

The Bleak Plight of Refugees on Greece's Samos Island

By [Chris Jones](#)

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We are sorry that we have not posted anything from Samos over these past few weeks. The mood for writing has not been there. In large measure this has been caused by an overwhelming sense of sadness which hangs like a thunder cloud over this beautiful island.

It is a cloud that affects us all. There are many elements which feed this cloud. There is the crazy global context with its political strategies which promote division, hate and suspicion, fracturing humanity at the very time when it needs to be more united to confront the greed and profit which drives humanity to destruction as the earth is plundered.

If this is not bad enough on Samos we have the plight of the refugees and the plight of most of the people living here who continue to endure the consequences of seven years of economic decline and austerity. It is no exaggeration to claim that a large part of the island's population live on the edge of catastrophe. Yesterday for example our neighbour was told that unless she has urgent heart surgery she will be dead within a month. For this she will have to go to Athens. And she will need to pay 4,000 euros. Yet she and her family have nothing. A month ago the island's hospital had no hot water for a week. The list is endless.

And for both refugees and islanders there is no glimmer of hope; of things getting any better. This hopelessness is a killer. It always is, but what has been particularly devastating has been the experience of a Syriza government. There was so much hope that things would improve under a clean Syriza administration. All these dreams are now ashes. Whether any lessons have been learnt about the profound limitations of electoral politics remains an open question.

As for the refugees on Samos it is much the same misery as ever before, except now winter is here so there are now very cold and wet days. Today it is sunny but it is zero degrees outside. Not good for camping, as many do in the hotspot! The situation is pretty well summarised by the refugees who tell us that the 2 words that they will always associate with being held in the Camp are WAIT and Malaka (which means wanker, useless, loser).

From what we can see, there is now widespread agreement from the EU Commission downwards, that the conditions in the island hotspots on Samos, Lesbos, Chios and others are deplorable. They are not safe, they are not healthy, there is no adequate provision for vulnerable refugees, the food is inadequate..... and so on and so on. There is absolutely no need for more reports to be published or inquiries to be launched. The library is full of reports all of which say pretty much the same. Naming and shaming has its part to play in exposing the system's inhumanities but if the hotspots on the Greek frontier islands are

anything to go by, it is a profound error to think that such exposures result in any positive change or action.

However, particularly those refugees who have been stuck on Samos since March 2016, will tell you that the one of the most obvious changes over the months of their detention has been the growth in the numbers of people 'working' in the camp. Michael, a 50 year old Palestinian refugee who has been here with his family since June noted how the numbers of cars now parked out on the approach road to the Camp have multiplied. "I counted over 120 cars and motor bikes this morning. There seem to be more week by week. But what are all these people doing? I have no idea except I see a lot of people sitting around drinking coffee." Michael is not alone in wondering what the hell is going on. Why with so many people are they still waiting months to get processed? Or as Abdul from Morocco observed, "there is lot of money being spent here. On hire cars, more police, more people employed in the camp, but none of it seems to get to us. I am still sleeping in a tent and the Camp is a disgusting place to live."

Fights, hassles and confrontations amongst the refugees are commonplace now. Over the past 2 weeks for example, we have seen 2 Pakistani refugees who play cricket with us twice a week, turn up with stitches in head wounds as a result of being attacked by other refugees with iron bars. Most of these fights erupt around meal times and are a direct consequence of the inhuman way refugees are provided with their food. Given the frustrations and conditions of the refugees it is remarkable that there have not been more serious eruptions of rage and destruction. Nevertheless, the fights are making life more stressful for many refugees.

Although it is not difficult to understand why such violence erupts there has been no serious attempt to identify how key aspects of the management of the refugees in the hotspot is one of the root causes. The inordinate delays, the lack of information, the failure to treat refugees with any respect are primary causes of frustration but it is made much worse by the crude prioritisation of one group over another. Again and again you will hear refugees tell you that the reason they are stuck on Samos for so long is because the system is only concerned with the Syrian refugees. They say these are given the top priority. There is no disagreement about the Syrians' position at the top of the pecking order but who comes next depends upon who you talk with.

Yesterday a group of Iranian refugees told us that there was no doubt in their minds that they were at the bottom, and the Pakistanis will tell you the same, as will the north Africans. As for the Algerians it is now the case that they are regarded as the most 'delinquent' as the Greek migration minister put it last week, and sadly this view is also held by many including some refugees. The Algerians, overwhelming male, tend to be one of the groups who do not accept being pushed around by the authorities. Some resist - they demand, they get into the faces of the police, they don't give up - and for their troubles they have been scapegoated. On Samos at least, the Algerian refugees are the most common victims of arbitrary arrest and detention in the police cells.

Dealing with the refugee population by their nationality has long been the preferred method of the system here. But it is clear that this is a crude measure and also extremely divisive and not the least cruel. Anything like a humane refugee policy would have in place a triage system that would make an attempt to assess the needs of all the refugees not withstanding where they came from. This is absent so there are refugees here on Samos who have

escaped from deadly violence, torture and perpetual fear but because they are not from Syria are simply neglected and ignored for months.

Daily people detained in the Camp are pleading to be seen, to be heard, but are turned away told that they cannot be seen now because they are dealing with the Syrians. Then they will see to the Iraqis, then..... and so on. The resentment caused by this approach is very deep. We can't count the number of times we have heard young Pakistanis ask are we not human too? But the reality for the Syrians is not so great either. Yesterday Ahmed a young Syrian man told us that his asylum application had been turned down. He had escaped from Aleppo. All his family and all of his friends who had remained in Aleppo were now dead. His friend, who traveled with him from Aleppo has had his application accepted. Ahmed was told that his rejection was on the grounds that Turkey is a safe place for him and he should return there for processing! Being Syrian guarantees you nothing.



Samos Refugees

Despite their diversity the refugees have far more in common with one another than their differences. Yet this commonality is constantly being eroded and undermined with some refugees now blaming others for their plight. Many will rightly point out that this is a classic divide and rule approach and works to the system's advantage. It is and it does, but it flows from cluelessness rather than intelligence.

In contrast there has been no let up in the efforts to encourage the locals to blame the refugees as the principal reason why things are so bad for them on Samos. They are held to be responsible for the on going decline of tourism and for more generally 'unsettling' the population by their presence. As one young Greek student from Karlovassi told us yesterday, he could never see Samos welcoming refugees and encouraging them to settle here even though he personally could see how a settlement of refugees on the island could rejuvenate and benefit the whole community. According to Vasili, too many here believe that the refugees are too different from the Greeks and they would not be accepted.

Some of the comments above came during a music concert for refugee solidarity that was

held on Sunday December 11th in Vathi. It was one of the most positive events of 2016 in Samos for it was one of the few times this year when both refugees and locals came together to share food and music and enjoy themselves. The turn out was impressive and the music made by refugee and locals playing and singing together was beautiful. It was an event that pushed back at the sadness which dominates so much of life here and was alive with possibilities. We could hear many people talking about organising further and bigger events and building on the confidence gained from this concert. Laughing, singing, relaxing, eating together is always positive and now when so much effort is directed to dividing us and building hatreds activities such as these taken on even more importance. As we heard from local people at the concert much damage has been already done. One coffee bar worker told us that she had customers who would regard her as a traitor simply by coming to the concert. Yet she continued, if only these people would stand still for a moment and think about the situation they would or should realise that the locals of Samos as victims of monumental injustice share much in common with the refugees here. She was under no illusion that this would be easy!

The dark cloud remains but there are moments when the sun shines through and many of us here, refugees, locals, volunteers/activists alike can take some comfort and hope.

Finally, please don't forget us. Many here, refugees and islanders feel abandoned and forgotten.

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