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Refugees at risk in Greece

Addendum to the report¹

Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons
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1. Introduction

1. This addendum is intended to supplement the report approved by the Committee on migration, refugees and displaced persons at its meeting on 3 June 2016. It updates the information on certain factual situations addressed in the report, and presents my findings and conclusions following my visit as rapporteur to Greece on 29 May 2016 and my participation in the visit by the ad hoc committee of the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly on 30 and 31 May.² I would like to thank the Greek delegation for assisting with the organisation of my visit on 29 May, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for their assistance during the visit, and the Greek Council for Refugees, the Greek Forum of Refugees, Médecins sans Frontières and Human Rights Watch, whose representatives I met in Athens. I would also like to thank the Greek non-governmental organisation (NGO) METAdrasi, whose representative participated in an exchange of views with the committee on 3 June 2016.

2. The clearance of Eidomeni and the new sites in Thessaloniki

2. The week before my visit to Greece, the Greek authorities launched a major operation to clear the informal camp at Eidomeni on the border with “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. I was able to visit some of the new reception centres in Thessaloniki to which people were transferred: in particular, Sindos (Karamanli), Oreokastro and Softex.

3. These centres are all located on disused industrial sites, isolated from populated areas, shops or any social activity. They were created at only a few days’ notice by the army, which now manages them. At Softex, I met the army officer who had been responsible for constructing several of the sites. It was clear that despite his professional commitment and best intentions, he was unaware of what was needed to make a reception centre meeting international standards; the UNHCR and specialised NGOs have complained that their efforts to advise the authorities had been ignored. A couple of police officers were present at each site to ensure security, although I was told that at Softex they had failed to intervene when a mass brawl had broken out the previous day. In general, there was very little engagement by the authorities with the camp residents. At Oreokastro and Softex, there were obvious physical hazards such as open ditches in unlit areas and waste material such as splintered wood and rusty metal; children were playing with abandoned equipment that was quite unsuitable for the purpose.

4. At the time of my visit, according to official figures, all three sites were already at or beyond their official maximum capacity.³ Official occupancy figures may, however, be unreliable: the UNHCR told me that at Oreokastro, they had asked the authorities to conduct a recount, which had revealed an additional 100 people. Furthermore, the projected capacity for each site is already greater than what it would be if

1. Addendum approved by the committee on 20 June 2016.

2. Ms Meritxell Mateu (Andorra, ALDE) has presented a report on the visit of the Ad hoc Committee of Bureau as an addendum to the progress report of the Bureau ([Doc. 14086 Addendum III](#)).



international standards were respected: for instance, the UNHCR told me that by their standards, Oreokastro, whose official capacity is 1500, has real capacity for only 700. The inhabitants of Sindos are 90% Syrians and 10% Iraqis; of Oreokastro, 96% Syrians; and of Softex, 99% Syrians.

5. Most of the accommodation (all in the case of Sindos) consisted of tents pitched inside a former warehouse. I visited Sindos too early in the day to be able to look inside the warehouse, but at Oreokastro and Softex, where I did go inside, the buildings lacked light and ventilation and the tents were much too close to one another. There was inadequate electricity supply to the tents and little lighting. Occupants had to choose either light, with their tent doors open, or privacy, with them closed. The proximity of tents one to another meant that if a fire broke out, it would spread quickly and be difficult to escape from. Many areas inside the buildings were particularly gloomy and forbidding, which may deter women from moving freely within them due to the risk of sexual and gender-based violence. More generally, conditions inside the buildings may exacerbate stresses and tension and generate unrest and even incidents of violence.

6. At Oreokastro and Softex, there were tents also outside the building. At Oreokastro, residents had moved their tents themselves from a dirt field to the concrete apron surrounding the building, as the former was infested with rats and snakes. At Softex, the outdoor tents are much too close to one another and have been pitched on land lacking drainage, especially problematic in case of heavy rain as not all tents have a waterproof base; there is also a complete lack of shade, which will make the summer sun difficult to bear.

7. Sanitation facilities are inadequate in quality and quantity, with only a few chemical toilets and shower cubicles for many hundreds of people. At Oreokastro, the waste water from the shower cubicles flowed across the concrete apron to form a stagnant pool, close to inhabited tents; the area was already infested with mosquitoes. At Softex, washbasins were fastened to an external wall, exposed to the elements. It was not known whether the mains water was drinkable, and so until tests had been completed, drinking water was provided in bottles – one-and-a-half litres per person per day, although an NGO provided additional supplies. I was assured that sanitation and water supplies would be improved considerably. There was no psycho-social support available to residents at any of the sites, despite the trauma many had suffered before and during their journeys and the additional stress of the sudden, unexplained transfer to grim and isolated new facilities – and the severity of many cases requires more than just psycho-social support.⁴ None of the sites had any educational, social or cultural activities or play areas, although at Sindos, an NGO was constructing a classroom.⁵

8. The Greek authorities have made an impressive effort to clear Eidomeni and transfer its occupants to other sites, especially given their severe budgetary limitations. In many ways, the new sites are an improvement on the lawlessness of Eidomeni, even if over time, a strong network of NGOs and volunteers had developed there to meet many of the occupants' basic needs. As things stand, however, the new sites unfortunately represent a missed opportunity to create facilities that meet international standards and that can provide long-term shelter and other essential facilities for refugees and migrants. I strongly encourage the Greek authorities to continue with their efforts to improve the sites, in co-operation with the UNHCR and relevant NGOs, and with greater European Union support.

3. Other sites in Thessaloniki and Athens

9. Whilst in Thessaloniki I also visited Diavata reception centre, which was established in February 2016 on a former army camp and is officially run by the migration ministry's First Reception Service. There was no ministry official present when I visited, however, and I was told that the person responsible only came to the camp once every few weeks. The site is better than those described above, being more spacious, with shaded communal areas, a playground and a football pitch. Much of the accommodation is in prefabricated huts, although in summer both these and the tents risk becoming very hot inside. The UNHCR spoke highly of the engagement of the army personnel who in practice run the camp. There are, however, still shortcomings, including a lack of information on the asylum procedure and refugees' and migrants' rights; a problem that is endemic throughout Greece.

3. The UNHCR reports governmental figures of 30 May showing 607 people at Sindos/Karamanli, whose official capacity is 600; 1 432 at Oreokastro (capacity 1 500) and 1 163 at Softex (capacity 1 000).

4. Médecins sans frontières' project for rehabilitation of victims of torture and other forms of ill-treatment, for example, received 147 referrals in the first five months of 2016.

5. For further information on these and other sites in Greece, see "Site profiles – Greece", UNHCR.

10. In Athens, with the ad hoc committee, we visited a refugee camp at Elliniko and the reception centre at Skaramagas. The camp at Elliniko had originally been established for short-term, transitory stay. Under the responsibility of the Migration Ministry, it consists of a chaotic jumble of tents and makeshift shelters erected in and around the main building of the former Olympic hockey stadium, some attached to the outer walls, some inside, including in the basement, where there is no natural light or effective ventilation. I have little to add to the observations of others who found conditions at the site to be completely inadequate for the longer-term stay for which it is in effect being used.⁶ I note that the Migration Minister, Mr Mouzalas, has announced that after Eidomeni, his next priority is to move people from Elliniko (and Piraeus).⁷ I would strongly encourage this, whilst urging the authorities to ensure that any new sites comply fully with international standards from the outset.

11. Skaramagas reception centre, opened in April 2016 for people moved from the informal camp at Piraeus port and run by the Greek Navy, was by contrast a far more salubrious facility. Built in a wide-open space at a port in northern Athens, accommodation was in containers, most if not all equipped with air conditioning – which will be essential as temperatures rise, there being no shade. Sanitation was adequate and there was a classroom for children. Although perhaps somewhat isolated from populated areas, Skaramagas is a huge improvement on hastily constructed sites such as Sindos, Oreokastro and Softex, and shows what can be done with the correct approach.

4. Lesbos–Moria hotspot, Kara Tepe reception centre and the Silver Bay Hotel

12. With a select delegation of the ad hoc committee I also visited Lesbos, in particular Moria hotspot, Kara Tepe reception centre and the Silver Bay Hotel.

13. Although the size of the delegation that visited Moria was small, as required by the Greek authorities for security reasons, we were allowed to see very little of the site. Apart from a meeting with officials of the Greek Asylum Service, we were permitted only to visit a medical facility run by Médecins du Monde, separated by several layers of razor wire-topped fence from the main accommodation area. Despite being accompanied by several soldiers, we were told that beyond this point, the authorities were unable to guarantee our security; the presence of European visitors risked inflaming tempers, as “Europe” was seen as responsible for border closures and the restriction of new arrivals to the islands. Even from our vantage point, it was clear that the atmosphere in the camp was extremely tense, with occupants holding up home-made banners for us to see, and slogans painted on walls. As we left Moria, a group of highly agitated young men rushed towards our bus, shouting for freedom and an end to discrimination (a reference to the priority given to Syrians). The police had to use physical force to prevent the passage of our bus from being blocked. The day after our visit, there was a major outbreak of violence, with 70 people reported injured, including six who required hospital treatment, and a large fire that destroyed tents and accommodation, leaving hundreds without shelter.⁸ This is not the first outbreak of violence in Moria; there were riots in protest at detention conditions in late April, during a visit by the Greek and Dutch migration ministers.⁹ There have also been protests and unrest at other hotspots, including those on Chios and Samos.^{10 11}

14. We saw many young children inside the accommodation area; in addition to those living with their parents, Médecins sans frontières told me that there are still more than 50 unaccompanied or separated children living in the hotspot. With its many layers of razor wire-topped fence, Moria has the air of a high-security prison camp, made worse by the simmering tension and outbreaks of violence. This is absolutely not

6. See, for example, “Report of the fact-finding mission by Ambassador Tomáš Boček, Special Representative of the Secretary General on migration and refugees, to Greece and ‘the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’, 7-11 March 2016”, 26 April 2016, SG/Inf(2016)18.

7. See, for example, “Elliniko refugee camp next, after Idomeni is evacuated”, *Ekathimerini*, 26 May 2016.

8. “Refugees hospitalised after huge fire and clashes at Lesbos detention centre amid warnings over more violence”, *The Independent*, 2 June 2016.

9. See, for example, “Underage Refugees Clash with Riot Police at Lesbos Camp”, *Greek Reporter*, 26 April 2016.

10. See, for example, “Doctors of the World Leave Chios Hotspot After Refugee Fight”, *Greek Reporter*, 1 April 2016; “The Chios Hilton: inside the refugee camp that makes prison look like a five-star hotel”, *The Independent*, 22 April 2016; “250 migrants break out of Samos hotspot and cause havoc on island”, *Themanews*, 7 April 2016; “Six injured in migrant clashes on Samos island”, *Ekathimerini*, 3 June 2016.

11. The European Court of Human Rights has recently communicated an application submitted by detainees in the Chios hotspot to the Greek Government, asking questions concerning the issues raised in the application of detention conditions, the lawfulness of detention and provision of information on the reasons for detention.

a place for children, whether they are with their parents or not. The Greek authorities should immediately move all children and, where relevant, their parents or accompanying relatives out of Moria and the other hotspots, and into appropriate accommodation.

15. Whilst I may not have seen the living conditions in Moria close up, what I did experience gave a strong impression of the general atmosphere and of the mental state of the people living there. There is much uncertainty surrounding many aspects of their situation. I had great difficulty clarifying the detention policy applied by the authorities. According to the new law introduced on 1 April, new arrivals may be detained for up to 25 days whilst their applications are processed. Several NGOs told me that due to the inadequate capacity of the asylum service, people are not even interviewed within the detention time limit, so that in practice they are always detained for the full 25 days. The authorities, however, suggested that in fact most people are allowed to come and go from Moria within a much shorter time, and even implied that in reality the camp was open for everyone, from the day they arrived.¹² Once released from detention, those able to find accommodation elsewhere on the island are required to report back three times a week, and those who could not are required to return to the camp at night. Vulnerable persons should be screened and transferred away from the hotspots within 10 days of arrival; Médecins sans frontières told me, however, that there are still many vulnerable people living in Moria (including unaccompanied minors, although these are separated from the general population), and that transfers to Kara Tepe (see below) had stopped, even though it could accommodate many more people. The most acute grievances seem to relate to people's ignorance of their rights and prospects under the asylum procedure. I will return to this below.

16. We also visited the Kara Tepe reception centre on Lesbos, run by the municipality. This was a spacious, well-maintained, well-equipped facility with social activities for its inhabitants, although the quality of accommodation on the periphery was not as good as that in the central areas. There were many national and international NGOs present in the centre, providing a range of services. The atmosphere was calm and relaxed and we were able to move freely around the site. Finally, we visited the Silver Bay Hotel, run by NGOs, in particular Caritas, for vulnerable refugees. Again, the facilities and services were good and the atmosphere calm and relaxed.

17. Following these visits, we had a meeting with the local and regional authorities, representatives of local NGOs, and representatives of the UNHCR, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex) and the European Commission. Three related themes emerged. First, according to the mayor, the local population, previously sympathetic towards the refugees and migrants as victims of grave misfortune, has become increasingly frustrated and concerned since the implementation of the EU–Turkey Agreement, especially following reported incidents of burglary by destitute refugees and migrants. Unless measures are taken to ensure security and reassure the local population there is a risk of reaction against the refugees and migrants. Second, the local authorities have received no assistance from central government or the European Union, instead relying entirely on their own resources.¹³ European funds are needed if their efforts are to continue. This led to a protracted discussion between the representatives of the European Commission and of the Greek Asylum Service. The former claimed that all necessary funding is available from Brussels, that all decisions were taken in agreement with the Greek authorities, and that the problems concerned co-ordination between central, regional and local levels of national administration, with the result that the available funds are not sufficiently used. The latter replied that EU funding for humanitarian activities is directed to NGOs via the UNHCR and is thus available to neither central government nor, indirectly, local authorities. The third theme was that the situation on the island had been unfairly and inaccurately portrayed in the international media, which had had a serious impact on the tourism sector of the local economy.

5. The pre-registration exercise launched by the Asylum Service, EASO and the UNHCR

18. In my earlier explanatory memorandum, I noted that on 14 May, a “pre-registration exercise” had been announced, in somewhat vague and ambiguous terms, by the Asylum Service, EASO and the UNHCR. During my visit, I learnt more about this exercise, which turns out to be of great importance.¹⁴ It is aimed at

12. I understood this point as being distinct from the authorities' argument that since people are not locked inside their accommodation in Moria at night, it does not qualify as “detention”, even if their movements are always restricted to within the site perimeter; I would note in passing that this argument is not consistent with the definition of “detention” under the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5)

13. This reminds me of the visit by the ad hoc sub-committee to reception facilities for migrants on the island of Kos (Greece), which heard the same complaints from local authorities: see the information report, AS/Mig (2015) 37.

14. For further information, see the “Pre-Registration Step By Step Banner” and “Pre-Registration – Questions and Answers”, issued by the Asylum Service, EASO and the UNHCR.

those currently on the mainland who arrived in Greece between 1 January 2015 and 20 March 2016 and do not yet have an asylum seeker's card. Those living in informal sites such as Piraeus and the EKO petrol station near Eidomeni will only be pre-registered if they are willing to move to an official site – although there is currently no available space for them. Individuals' names, ages, nationalities and intention to apply for asylum will be recorded, and those who apply for asylum will receive an asylum seeker's card. No details will be taken of the asylum claim, although pre-registration will lead to appointments for asylum interviews. It should therefore replace the current process whereby applicants must use Skype to apply for appointments to make their asylum claims: a failed process that has generated enormous frustration amongst the large numbers of asylum seekers whose calls went unanswered, apparently due to the inadequate number of Asylum Service staff allocated to receive the calls.¹⁵ The pre-registration exercise is supposed to be completed by the end of July. Unfortunately, there were delays even before it began, with the launch date being postponed from 30 May to 6 June. (It appears that in the end, the exercise began on 8 June.) The timetable for subsequent phases is also unclear: appointments for interviews with the Asylum Service will be given "probably at the end of July", and the appointments themselves may be "some months" after pre-registration. Those who do not strictly comply with the procedural requirements of the pre-registration exercise will have to revert to the Skype process. Given the very large number of asylum applications that are to be expected, it could take a very long time before they are all fully processed.

19. It is absolutely vital that the pre-registration exercise proceeds in a timely, efficient and effective manner. The lack of clarity and certainty concerning the asylum procedure is causing great anxiety and distress to refugees throughout Greece and is one of the main factors generating tension and unrest in the hotspots. Until people are pre-registered, they cannot be considered for relocation under the EU decisions, family reunification under the Dublin Regulation or refugee status in Greece – for one or the other of which very many of them would qualify – and without an asylum seeker's card they may have difficulty accessing essential services, including medical care. It is thus of keen interest also to the Greek authorities, as the key international responsibility-sharing mechanisms cannot be engaged for people who have not been pre-registered, so it is vital the system is operative. European Union support to Greece should prioritise this issue, and European Union and other relevant States should ensure that procedures for family reunification and relocation are conducted quickly and efficiently. Pre-registration is just the first, very preliminary administrative step, and it must be rapidly followed by initiation of the asylum or relocation procedure.

6. Bureaucracy, responsibility and information: effectiveness and accountability

20. There appears to be considerable bureaucratic complexity and inefficiency in the Greek authorities' response to the current situation. For example, of the eight sites managed by public authorities that I visited, one (Elliniko) was run by the migration ministry, two (Moria and Diavata) by the Ministry of the Interior (although in practice, the latter is run by the army), three (in Thessaloniki) by the army, one (Skaramagas) by the navy and one (Kara Tepe) by the local authority. This multiplicity of actors was reflected in the fact that when the ad hoc committee visited Athens, we had meetings with no fewer than five government ministers. There may be some hidden logic to this but it cannot help with co-ordination, logistics and economies of scale. I note also that the asylum service is collaborating with two different international organisations (EASO and the UNHCR) to assist with the pre-registration exercise. Such situations are not, however, always brought about by the Greek authorities, such as the allocation by the European Union of humanitarian aid for refugees and migrants in Greece not to the Greek government but to the UNHCR (see paragraph 17), which in turn administers its distribution to NGO partners on the ground who actually deliver the services – with the Greek Government then playing a supervisory role. This must surely add layers of administrative complexity, delay and expense, to the detriment of the intended beneficiaries.

21. At several points during the preparation of my report, I found myself confronted by apparent ambiguities, inconsistencies and omissions in the available information on, for example, the number of Greek and EASO caseworkers actually operational on the islands and the number of decisions made and appeals determined. Further areas of obscurity are identified in this addendum, such as the occupancy rates of reception centres and the day-to-day responsibility for their administration, the detention policy in the hotspots, the disbursement and allocation of EU funds, and the timetable for pre-registration of refugees and migrants and subsequent processing of their asylum applications. A recent report concludes that much of the information that would be necessary to assess the implementation of the EU–Turkey Agreement is simply unavailable, or at least is published in a dispersed, inconsistent and incomplete manner.¹⁶

15. See, for example, "Europe migrant crisis: Asylum seekers in Greece struggle with 'dysfunctional' Skype applications", *ABC News*, 16 May 2016. One enterprising Syrian refugee has launched an online petition to replace the Skype-based system with face-to-face services, which has attracted over 211 000 signatures.

22. The above considerations are all important to the transparency and accountability of the efforts made by national authorities and the European Union to respond to the migrant and refugee situation in Greece. If these bodies are not in possession of clear, consistent and complete information on the situation and their responses to it, it is difficult to see how their activities can be well-targeted, well-co-ordinated, efficient and effective. If they are in possession of such information – which I very much hope is the case – then it should be published in readily accessible form, in order to facilitate public understanding and allow proper external scrutiny. It is also difficult to hold public authorities, including international organisations, effectively to account when it is unclear who is responsible for what, where multiple bodies are jointly responsible for a single activity or where they are responsible for similar activities. I would encourage both the Greek authorities and the European Union to publish consistent, coherent, clear, complete and comprehensible information and to co-operate in a way that reduces the bureaucratic obstacles to the minimum.

7. Conclusions

23. Overall, my visit clarified my understanding of the situation in Greece as set out in the report. There are some bright spots, such as the generally acceptable quality of reception centres at, for example, Skaramagas and Diavata, and even the determination and effectiveness shown by the authorities in transferring people from Eidomeni. These were, however, overshadowed by the unacceptable situations at Elliniko, the new sites at Thessaloniki and the Moria hotspot. In their current financial circumstances, no-one can expect the Greek authorities to be able to resolve these problems without much more outside support and assistance. I am now more convinced than ever that unless things change soon, the situation in Greece is simply unsustainable.

16. See “Navigating the Aegean: What the EU ought to know, and say, about refugees and the Greek islands – A policy proposal”, European Stability Initiative, 4 May 2016.