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Greece says migration crisis over; refugees beg to differ

‘Even animals cannot live in that kind of condition.’



Migrants walk in the early morning dawn on Lesbos, in September 2020. The numbers crossing the Aegean Sea to the Greek island have fallen, but at what cost? (Nicolas Economou via Reuters Connect)

ATHENS

A little over a year ago, the Moria refugee camp on Lesbos [burnt to the ground](#) – thrusting the [dismal conditions](#) in the overcrowded, under-resourced, and [squalid camps](#) on the Greek islands into the international spotlight.

The Greek government has since declared success in bringing the movement of asylum seekers and migrants into the country under control. “Greece is no longer experiencing a migration crisis,” Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi [said](#) in August.

But the rosy picture of reduced numbers and improving conditions presented by the authorities masks a stark reality for those seeking protection, according to humanitarian organisations and human rights groups.

The number of asylum seekers on the Greek islands has fallen to just over [4,500](#), down from around [40,000](#) in April 2020. And the first of five new migration reception centres being built on the islands – with [276 million euros](#) in EU funding – to improve living conditions opened on 18 September.

Overall, the number of asylum seekers housed in facilities throughout Greece managed or supported by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum has fallen by around [50 percent](#) – from more than 82,000 in August last year to around 42,000 – and new arrivals to the Greek islands are [down](#) by 78 percent compared to last year.

However, this is only part of the story. Since March last year, Greece has been systematically pushing asylum seekers and migrants back from the country’s land and sea borders. The pushbacks have been thoroughly documented by human rights watchdogs and journalists, but Greece denies it is engaging in such practices, which are illegal under international law.

[Read more → Greece’s ‘new tactic’ of migrant expulsion from deep inside its land borders](#)

At the same time, a series of government policies have made it: more difficult for people who do manage to enter the country to receive refugee status; easier for rejected asylum seekers to be deported; and harder for people who are granted protection to access accommodation, financial support, and services such as healthcare and education.

“Refugees ending up on the mainland shortly after getting protection have no means to overcome the chronic barriers to obtaining documents such as a residence permit or a tax number, which are necessary for accessing their rights to housing and to social welfare,” explained Minos Mouzourakis, legal officer at the NGO Refugee Support Aegean.

“This creates acute risks of destitution,” Mouzourakis told The New Humanitarian.

Timeline: The migration policies of Greece’s new government

As a result, thousands of people have left for other EU countries since last year after being granted refugee status in Greece. Between July 2020 and July 2021, 17,000 people with international protection in Greece applied for asylum again in Germany, according to [a letter](#) sent to the European Commission by the interior ministers of Germany, France, and four other EU countries.

“Greece is not ensuring that these persons are given suitable accommodation and provided with a minimum level of physical subsistence,” the letter stated.

Courts in at least two EU countries – Germany and the Netherlands – have blocked people re-applying for asylum from being deported back to Greece because of the “serious risk of inhumane and degrading treatment”, according to one [court decision](#).

The New Humanitarian spoke to dozens of asylum seekers and refugees currently in Greece, or who have recently left the country after being granted refugee status, to understand what conditions are like and why so many are being pushed to leave.

On the mainland

Ali Mohammed*, a 34-year-old from Syria, recently left the camps on the Greek islands.

Mohammed arrived on the island of Kos in May 2019 with his wife and three children. The family lived in the official reception centre located far from the main town on the island. They felt isolated, and struggled to access services. It took more than two years for the family to receive a decision in their asylum case. When it finally arrived in April this year, they were rejected because they had previously lived in Turkey, which Greece considers a safe country for Syrian refugees to be returned to – a designation [disputed](#) by human rights organisations.

Mohammed and his family are appealing this rejection, but along with the notice that their request for asylum had been denied, authorities gave Mohammed a piece of paper temporarily protecting his family from deportation because his wife is pregnant and allowing them to travel to the Greek mainland.

“The [authorities] gave me these papers and said, ‘Go to Athens and try your best there to get papers because we can’t do anything for you here,’” Mohammed told The New Humanitarian. “I never expected it to work out, because I had seen what it was like in Kos.”





Rows of white tents at Mavrovouni, a new camp set up on the island of Lesvos after the destruction of Moria (pictured opposite) in September 2020. (Iliana Papangeli/TNH)

Still, tired of living in the isolated camp, the family boarded a ferry to the mainland in May to try their luck with the asylum service in Athens. When they approached authorities in one of the refugee camps in the city, they were turned away. “[They] told us that they could not do anything for us because our asylum was denied [on Kos],” Mohammed said.

Without refugee status, Mohammed and his family weren’t eligible for housing support and he also couldn’t open a bank account – a requirement for renting an apartment on his own. The family ended up sleeping on the streets for 20 days before Mohammed found a way to purchase a housing container in a refugee camp on the black market for 400 euros for the family to live in.

Entry and exit to the camp is not closely monitored, so the family has been able to live under the radar. But they do not have access to services in the camp, such as food distributions, education, and medical care. They are far from the only ones. According to figures from the Ministry of Migration and Asylum seen by The New Humanitarian, there are more than 2,500 unregistered asylum seekers living in refugee camps in Athens and the surrounding area.

Mohammed has been supporting his family with money borrowed from family and friends, waiting for the appeals process to take its course. But prospects of a positive outcome are slim: in the first six months of 2021, just [8.2 percent](#) of negative asylum decisions were overturned on appeal.

If he and his family are rejected again, Mohammed doesn't know what they will do next – it's not a possibility he likes to think about. But even if the family's application is accepted the second time around, Mohammed has seen enough of life in Greece to know he wants to leave – perhaps to somewhere like Germany, where he thinks refugees are treated better. “We came with the hope that Greece will help us have a better life,” Mohammed said, clearly disappointed.

Onward movement

Moritz Reinbach, who works with Diakonie, a refugee support organisation in the German city of Hamburg, monitors the airport in the city to keep track of asylum seekers arriving who might need help. He says he encounters people on a daily basis who have been granted refugee status in Greece and have now come to Germany to re-apply for asylum – although sometimes people are sent back if they don't have adequate legal support.

According to an EU law known as the [Dublin Regulation](#), asylum seekers are required to apply for protection in the first EU country they enter. If someone is granted protection in one EU country, other EU countries do not – under normal circumstances – have to consider a second claim, and the person can be sent back to the country where they already have status. The court decisions in Germany and the Netherlands have changed that – at least in those countries.

“There have been many decisions by regional courts which state that refugees recognised in Greece and applying here for international protection cannot be returned back to Greece because Greece is not a safe country for refugees,” Reinbach told The New Humanitarian.

Yasser Hassan al-Qabbali, a 40-year-old originally from Saudi Arabia, is one of the thousands of people who were recognised as refugees in Greece who have travelled to Germany to re-apply for asylum. People who are granted protection are entitled to apply for a [travel document](#) that allows them to visit other EU countries.



Thodoris Nikolaou/TNH

On Greece's borders with Albania and North Macedonia, refugees seek to continue their trip up north, often jumping on trains or passing through the Balkan route by foot.

Al-Qabbali, who received his asylum decision in Greece in June, said his experience living in the refugee camp on the island of Kos for nearly two years while waiting for his claim to be processed convinced him to apply for the travel document and leave. "Everything is bad," he said of conditions in the camp on Kos. "There is no water, and the electricity was cut off most of the time; the food is worse than what pigs eat."

"The [asylum] process is long and tedious. Refugees are piled on top of each other... [and] the police treat them violently inside and outside the camp," he added. "My life, and the life of the refugees in Kos, was characterised by a lot of waiting, which added to the psychological pressure."

Most of the people al-Qabbali knew in Greece felt the same way. "Everyone was waiting to receive their Greek travel document so that they could leave," said al-Qabbali, who is now in Hanover, waiting for the outcome of his German asylum application.

"Germany is an orderly country," he said. "There is no chaos, and [the Germans] care a lot about living your day as a human being." But, he continued, "the future is still unknown".

“The life of refugees remains difficult,” al-Qabbali said. “There is no country in the world furnished with roses for refugees.”

Still on the islands

Back on the Greek islands, the conditions in the camps that drove people like al-Qabbali to leave the country are still dismal despite the reduction in overcrowding, [according](#) to aid groups.

On Lesbos, [3,000](#) people are still living in a temporary camp set up in the wake of the Moria fire. The camp is in an area prone to flooding and lacks many basic services, including electricity to keep people warm during the approaching winter months, according to a [press release](#) from the International Rescue Committee.

Despite authorities promoting the new EU-funded facilities as a fulfillment of promises made to build more humane camps, human rights groups have expressed concerns.

The facility that opened recently on Samos has air-conditioned dining areas, recreational spaces, and special housing for particularly vulnerable people. But it is also surrounded by barbed wire fences, watched over by police, and entry and exit is limited to daylight hours and controlled by fingerprint scanners and electric cards. Critics have [likened](#) it to a prison, and the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières has said it will only further “dehumanise and marginalise” people seeking protection.

Mohammed*, a 26-year-old from Togo, has been on Samos since November 2019. He fled Togo after a [violent crackdown](#) on anti-government protests in 2017, some of which he says he helped to organise. Most of his friends in Togo are now in prison, and he’s afraid that if he returns to the country he will be imprisoned too, or killed.

“I don’t have trust in the Greek government.”

Mohammed’s first asylum claim was rejected earlier this year, and he is waiting for the outcome of the appeals process, but there’s no clear timeline for how long that will take.

In the meantime, he found the old camp on the island, where he was living until recently, degrading. “How can human beings like you or me be sleeping in the camp? Even animals cannot live in that kind of condition,” he said.

But he also doesn’t want to go to the new facility. “I don’t have trust in the Greek government,” he said.

Mohammed is worried that Greek authorities may change their policy about allowing people to enter and exit the facility during the daytime, and could start locking asylum seekers inside. “I don’t have faith in them, and I am not going to the new prison camp,” he said.

At some point, he might not have a choice. He is currently living with NGO volunteers in a rented apartment in the main town on the island, but he’s not sure how much longer they plan on staying.

Mohammed is hoping his appeal will come through and he’ll be able to go to the mainland. “I have a big dream to achieve,” he said.

The pressing question is whether conditions will be any better if he is able to leave Samos, or will he – like so many others – be pushed to try to leave Greece altogether.

**Name shortened or changed due to asylum issues.*

With reporting support from Aymen Alkhawani. Edited by Eric Reidy.