

The Refugee Crisis: Arrivals Placed in “Closed Detention Camp” on Greece’s Samos Island

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The decision to place all the arrivals in a closed detention centre which followed on from the EU/Turkey pact led some activists and NGOs to withdraw from direct work in the Samos hotspot (aka the Camp). Given the dubious legality of the pact and the intention to return the majority of the arrivals back to Turkey which has been deemed a safe place for refugees, it was considered that any interventions with refugees in the Camp would signify compliance with this latest inappropriate and inhumane response to the refugees. As one MSF worker observed at the time, “how can I help and welcome the arrivals on the beach when I know that they are going to be locked in the camp and then possibly deported to Turkey? I can’t do that”.

The changed role of the NGOs and some activists has not been without some negative consequences. Not the least the refugees now in the Camp (around 1,000 including hundreds of young children) have to some degree been abandoned to the authorities. One of the key lessons we have learnt over the years of working with refugees here, is that the system does not do humanitarianism when it comes to refugees. Many individual volunteers who arrive here for a short time and register with the authorities have continued to enter the camp to do what they can, especially with respect to clothing and in one case offering classes in Greek.

If the pact should collapse it is very likely that the flow to the frontier Greek islands will grow again. As it is the numbers now coming to the frontier islands such as Samos, Lesbos and Chios are slowly increasing. 55 refugees arrived on 7th June and a further 60 three days earlier. This week has also seen the Greek press reporting on convoys of buses travelling into Izmir carrying refugees and ‘hundreds’ of boats being prepared along the coast. Who knows? It is possible and the pact is by no means secure. More significantly, there is no let-up in the war in Syria, nor in Iraq, Afghanistan or Yemen. Neither is there any let up in the plundering and corruption which drives so many young men to leave north Africa and Pakistan. And should the situation in the huge refugee camps within Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan continue to deteriorate then more refugees will be taking to the road especially if there is no sign of any peace agreements.

Shameful

What is so shameful is that there is no desire or intent to provide a safe and supportive place for refugees. The Samos hotspot is a perfect illustration of this attitude. European history is full of examples where the oppression and control of the poor has been exercised in a wide variety of ways, including architecture. Prisons and workhouses in 19th century Britain were not only located in the midst of desperately poor neighbourhoods but were

consciously designed and built to be symbols of state power and fear. This is no less true for the Samos hotspot. A double wire fence topped with razor wire speaks volumes and it is not in words of welcome and compassion.

In part this is driven by the notion, which we have heard many times from senior officials on Samos, that a humanitarian embrace of the arrivals would make Samos attractive and encourage more refugees to come over from Turkey. We heard exactly the same sentiments expressed in Hamburg in the 1980s when we visited the converted factories which housed refugee families for up to 5 years in the most appalling overcrowded and dismal conditions. It was important we were told that the message gets back up the line to intending refugees that this was what they could expect. Don't come! It was the same logic used by the British government in its support for reducing the Italian led Mare Nostrum rescue initiative in the Mediterranean. If the journey was made in the knowledge that there would be less chance of rescue and hence more danger then it would discourage refugees from attempting the journey. It is certainly reflected in the total silence of the system with respect to safe passage across the Aegean from Turkey to Samos. The ferries between the islands and Turkey are now operating again. And yet again they are not allowed to carry refugees.

The system knows all too well that making refugee journeys dangerous and making reception facilities ugly and oppressive has no deterrent impact. This is a known truth across the globe. We are now witnessing sometimes over a thousand people a week drowning in the crossings to Europe, especially from Libya. We are seeing new and more dangerous routes opening up between Turkey and Crete and so it will go on. Knowing that cruel deterrence does not work makes the system's policies all the more toxic and vile. It simply doesn't care how many refugees perish. After all they are refugees and not passengers on some missing airliner.

Fewer in Number But Still They Come

There are many factors at play in the recent marked reduction in the refugee flow to the Greek islands since March 20th. Some we can only guess at, as there is, as ever, a marked lack of reliable information about what is going on over in Turkey. So we hear many different accounts from the refugees which include more push backs by the Turkish coastguards, and a reduction in the number of smugglers so making it more difficult to find transport but we have no idea if this because the smugglers are lying low at this time, or if they have moved their operations. We also hear of increased police and army patrols on the Turkish side. Inevitably the closing and militarisation of the land borders out of Greece making the country a prison trapping tens of thousands of refugees, especially the old and the young is leading refugees to forge new roads to Europe avoiding Greece.

Amongst the refugees who have arrived on Samos since the end of March there have been well over 300, nearly all young men, from Pakistan, Morocco and Algeria. All of whom paid between 600 and 1700 Euros to make the dangerous sea passage to Samos on top of all their other costs in getting here. Under the EU/Turkey pact these refugees are considered to be 'economic migrants' and prime candidates for immediate deportation back to Turkey, and indeed the majority of those who have been returned are overwhelmingly from these countries. Yet still they come and take enormous risks and confront such hardship whilst they are detained.

It is clear from some of those we have talked with that there is little interest in the details of

the latest policies and practices. The system, as they say, is always against them, always interested in stopping them, hassling them in whatever ways it can. This is how it is. Amongst many of the young men we find a determination and a confidence that whatever the barrier they will find a way around. Hundreds of thousands have gone before them, breaking through borders and barriers. OK it might be more difficult now but it is not impossible. Refugees are still making it out of Samos and Greece despite the pact, including our friend Mamoud who left here in April and is now in France. And the choice becomes less crazy when the refugees see the chaos and confusions in the hotspots across Greece. To date only a tiny fragment of asylum applications have been processed in the whole of Greece since the end of March. There are over 7,000 refugees who are still waiting to just make an asylum application. There are around 55,000 refugees stuck in Greece. Just how long is it feasible to hold people in the hotspots as they wait for their cases to be considered?

One of the loudest complaints of the refugees is that they are left in the dark with no information. But there is no information to give. The Greek asylum system generally is in chaos. The authorities running the hotspots don't know when they are going to get the lawyers and judges necessary for this new system to function. In the Samos hotspot it appears from a question in the Athens parliament this week that there is only ONE person working on the asylum applications!

For months now statements in the local media make grand announcements about the resources that are going to come to Samos. In March we were informed that 500 jobs were to be created in the hotspot which would constitute the biggest job creation project since the Greek crisis started in earnest over 6 years ago. New and better accommodation cabins for the camp were on their way as well as lawyers and asylum experts from across Europe (2,300 of them for the Greek islands). But virtually nothing has arrived apart from more police and Frontex people. And this has been the pattern for years now on Samos. Lots of talk and declarations and then nothing unless it involves security and barbed wire.

Pact Under Pressure

The pact can only work if Turkey is accepted as a safe country for deported refugees. Much to the dismay of the EU authorities, Greece has not endorsed Turkey as a 'blanket' safe country and the judges on the panels which hear appeals when asylum is not granted, are insisting that every case for deportation has to be considered on a case by case basis. This completely goes against the plan to deport the majority of new arrivals as rapidly as possible with Turkey established as one of the gateways into Europe. According to the Greek newspaper, *Ekathimerini* (7th June):

"Fears are rising about the possible breakdown of a deal between the European Union and Turkey for the return of migrants after legal committees in Greece upheld dozens of appeals by refugees against their deportation. By late Monday, Greek appeals committees had ruled in favour of 35 refugees, ruling that Turkey is "an unsafe country." Only two rulings overturned appeals by refugees against their deportation."

The pact may fall not simply as a result of whether Turkey gets what it wants (visas and cash) but from within Europe itself. The EU seems (thankfully) incapable of being able to implement its policies and unable to mobilise its collective resources. There is little solidarity between the member states and each is now making its own arrangements irrespective of

the wider consequences. One of which appears to be turning countries such as Greece and Italy into giant holding camps for refugees. There are endless examples of these failures including the intention that all newly arriving refugees are to be kept on the frontier islands and not be allowed to move onto the mainland. This is an important aspect of their policy as the Austrian foreign minister, Sebastian Kurz, noted in an interview on June 5th:

“A refugee, who stays on an island like the [the Greek island of] Lesbos with no chance of receiving asylum, will be more willing to return voluntarily, as someone who has moved into an apartment in Vienna or Berlin.”
(<http://presstv.ir/Detail/2016/06/05/468984/Austria-Kurz-refugees-EU-Turkey-Australia>)

But the hotspots are already massively overcrowded and all new arrivals add to that pressure. Drip by drip and as each day passes the pressure grows. It is not sustainable.

Desperation and Hope

The European authorities constantly fail to grasp that the overwhelming majority of refugees are desperate to find a safe home again. It is desperation that drives them onto the road away from their countries and to make life threatening journeys. And it is often hope that pushes them towards Europe. They may find their final destinations difficult but as yet there are no bombs dropping on Berlin or Munich. Moreover Europe projects itself to the rest of the world not only as a place of peace but also as highly civilised, democratic, protective, governed by the rule of law, justice and so on. A place of refuge, a place where they might live again. Imagine then arriving on such hallowed ground and then being treated as less than human, let alone as a refugee fleeing war and danger; it is quite literally gob-smacking for many refugees. But they don't relent because they believe that their claims for refuge are un-impeachable and it is almost inconceivable that Europe will not eventually concede and rescue them from the hotspots on the islands. When nothing of the sort happens so their rage (and depression for some) grows and more and more we hear them resort to their very basic demand of “We are human”.

Boiling Over

This rage is going to escalate. For the refugees trapped for months in the hotspot on Samos the Camp is a pressure cooker as we have recounted in earlier articles. Overcrowded, starved of information, having no idea when their lives might resume, treated like dirt, bored out their heads, surviving on pathetic food feeds frustration. Daily fights break out inside the camp as these emotions boil over. But the press only report the big fights such as the one which erupted during the late evening of June 2nd when two of the cabins were burnt down and 7 refugees required hospitalisation. The mainstream media report these more spectacular fights where refugees are injured but they never provide any context so encouraging the belief that this is how refugees are - violent, unpredictable, excitable.... Whereas it is the Camp and its cruelties and inadequacies which are responsible for these tensions. And they are not episodic incidents as the press would have us believe. They are happening every day.

Tourism has collapsed on Samos this summer. It is catastrophic for the island as tourism is such an important part of the local economy. With almost no exception the refugees on Samos have been identified as the reason for this disaster. Visiting government ministers, the mayor, the regional prefect, the hotel associations, the lawyers and so on all point the

finger at the refugees and the highly reported explosions in the camp play into this story. Refugees are to be feared because they are dangerous, they fight, they steal, they spread diseases, they sexually harass women; all of which are said to be almost unknown amongst the locals on Samos (Samos Bar Association, 4th June).

The local elites then seem disturbed when they find their accounts being publicised in the media especially in countries like Germany and Holland which are traditionally big markets for Samos tourism. It is not the reality here which keeps tourists away because there are no hordes of refugees wandering the streets; there are no outbreaks of dangerous diseases; there is no violence outside of the Camp and it is a lie to suggest that everyone on the island is being badly affected by the presence of the refugees. But this myth making which has become the main tactic of the local establishment when begging for funds from Athens and Brussels has back-fired badly. It is the authorities here which are largely responsible for feeding the media's one-eyed reporting of the situation on Samos, not the refugees.

New Anxieties

They talk rubbish but it is dangerous for here in Greece it can only be a matter of time before fascist parties such as Golden Dawn begin to exploit this manufactured unease with a vengeance. Only yesterday we heard that far right groups were attacking refugees on Chios. And across Europe as a whole we are seeing attacks on refugees increasing.

We are also seeing new areas of deep concern and anxiety emerging as refugees on Samos are hearing more and more from their friends and families in northern Europe about the huge delays and bureaucracy associated with family re-unification. For many family re-unification was both their dream and their expectation when making their escape to Europe. In all the main receiving countries family reunification procedures are becoming increasingly complex and bureaucratic and lasting from anything between 2 and 3 years. It is a new form of torture with unendurable delays. There is increasing refugee testimony that these barriers are a major influence as to why 37,000 refugees sought voluntary return to their countries from Germany in the past year. Stories such as the one we heard from northern Germany this week where the parents are separated from their 2 daughters in one part of Germany and their son in another, and after 8 months are still no nearer to being united are becoming more common place and provoking deep unease amongst the refugees here.

But it is not just family re-unification which is bothering the refugees. *Statewatch*, an excellent source of information on refugees, posted the following this week:

“As reported by Germany’s international broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW), an interior ministry report based on March 31 data shows there were over 219,000 migrants set to be expelled from Germany. Almost 168,000 of them had been issued the so-called Duldung (tolerance) permits, allowing them to stay in the country until obstacles for their deportation are cleared. The remaining 51,000, however, were to be expelled as soon as possible.”

On the basis of these numbers alone, it would seem that the number one destination country (Germany) for the refugees coming through Samos, does not look so promising.

Being Forgotten

On Samos we need to make sure that the refugees in the Camp are not forgotten. So much

of the system's agenda is played out in and by the mainstream media. But what often gets neglected is the impact of its episodic coverage. A classic example are the 'missing' 10,000 refugee children within Europe which Europol revealed in January 2016. For a few days this was news. Since then virtually nothing. They are off the agenda. 10,000 or more children missing and so little attention. It is extraordinary. It takes no imagination to know that if these were British or French children it would be a very different story.

On Samos if there is nothing dramatic to report or to film there is no media coverage. Once off the pages of papers and dropped from the news bulletins it is as if the issue has simply gone away. So although the refugees are not coming now in great numbers we have in our midst a Camp holding over 1000 refugees in conditions which defy any meaning of humanity and solidarity. To live with this tumor in our midst is distressing in the extreme for both the refugees and many islanders. How do you relax over a coffee with friends in the centre of Samos town when you know that less than 1 km away is a Camp where people are frightened and treated worse than any animal on this continent?

We are like many other people on Samos. We want to shout out to the people of Europe and the World. Look at what is happening. Find out. Learn and act. To be silent is to be compliant. The system is foul and dangerous and criminal. It will not reform itself. Only the people of the world, acting as human beings can make the changes so desperately needed.

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