

Migrant Camp Built on Army Firing Range Could Be Giving Asylum Seekers Lead Poisoning

Human Rights Watch has warned that is very likely there is lead in the soil of the camp housing former residents of the burned down Moria camp.

When Greece's notorious Moria migrant camp burned to the ground in September, its thousands of desperate residents were rehoused in another site hastily erected on military-owned land nearby.

But while their new home offered an escape from the endemic violence and overcrowding of Moria, it has confronted asylum seekers with an entirely new hazard: potential lead poisoning.

Human Rights Watch warned Tuesday that the Mavrovouni migrants camp, erected on land including a former military firing range on the Greek island of Lesbos, could pose a serious risk of lead poisoning to its 7,500 residents.

"It's very likely there is lead in the soil," Eva Cossé, a Human Rights Watch researcher, told VICE World News.

Her group has been unable to conduct its own testing for lead contamination at the site. But it says that it is concerned due to the known risk of lead poisoning at former firing ranges, where highly toxic lead dust from bullets, shot and casings contaminate soil, and becomes airborne in dry, windy conditions.

"It's well known across the globe that shooting ranges are contaminated with lead," she said. "We say the government should have done testing before it put people there."

The new camp was established on military land that includes a former firing range, where generations of Greek soldiers have carried out shooting drills since it was first opened in 1926. In the aftermath of the devastating fire at Moria camp, which made thousands of desperate asylum seekers homeless, the residents were rehoused there without any testing for lead contamination of the site having been carried out.

Lead poisoning can cause irreversible impairment of neurological, biological, and cognitive functions. Young children, who absorb four to five times as much lead as adults, and pregnant women are especially vulnerable. According to official data, one-third of the camp's inhabitants are children — about 1,000 of them aged under 5 — and more than 1,600 are women, 118 of whom are pregnant.

Alastair Hay, professor of environmental toxicology at the Leeds Institute of Genetics, Health, and Therapeutics told VICE World News that the concerns raised by Human Rights Watch were warranted, due to the site's use as a firing range.

"Children are the most vulnerable to lead due to their developing nervous systems," he said.

"Most people get exposed to lead through ingestion, and young kids eat a certain amount of soil every day just because they're putting their hands in their mouths."

Human Rights Watch is concerned that construction work being carried out to make improvements at the camp could be worsening the risk of lead poisoning, by disturbing lead deposits buried in the soil. It's also concerned about unexploded mortars and bullets that have been found throughout the site by residents, including children, despite assurances from the government that it had been cleared of danger.

The Greek government did not respond to requests for comment but has denied there is any risk at the site.

In a letter to Human Rights Watch last month, Migration and Asylum Minister Notis Mitarachi wrote that his ministry had been "assured that there is no lead contamination," as only lead-free ammunition had been used on the firing range. Furthermore, the site had been covered in a layer of clay, which emitted low levels of dust, prior to being turned into a migrant camp.

But he acknowledged that lead testing had not been carried out on the site. Due to the concerns, he said he has arranged for soil testing to be carried out, although the results are not known.

However, Cossé said that an analysis of photographs of ammunition found by

camp residents — which showed varieties that contained lead — cast doubts on the government's assessment of the risks, and its assurances that the site had been cleared of bullets.

"This contradicts what the government said about the army only using lead-free bullets in the firing range," she said.

Thousands of asylum seekers from countries like Afghanistan and Syria are stranded on Lesbos, sometimes also referred to as Lesbos, an island in the Aegean just a few miles from the Turkish coast. The island was once only a brief stopover for asylum seekers arriving by smuggler boats from Turkey before they made their way to the Greek mainland and onwards into Europe.

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But a March 2016 migration deal struck between the European Union and Turkey turned the Greek islands into de facto holding pens for migration into Europe, requiring migrants to remain there until their asylum applications could be processed.

The Greek government has faced criticism for the squalid conditions in the island camps, with regular calls for asylum seekers to be relocated into better-equipped accommodation on the Greek mainland. In response, it says it carries an unfair share of the burden of dealing with irregular migrants into Europe, who hope to travel onwards to wealthier northern European countries.

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Human Rights Watch has called on the Greek government to carry out thorough testing of the levels of lead in the soil and dust at the camp and to publish the results. If lead is found, it says, residents should be tested, offered treatment, and relocated to a safe location.

"The Greek government could be putting at-risk families with young children, aid workers, and its own employees because it's determined to hold asylum seekers on the island," said Belkis Wille, a senior crisis and conflict researcher at the organization.

"If this is where the government is trying to force asylum seekers to live on

Lesbos, then all the more reason to transfer people to the mainland.”

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