

Report from Greece's Kos Island: The Daily Harassment and Social Plight of the Refugees

By [Luisa Weber](#)

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[Sofiane Ait Chalalet and Chris Jones](#) 12 July 2016

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That's the first thing that comes to my mind when I remember my week on Kos earlier this summer. One week is clearly not a long time, but it was more than enough time to see that there has been no let up in the authority's on going cruel behaviour towards all the refugees and migrants on the island. I read in the online newsnet of a popular swiss newspaper „Tagesanzeiger“ (Tagensanzeiger.ch/newsnet vom 30.10.2015), that even a middle-right-wing politician from Switzerland was able to recognise that the circumstances on the Greek island of Kos are deliberately made and wanted by the local politicians and state authorities. Deterrence, as they keep saying is necessary... it is the endless mantra you hear from the Greek state.

The Hotspot

The hotspot on Kos is located outside of a small village called Pili which is about 15km out of Kos town. From the village there is a dusty road to the Camp. It is out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a high fence with a lot of nato-barbed wire...that's the type with the razor blades...The people inside the Hotspot are allowed to go out, but no one besides UNCHR and Praksis (a Greek NGO) have permission to enter the camp.

For the refugees and migrants it is unusual for a family to make a walk to the village for example, because they don't have keys for their cabins and so they can not lock the doors. A friend from Syria who we met on the road to the camp, told us, that one day she asked one of the police guards at the entrance to give her the key for her family's cabin, because there had been some thefts. Her family wanted go out of the camp together, like families do but they were scared to leave their belongings in an unlocked cabin. The answer of the policeman was no. And the reason for the no, was that he said 'you will loose the key, and than I will have to pay 50 Euros to get another'. It was not enough that the policeman was treating her like a small kid. For even when our friend offered to sign an official paper that she would take full responsibility in case she lost the key, the answer was still no.

We wanted to visit this friend in the camp or at least in front of the entrance so that we could talk together. Our journey to the hotspot started with us asking locals where it is and how we can get there. They looked at us like we came from a different planet. Like why for god's sake do you want to go there? Anyway, when we arrived at the camp, there was a policeman who told us to wait. He left and when he didn't come back after 10 minutes one of us walked further up the road to ask at the main entrance. When my friend got to about 50 metres before the gates to the camp, there was a policeman who asked her not who she is, but what she is, thinking she has permission to come there. She replied that she is a

human being and that she wants to visit a friend who was inside the camp. This was reason enough for another policeman to start shouting at her: 'Go! Go away!' My friend was coming back to us and the shouting policeman followed her in a car. In the meantime another friend and I, were just standing around in front of the fence. When the policeman saw this he continued shouting 'go away'. I told him in a friendly way that it would be nice, if he could speak more kindly to us. Unfortunately this appeared to be impossible for him and he began to shout out his orders to me like 'show me your passport! Tell me where you are from? What is your name?' And so on. I decided not to show him my passport, because his only reason for this demand was 'because I am a policeman'. I told him in a friendly way that this was not a good reason. Inevitably he then began to yell at one of my friends who was standing next to me. He is a refugee, and that's why we needed to leave after I had told the policeman that it would be better for him if he looked for another job as he seemed unable to deal calmly with situations like this.

We finally met our friend from Syria in the middle of the route back to the town out in middle of nowhere.

The Food Situation

The refugees and migrants inside of the hotspot are not allowed to handle any food by themselves. There is one woman, hired by the authorities, who is running the kitchen of the camp. As our friend told us, the food is often burnt and unfit for human consumption. Now, during Ramadan, the kitchen is not making any kind of arrangements for the people fasting. They distribute the food only once and when the sun is going down it is all cold, every day. One day, someone from Pili brought some special food for the fasting people to eat after sunset. The woman who runs the kitchen took all of it and our Syrian friend was complaining again and again, that it is not OK to steal the food which was specially brought for Ramadan. It was 2 days before she gave some of this food to the residents of the camp. Our friend also told us, that it is completely arbitrary who gets clothes or shoes from the hotspot warehouse. In the warehouse they have a lot of donated hygiene products, but the residents only get given a small bottle of shampoo, lotion or whatever which is needed for personal hygiene. Of course, people can buy their own stuff, if they have any money at all...



Painting from a Syrian refugee in the Kos hotspot, June 2016

Medical Care

If you look from outside of the village to the hotspot you can see a huge white caravan inside the camp, on a hill. It is a real eye catcher, because there is a huge red cross on it. When I ask my Syrian friend how the medical care is working, she responded with a sad smile, 'it is only a caravan, there is no medical-staff working at all...'

If someone needs medical care, they must go to a doctor in Kos town. If it turns out, that they need special medical care, the doctor writes a medical certificate recommending that they need to go to Athens. It was like that, our Syrian friend told us, with a little child in the camp. The parents went to the police with the medical certificate, to be told by the police, that they are not allowed to travel, and anyway that the kid is fine. Do policeman in Greece have a high medical education as well? Or is it just more negligence which characterises the whole system?

Women and child protection

In the hotspot all the residents are mixed. That means, that unaccompanied women, families, kids and single men are not separated. For all the refugees and migrants coming from Muslim majority societies where gender separation informs much of daily life and arrangements this is problematic. Women in particular, but also men find this mixing uncomfortable. But when we consider the situation inside the camp it poses a huge problem. People are bored, people don't have any idea about their future life, they are not allowed to do anything, most of them don't have any money left, are often traumatized from their escape or by war, and so on and so on. When we are aware of all these circumstances, it is not that hard to guess, that it could be difficult. Our friends in the camp were especially alarmed when some of the men started drinking alcohol which led to really inappropriate behaviour or even worse against women and children. Some of the family members went to

the police, who are always around in the camp, to ask them for help in this situation. The answer of the police was: 'Not our problem'. Abandoned and ignored yet again.

Our friend was not even allowed to take her young niece outside the camp, even when she showed the police, that she has the same family name as her niece. It was only possible, when the father and her brother, came to the gate, to prove that she is his sister and the kid's aunt. The policeman said that he will allow it for one time only, but in the future, only her father can take her outside of the camp...

Our Syrian friend told us, that her only wish she has for her, her family and all the other refugees is, that someone is telling the world what is happening on Kos and on many of the other Greek islands at this time.

Police station in Kos Town

We came to Kos from Switzerland to help a refugee from Syria who was in prison there because he had been caught trying to travel without papers. We had met him earlier in Samos and then in Athens and he had become a friend. We wanted to support him with a lawyer and to get him out of prison. By the time we arrived, the police in the main police station in Kos town had finally decided to let him out. They told him to leave the island quickly, but how this could happen when he did not have papers nor money? As ever the police told him that this was not their problem.

We also wanted to visit the other refugees and migrants in the cell in the main police station in Kos town. When I walked into the station to request that I would like to see the prisoners, the police woman at the desk told me that 'there are no prisoners here'. It was clear that she was lying straight in to my face. Even when I asked her again, that I wanted to visit the prisoners inside and that I know that there are some including a few who had already been in for month, she told me the same lie. The police woman then started yelling at me and asked me if I don't understand. She said that people are held in the cell for just one day, then they are transferred to the hotspot. It was a very weird situation, because our friend who had just got out from prison had told us a lot about the horrible conditions inside and how many were held for weeks at a time. There are between 5 to 10 men in a cell with one hole in the floor as a toilet. He said they were not allowed their mobile phones, they had no privacy, the food was disgusting and they experienced inhumane and disparaging treatment by the police. For example, our friend told us that the most of the police address the prisoners inside only as « malacca » which means asshole.

The second time we went to the police station to visit the inmates, at least the policeman behind the desk did not lie, but he told us to leave in rough way. Two of us went behind the building to see the window where the people are in the cell and where some of them were waving and shouting. The policeman jumped up from his chair very quickly so we needed to leave, so not to put our Syrian friend in danger.

Our experiences have been very clear; that the actions by the police on Kos are totally arbitrary and their only concern is to show their power. They are rude, unfriendly and seem to deal with any attempt to show solidarity by shouting and yelling.

A Hotel for refugees and migrants

In the centre of Kos town there is a hotel, run by UNHCR for refugees and migrants. People

with special needs, illness, trauma or unaccompanied pregnant women with small kids are housed in this hotel. We met many wonderful refugees there and the hospitality they showed us in their small hotel rooms was really overwhelming. We spent a few hours with two families from Syria and a funny 17 year old boy.

One of the women who had escaped from Syria with her sister and her husband told us, that her sister has epilepsy. She and her husband are taking care of her, but a few days ago her sister tried to jump from the balcony on the 3rd floor of the hotel. It was clear to see that the woman was desperate and really afraid about what happened to her sister. She went to the UNHCR to ask for psychological support for her sister, but the only thing they told her was: 'sorry, but we cannot do anything for you'. Seriously? The refugee agency of the UN cannot do anything? If not them, then who?

Conclusions

We came for a week but in those 7 days we yet again confronted the same cruelties we had seen before in Samos and in Athens. We saw police who were totally unsuited for working with vulnerable people, we saw agencies like UNCHR whose contributions were so limited and seemed incapable of offering what was needed. And we met refugees and migrants who despite all these humiliations struggled to stay sane and human and who showed us kindness and friendship which stood in the starkest contrast to the authorities. They knew they could expect little or nothing from the system and placed much hope in ordinary people who they thought could help if only they knew what was going on. Sadly, we are not so sure.....

Luisa Weber is a refugee activist based in Switzerland and worked in the 'Open Eyes Balkan Route Kitchen in Samos in 2016.

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