyed what was the largest migrant camp in Europe, left 13,000 asylum seekers in need of emergency help¹⁹. In addition to highlighting the appalling conditions in the camp, which sheltered 13,000 people despite having a maximum capacity of 3,500, the fires revealed the increasing number of constraints hampering the successful provision of emergency humanitarian aid²⁰. Thousands of migrants had to sleep on the streets of Mytilene, in emergency camps or leave the island. Any remaining volunteers, whose numbers had already dwindled due to the pandemic, had to deal with attacks from local people and small militant extremist groups opposed to mass immigration in Greece. This contributed to the slowdown in the provision of aid by NGOs, even if the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown that followed in Lesbos had the effect of muting for several months both the suffering of the migrants and the anger of local citizens.

In addition to adversely affecting their work, the health crisis saw the emergence of new fields of action for NGOs. The almost prison-like environment in which the migrants in the Greek island camps are held has been worsened by the presence of police officers who regulate the comings and goings of the residents to “control the pandemic”. The mental and physical health of the immigrants has deteriorated even further these last few months. The health restrictions have undoubtedly exacerbated the precarious position and the vulnerability of migrant populations in Greece.

As a result of insufficient support from the international community, NGOs are indirectly prompted to play a central role in promoting vaccination campaigns and providing psychosocial support for the

¹⁶ Further information on the covenants at <https://www.humanium.org/fr/normes/pactes-internationaux-1966>

¹⁷ Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/fr/convention-1951-relative-statut-refugies.html>

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Greece: Island Camps Not Prepared for Covid-19”, 22 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/22/greece-island-camps-not-prepared-covid-19>

¹⁹ Julia Dumont, « À Lesbos, un an après les incendies de Moria, les migrants ont perdu tout espoir d’un accueil “plus humain” », *InfoMigrants*, 9 septembre 2021, <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/34929/a-lesbos-un-an-apres-lincendie-de-moria-les-migrants-ont-perdu-tout-espoir-dun-accueil-plus-humain>

²⁰ Federica Martiny, « Après l’incendie de Moria, l’UE propose seulement un camp de réfugiés plus moderne », *EURACTIV*, 15 septembre 2020, <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/migrations/news/apres-lincendie-de-moria-lue-propose-seulement-un-camp-de-refugies-plus-moderne>

residents of the camps. However, paradoxically, this humanitarian work is constantly hampered and complicated by Greek government control, as seen in the new Vathy camp on the island of Samos, opened in September 2021, also destroyed by fire one year after the Moria camp on Lesbos. Effectively an open-air prison, secured by barbed wire, x-ray scanners and magnetic doors, access to this new camp is now prohibited to humanitarian organisations that are no longer allowed to enter freely to provide assistance to migrants in need.

What is the outlook?

Understanding the issues concerning the camps on the Greek islands must come through fact-finding and humanitarian missions, carried out by NGOs. *Humacoop-Amel France* is one of those concerned. The aim of the several missions it performed between 2015 and 2021 was to assist local stakeholders, gather the testimonials of refugees, encourage and support the actions of the local population and of humanitarian organisations present on the ground and collect data to use in advocacy work. From now on, it will be providing human and medical backup to local and international NGOs helping to facilitate access to care for the refugees on Samos as well as investigating the living conditions of new arrivals and those waiting in reception centres or in the surrounding jungle. Ultimately, they aim to raise awareness and defend the right of these people to be treated with dignity.

Raising awareness in civil society can also come from talks, photography exhibitions, books and publications, advocacy work, screenings and debates and comic strips (such as *Les oubliés des îles grecques, histoires de crises*²¹). These are tools NGOs can use to provide information about the living conditions of migrants in the Greek island camps. It is important to highlight a reality often obscured by the media, encouraging French citizens to ask themselves questions and gain an understanding of the immigration issues in Europe and thus become spokespeople for both migrants and humanitarian stakeholders in the context of an alarming migration and health crisis. All this work and these public events draw attention to the inhuman living conditions of migrant populations and the lack of access to care, leading to the development of health and serious psychological problems, and help us understand the challenges humanitarian action in Greece has to respond to today.

Even though since 2019 the European Commission has been discussing the establishment of a new Pact on Migration and Asylum²², no sufficiently courageous policy is emerging from any of the EU member States²³. It should be noted that at-risk Afghan people have recently been able to benefit from the “humanitarian visa”²⁴ scheme enshrined in European law, after the Taliban seized power. What is the EU doing for other populations also in great danger? We must remember that this visa exists within the framework of the Schengen agreement on free movement in Europe, and that “the fundamental idea is to enable people to enter the receiving country to seek asylum, that is before their status as a refugee has been recognised”, as summarised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

²¹ Bertille de Salins, *Les oubliés des îles grecques, histoires de crises*, self-published (in French), septembre 2021, <https://www.histoiresdecrises.eu>

²² Ministère de l'Intérieur (France), *Pacte sur la migration et l'asile*, 30 avril 2021, <https://www.immigration.interieur.gouv.fr/Europe-et-International/Pacte-sur-la-migration-et-l-asile>

²³ AEDH (The European Association for the Defence of Human Rights), “Humanitarian visas: the Parliament calls for the adoption of a European regulation”, 23 July 2018, www.aedh.eu/en/humanitarian-visas-the-parliament-calls-for-the-adoption-of-a-european-regulation

²⁴ Benjamin Fonteny, « L'indispensable mise en place d'un visa humanitaire européen », *The Lighthouse*, 27 avril 2020, <https://lighthouseua.hypotheses.org/2355> ; « En France, le visa humanitaire se développe discrètement », *France24*, 25 janvier 2017, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20170125-france-visa-humanitaire-developpe-discretement>

Development (OECD) in its 2016 migration outlook report²⁵. Also worth noting, however, is that humanitarian visas do not prejudge recognition of refugee status, even if the grounds identified broadly overlap those for the granting of asylum.

While NGOs attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of current European policies and continue to provide aid in the camps, by law the European Union is guilty of “failing to assist persons in danger”.

Translated from the French by Fay Guery

Biographies

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²⁵ OECD, “International Migration Outlook 2016”, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/perspectives-des-migrations-internationales-2016_migr_outlook-2016-fr