

Migrants seeking winter shelter overwhelm northern Greece

THESSALONIKI, Greece (AP) — Several hundred asylum-seekers camped outside a police station Monday in northern Greece, lining up to be arrested and formally processed as a surge in illegal migration overwhelmed authorities in the region.

After sleeping on benches and patches of grass in a central square in Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city, the migrants formed a line outside the police station, seeking a place at a migrant camp before the winter.

Karzan Hassan, a 22-year-old Iraqi Kurd, crossed into Greece last week and has slept outside the police station for the last two nights. He says he's hoping to reach Britain with his two brothers after abandoning a plan to travel to Italy.

"We don't want to stay in Greece. We want to get our papers, so that we can stay somewhere to clean up and rest," he told the Associated Press.

Hassan said he paid a smuggler in Istanbul \$2,500 for the trip to Greece.

Authorities later Monday moved the migrants in police buses to a nearby refugee camp, but it was unclear whether there was sufficient space at the overcrowded site to give them shelter. The migrants organized a cleanup of the square before boarding the buses.

"The number of arrivals is high in Thessaloniki and that's created a bottleneck," Nikos Ragos, the Migration Ministry's regional coordinator for northern Greece, told the AP. "So we are supporting the police until (migrants) can be documented."

Greece is struggling to cope with a high number of asylum-seekers due to other European Union nations' resistance to settling refugees and ongoing migrant arrivals from neighboring Turkey.

Police said 35 smuggling suspects were arrested last month in Thessaloniki, accused of transporting 1,821 migrants to the city — a 60 percent increase from the previous month.

Last week, Amnesty International Secretary-General Kumi Naidoo visited an overcrowded migrant camp on the Greek island of Lesbos that has been heavily criticized by rights groups. He described conditions there as “appalling ” and called for an emergency winter evacuation of migrants to the Greek mainland.

Petros Giannakouris in Athens contributed. Follow Kantouris at <http://www.twitter.com/CostasKantouris>

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