

# **‘Catastrophe is coming’: Disaster looms as coronavirus reaches Greek refugee camps**

Life for refugees in Greece is already fraught with uncertainty and hardship, but fears have spiraled since the coronavirus pandemic reached the camps.

COVID-19 has reached the refugee camps of Greece, with two different migrant facilities in the country now closed to entry and exit after residents in each tested positive for coronavirus.

In the latest case, a 53-year-old Afghan man with pre-existing health conditions in Malakasa camp, just outside Athens, was confirmed ill with the virus.

A few days prior, at least 23 residents tested positive for the coronavirus in Ritsona camp. These cases are the first to be confirmed at a camp in Greece, but there are fears that many more are unreported.

The government has responded by quarantining each camp’s residents – with a combined population of over 5,000 people – for a minimum of 14 days.

## **Dire conditions**

These critical developments renew calls to clear the overcrowded, unhygienic camps, where observation of the governments’ own rules on social distancing remain impossible.

Zikria Farzad is an Afghan refugee and a teacher. He is also the creator of ‘Wave of Hope’, a makeshift school created by refugees in Moria camp on Lesbos. He understands just how crowded the camps are.

“For a two-person tent, there are four families, and seven families for container shacks that are designed for two families,” Zikria told *The New Arab*.

To make it worse, the situation under quarantine has been even more suffocating for refugees, as already dangerous conditions appear to be deteriorating. In the camps, access to food is limited.

The NGO Lifeline reports that in Moria the food supply has been reduced to 1,000 kilocalories (kcal) per day for children and adolescents. This is half of the recommended daily intake.

***Read more: Middle East regimes are freeing inmates as coronavirus spreads. But political prisoners remain behind bars***

They also report that bottled drinking water has been reduced to nine litres per family per day. Big families of more than six people get the same allowance.

### **Restricted healthcare**

Healthcare has been restricted since the government blocked access to social security numbers for refugees and migrants in July.

Those sick in Ritsona and Malakasa may only be able to access the hospital in Athens due to their specific condition being classified as an emergency, in line with a state policy of non-refusal which makes emergency treatment mandatory.

This measure has forced those living in the camps to rely on NGOs and solidarity groups for healthcare, yet even these have been threatened by the recent violence against NGOs on the island that drove many NGOs to evacuate their volunteers.

Now in Lesvos, less than 20 volunteer medics remain for over 22,000 residents.

Jan Egeland, secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has said that “coronavirus will decimate refugee communities if we don’t act now”.

### **Social distancing impossible**

The World Health Organisation’s (WHO) guidelines to slow the impact, and thus the death rate, of the virus, include social distancing and seeking medical assistance early.

The scale of the outbreaks in the camps depends largely on whether it will emulate a 1 percent fatality rate, like that in Ireland, or 10 percent like that of Italy.

In the camps, following such guidelines is impossible. “We cannot stay inside because we have to get food, water and go to the bathroom,” said Zaki, a

nineteen-year-old Afghan in Moria Camp.

“When we go outside there are a lot of people and people are always sick because we don’t have healthy food and doctors are only for people who are really sick,” he added.

Nafesee, a young mother of three in Eleonas Refugee Camp describes her experience of the camp, “if one person gets sick, everyone gets sick and if one person has a coronavirus, all the people in the camp get infected”.

One government official has described the conditions in the camps as a powder keg ready to explode. Zikria fears that currently, “with no means of preventing it, the virus will soon cause all people to die.”

***Read more: ‘Live like human beings’: Refugees robbed, assaulted trying to cross Greek border***

A trending hashtag on Twitter and Facebook is #stayhome; but for people like Zaki, Nafese, and, Zikria, there is no home to stay in.

### **Self-organization**

Residents and volunteers have collectively organized their own protective measures. In Moria, a group of Afghan women are working at a rapid rate to produce 500 protective masks each day.

Meanwhile refugees at the solidarity group ‘Stand By Me’ Lesvos are working seven days a week to clear waste from the site.

However, whilst evacuation is delayed there are limits on what the communities can do to prepare. The Greek government has taken some limited measures to prepare for the arrival of the virus in the camps including the installation of ATMS and delineated quarantine areas.

Several sources indicate that this may amount to one medical container for 20,000 people.

### **Evacuate the camps**

On 24 March, Amnesty International called on the Greek government to “move

people out of the reception centres to appropriate, small-scale centres on the mainland, such as hotels and apartments.”

In Greece, thousands of apartment blocks lie empty. Another suggestion came from sea rescue NGO Sea-watch. They called for cruise ships to evacuate the Greek island camps, using vessels now lying empty docked in nearby ports.

Migrant women, men, and children should be housed in facilities with adequate security, sanitation, and hygienic conditions and should be allowed to apply for asylum. With COVID-19, all and any healthcare needs should be promptly addressed.

A research committee within the EU also published a letter demanding action from the EU.

“If the EU fails to take immediate action, the situation on the Greek islands will become unmanageable with the risk of many deaths. This is an emergency and the EU has to react accordingly,” the letter stated.

This echoes the demands of residents themselves and activist groups such as ‘Demand from a Pandemic’ who have organized banner drops, and a Norwegian group who placed 7,499 shoes on the shores of Ulvoya beach, representing each child or young person trapped in Moria.

“The humanitarian catastrophe is coming, and the only solution is for the world to cooperate, and the camp must be evacuated as soon as possible,” warned Zikria. But he is not hopeful.

“I personally no longer believe in today’s world...especially European politics.”

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