

Hundreds of Iranian and Afghan Refugees Thrown out on the Streets of Athens



Refugees staged a sit-in outside the Greek parliament in Athens, demanding shelter

Just before Easter, police in Athens raided a building where a group of refugees had been sheltering, arrested several of them and sent the rest either to camps or out on to the streets. In retaliation, between 40 and 100 refugees, many of them Persian-speakers from Iran and Afghanistan with the correct documentation for claiming asylum, have organized a sit-in outside the Greek parliament.

The refugees had been staying in a squat in the central Athens neighborhood of Exarchia, home to the city's anarchist movement. But since the police evicted them on April 18, they have nowhere to stay — and they have even lost what few belongings they had.

One man I spoke to couldn't stop crying, his face furrowed and his words, spoken in a scratchy voice, difficult to understand through the tears. He told me about his son, who had literally been kicked out of his sleep when the Greek police raided the building and arrested him. He held up his finger and said: "This is not justice."

Refugee camps in Greece are of two kinds — open and closed. Refugees in open camps are free to come and go and to receive visitors, but in the closed camps, they have to get permission to leave, and visitors are only allowed to speak to the refugees for a few minutes from across a fence.

The "squats" are usually empty buildings that groups of anarchists have taken over and made available to refugees. The refugees have no money, but agree to take part in the anarchists' demonstrations in exchange for a place to shelter and sleep. The squat the police raided on April 18 was located on Bouboulinas Street

in central Athens.

The Defeated “Caravan of Hope”

The first police raid on these buildings took place immediately after the “Caravan of Hope” movement failed in early April —a convoy of refugees who had tried to cross the border from Greece to Macedonia. The first night, the police forced people in two of the squats, one of which sheltered single women and mothers with children, to evacuate. More evacuations took place during the following nights.

After a few hours, refugees with papers that proved they had applied for asylum in Greece were released on to the streets without a shelter to go to. But undocumented refugees who had not been fingerprinted were taken to closed camps. They will be entitled to request asylum after a few months — but at that stage they will also be thrown out on the streets alongside fellow shelterless refugees.

Most of the refugees are Persian-speaking Iranians or Afghans. Since April 18, close to 100 of these refugees have been staging a sit-in in their tents in Syntagma Square outside the Greek parliament building.

I spoke to one refugee named Sajad. “We lived in the Clandestina squat for close to a year,” he told me. “At five o’clock in the morning the police savagely attacked our squat. Earlier, we had heard that two other squats had been evacuated as well. At dawn, the police, brandishing arms, entered the building and our rooms. It was very scary. We are in front of the parliament to ask why they did this to us when we are documented. When we went to other government bureaus and registered to find a home, they told us that the squats were a good place. We are [calling for] our rights and want them to give us a secure place to live.”

Work Permits but No Jobs

Elaheh, who has set up a tent with her family outside parliament, told me: “The police did not pay any attention to the fact that there were pregnant women, old women and children among us. They took all of us to the police station and when they found out that we had documents, they told us to go. The police did not even allow us to grab some clothing for the children. They sealed the squat. We all have Greek documents. All the families have children. But there are also families

who do not have cash cards or have yet to be registered so that they will receive documents for their IDs. My husband and my child are ill, but they have done nothing about it. We even have work permits, but there are no jobs. We hope the Greek government can help us.”

After I visited the refugees outside the parliament building, I wanted to see how the refugees who had been transferred to a closed camp were doing. On April 18, police arrested about 15 of them and transferred them to the camp. The police agreed to take me there, bringing me to the camp’s entrance in a windowless van. At the first inspection point, I had to register with officials and hand over my documents. Then I had to wait for the police to search my belongings. Wherever I looked I saw fences and Conex shelters [a type of shipping container]. The authorities had put up fences around groups of 10 Conex shelters, like cages. The refugees were not allowed to leave and no visitors were allowed to enter.

Eventually I was able to talk with a group of detained Iranian refugees for 10 minutes. I shook their hands through the fence. They had no belongings and the camp had not provided them with anything. It was just them and the fences that surrounded them.

“It was 5am and we were asleep,” a woman in the camp named Hranush told me. “Suddenly the police attacked. Many people escaped through the back entrance. We stayed and told the police that we were all families with children, but they paid no attention. No matter how much we pleaded they would not let us take our personal things. Our documents were left behind as well. Then they sealed the building and we have no idea what is going to become of them.”

An Inhuman Situation

Now hundreds of refugees, most of them Persian speakers, are adrift on the streets of Athens. In contravention of its commitment to the European Union, the Greek government has failed to bring order to the lives of refugees in this country. Human rights organizations have repeatedly warned that the situation for refugees in Greece is inhuman, not only for those wandering the streets but also for those in the camps.

The refugees spend their days and nights in a state of anxiety, anguish and insecurity. Whatever facilities they have access to are unhygienic, and they suffer from poor nutrition. Many of them have suffered enough living without any roofs

over their heads, but the recent spate of arrests has given rise to new panic, further proof of the Greek government's failure to attend to the situation of refugees. "We came here to be secure, but our lot was insecurity," several refugees told me.

In the summer of 2018, the European Union reached an agreement with Greece, Turkey and Italy that meant an increase to the budget for handling refugees. In exchange, these countries agreed to cooperate toward helping to slow the tide of refugees moving into northern and western Europe. They also agreed to reinstate the 2013 Dublin Regulation, which refuses refugees the right to choose the country in which they seek asylum. Instead, the regulation states that the person must apply for asylum in the first country he or she arrives in, and in which authorities officially register them. As a result, if an asylum seeker has registered in Greece and somehow manages to reach another EU country, he or she will be returned to Greece.

But the conditions in Greece for refugees, coupled with the government's inefficiency in handling their affairs, have made them averse to remaining in the country. Men, women and children, young and old, who had all sought asylum in Greece to escape insecurity have now been turned to cast-offs with no clear future ahead of them.

While most media have described Greek authorities as hostile, or incompetent at best, when it comes to refugees, according to one report, some Athens city officials have shown concern about the situation. "You can't throw families with small children into the street without having first considered what will happen to them," said one, without giving his name.

The same official said the evicted refugees may be moved to the city's only camp, Elaionas, provided there is enough space for them to be sheltered there.

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