

The Refugee Crisis in the Greek Islands: Dog Days on Samos

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These are strange days on Samos. Unlike the previous 11 months the flow of refugees to the island has slowed down dramatically since the EU/Turkey pact came into force at the end of March. Days pass now with no new arrivals. But still some are arriving even though they tell us that it is now difficult to find smugglers in Turkey prepared to help them cross to Samos. In the past 7 days around 100 have arrived.

It is not just that the flow of refugees is now smaller but they have little or no visibility on the island. In that sense it is like earlier years for all the refugees who arrive are now locked in the camp. There are very few refugees on the streets and in the bars. Only those who are given a pass to leave the camp after 25 days detention are able to get out for some of the day. As most have no money the bars and cafés have taken down their notices in Arabic which once advertised their menus.

Of course, this is what the authorities want. Refugees are bad for tourism. And the holiday season is here. This season looks especially bad with hotel and flight bookings well down on previous (also poor) years. What we don't hear though is the benefits some gain from the refugee business. There are a myriad of people here involved in this business from the police, Frontex, the various NGOs (the MSF for example, spend around 200,000 euros a month on their Samos intervention) as well as volunteers. They stay in hotels and apartments, they rent cars, jeeps, buses, they rent store houses and offices, they employ local people, they eat, buy food, go to the bars all of which brings benefit to businesses on the island. It would be a good day when we are told exactly how big this refugee business is on Samos.

But that refugees are bad for tourism is a widely held truth here. But need it be? What if Samos decided to become a beacon of humanity. What if the island came to stand in solidarity with the refugees and not only cared and welcomed the arrivals but from its direct experience and contact with refugees over many years *now* made it clear that we were dealing with victims of plunder, chaos and violence, to satisfy the US and its western European 'allies'. Many now ask why are 'they' here, bothering us. Well it is simple, 'they' are here because 'we' are there. The west dropped 30,000 bombs in the ten month bombardment of Libya killing tens of thousands of innocent people. As we write Aleppo is being smashed to pieces under bombs and armaments. And it goes on and on in so many places. Just who are the terrorists in our world today? Who is making and supplying all these weapons? These are some of the questions which Samos ought to be asking. Thousands are dying and thousands are running for their lives because 'we' are there. And, if we cared to ever listen to the refugees we would understand all too well why they are here and the reasons for their migration.

Instead we are back to an island which is staggeringly beautiful but which has a vile tumour throbbing less than a kilometre from the centre of the main town. There are hundreds of children amongst the inmates, languishing behind a double fence topped with razor wire. On every possible ground imaginable the camp is not a safe place for children. Even though the camp has doubled its capacity the new, bottom half, has yet to open so all the refugees are crammed in the older part which was constructed for 250 people. The principled opposition of the big NGOs not to work or co-operate with closed camps makes life more difficult.

Yes they are being fed, but the food is pitiful. Lots of pasta with red sauce, little meat or fresh vegetables. These meals arrive on Samos frozen and then re heated in microwaves. Nasty. And what makes it so much worse is that the food is distributed in ways which humiliate the refugees and lead to scuffles and chaos. This week the police fired tear gas in the Moria Camp on Lesbos to control the refugees who were protesting the visit of a Greek and Dutch minister. The Greek minister talked of the sad necessity of resorting to violence but said there was no alternative. He continued by saying that we had to expect such 'explosions' in the hotspots and they had to consider how to manage such events in the future. But why should we accept the inevitability of explosions? Why doesn't he act to defuse the bombs for which he and his fellow European ministers are responsible for creating?

These 'hotspots' such as the one here on Samos were supposed to be transformed under the EU/Turkey pact. They were no longer to be transit points undertaking some preliminary processing before allowing refugees to move on to the mainland, but to become holding camps working as EU courts for determining asylum applications (only for Greece) and basically deporting the rest to Turkey. The frontier islands such as Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Kos are expected to become the new fence guarding Europe's south eastern border. Here and no further. In a vain attempt to satisfy some of the weak protections refugees offered under international law, the hotspots are expected to respect the individual rights of refugees including the right to appeal and the provision of legal advice and support. Other guarantees were also made about restrictions on detention, and a commitment to support refugees with regard to their needs and dignity.

With no capacity and no competence it was always likely that this system would not materialise. What we have on Samos at the moment is a hotspot which is all about detention. Nothing else. There is no movement. Refugees are stuck in a nasty place with no idea what might happen next. They have no information. This is what is so destructive to so many refugees. Those with children and families have unlike the young male refugees even fewer options. With so many borders around Greece now blocked off the routes out have become more dangerous and arduous and virtually impossible for young families. Even the younger refugees are discovering that it is not easy to get off an island. Everyday we hear reports of refugees being arrested in the town, in the port or at the air port for trying to get out using false papers. The lists posted of the cases coming before the Samos court for prosecution overwhelmingly involve refugees.

If you don't look European/Greek you are conspicuous on Samos and in constant danger of being stopped and searched. And there are many police here now, many in plain clothes.

The camp is but a cell in the bigger cage of Samos which in turn is part of the prison of Greece. This is the reality for the majority of refugees here.

In the meantime the camp continues to fill. It is a ticking bomb. It is a bomb made here but

be sure when the explosions come it will yet again be the victims who will be blamed and who will suffer.

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