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Greece: Unaccompanied Children at Risk

Arriving Alone in Island Camp, They Face Insecurity, Neglect



A boy stands next to a hole in the fence of the Moria camp following rainfall, on the island of Lesbos, Greece, November 22, 2019. © 2019 Elias Marcou/Reuters

(Athens) – Hundreds of unaccompanied children on the **Greek** island of Lesbos are exposed to inhuman and degrading living conditions, Human Rights Watch said today. Children, unable to secure a place in the overcrowded specialized accommodation for unaccompanied children, face unsanitary and insecure conditions sleeping rough, sometimes in the open, in other formal and informal parts of the camp on the island.

“Hundreds of lone children on Lesbos are left to fend for themselves, sleeping on mats and cardboard boxes, exposed to worsening and dangerous weather conditions,” said **Eva Cossé**, Greece researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The Greek authorities need to urgently make sure these children are safe and cared for.”

On a visit to Lesbos from October 15 to 23, 2019, Human Rights Watch interviewed 22 unaccompanied children living in the Moria “hotspot,” some as young as 14, who described having little or no access to care, protection, or specialized services. Due to overcrowding in the sections of the Moria camp reserved for unaccompanied children, most of the children interviewed were living either in the camp’s general areas, mixed in with the general population, or in the adjacent overspill site known as the Olive Grove, a rocky hillside where people set up their own tents for shelter.



“Everything is dangerous here: the cold, the place I sleep, the fights. I don’t feel safe,” said Rachid R., a 14-year-old unaccompanied Afghan boy who arrived in Moria at the end of August. “We are around 50 people sleeping in the big tent. It smells really bad, there are rats and sometimes they die inside the tent and it smells bad. There are so many.” Lesbos, Greece, October 2019 © 2019 Eva Cossé/Human Rights Watch

“Everything is dangerous here – the cold, the place I sleep, the fights. I don’t feel safe,” said Rachid R., an unaccompanied 14-year-old Afghan boy who arrived in Moria at the end of August. “We are around 50 people sleeping in the big tent. It smells really bad, there are rats, and sometimes they die inside the tent and it smells bad. There are so many.”

Most of the children interviewed reported experiencing **psychological distress**, including symptoms such as anxiety, depression, headaches, and insomnia.

When Human Rights Watch visited in mid-October, 1,061 unaccompanied children were registered in Moria. Of that number, 587 were registered as living in a large tent (a Rubb Hall) designed to temporarily accommodate all new arrivals until they go through the registration and identification procedure. Since early November, a minimum of 600 children have been registered as living there. Unaccompanied children sleep in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions that put their physical and mental health at risk.

Children who cannot find space in the Rubb Hall are living in the open areas in the camp or outside the camp, where they are exposed to frequent fights and other violence. Human Rights Watch interviewed and observed children sleeping on the ground without shelter, or sharing tents with adult strangers. Some had been living in those conditions for almost three months. Other children had to purchase their own tents. Twelve children interviewed said that Moria camp officials told them they could not have tents because they should be housed in the section for unaccompanied children, even though that section was too full to accommodate them.



A makeshift gym created by asylum seekers living in Moria is located in the Olive Grove, Lesbos, Greece, October 2019. © 2019 Eva Cosse/Human Rights Watch



On November 29, a government representative denied in a phone conversation with Human Rights Watch that any child is refused a tent or special protections. But an aid worker in the camp subsequently contacted confirmed that the authorities still “do not give tents to the [unaccompanied] minors,” adding that understaffing in the camp means that “children fall through the cracks.”



The situation on the islands has grown more acute due to a **spike in arrivals since July** leading to **extreme overcrowding in the hotspots**, compounded by the Greek authorities’ containment policy, which has blocked transfers to the mainland. As of November 30, an **estimated 1,746 unaccompanied children** were housed in the Reception and Identification Centers on the islands of Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Kos, and Leros. On November 20, the Greek authorities announced plans to **relocate 20,000 asylum seekers** to the mainland by early 2020 from 5 Greek islands currently hosting almost 40,000 asylum seekers and migrants, a positive move. However, the government also plans to turn the reception centers for identification, processing, and deportation, including Moria, into detention centers.

On November 24, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced a plan to protect unaccompanied children, “No Child Alone,” which included creating more shelters. In October, Citizen Protection Minister Michalis Chrisochoidis had sent a letter to all other European Union governments asking them to share responsibility by voluntarily relocating 2,500 unaccompanied children. On November 6, he told the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties that only one country had responded.

In keeping with the spirit of the No Child Alone plan, the authorities should urgently take steps to identify children living outside the dedicated sections in Moria and ensure that they have access to safe, humane accommodation where they can receive care, education, counseling, legal aid, guardianship, and other essential services, Human Rights Watch said.

EU states should share responsibility by relocating unaccompanied migrant children from Greece to their own countries and by facilitating family reunification.

“Unaccompanied children are among the most vulnerable people on the Greek islands, and they need Greece and other European countries to take care of them,” Cossé said. “The EU and its member states should demonstrate responsibility and care for kids who suffer there every day.”

For details about the law and accounts by unaccompanied children registered on Lesbos, please see below.



Greek and International Law



Under Greek law, registered unaccompanied children should be placed in safe accommodation, but there is a chronic shortage of shelter space. On the mainland, the authorities often **detain unaccompanied migrant children in police stations and immigration detention facilities**



pending placement in a shelter. On the Aegean islands, Reception and Identification Centers such as Moria – commonly known as “hotspots” – have separate sections to provide secure shelter for unaccompanied children, but they are not large enough to accommodate all unaccompanied



children waiting to be transferred to long-term accommodation.





Inside the large tent in Moria that authorities set up to temporarily accommodate all new arrivals until they go through the registration and identification procedure. Since early November, a minimum of 600 unaccompanied children are registered as living here. Lesbos, Greece, October 2019. © 2019 Eva Cosse/Human Rights Watch

The separate protected area where children are accommodated in Moria provides a safer space for short-term stays than holding children in jail cells, which is unacceptable, Human Rights Watch said. Unlike police jails cells on the mainland, the protected area in Moria allows children to move in and out freely and provides some activities organized by nongovernmental organizations. But leaving children to fend for themselves in the open camps is akin to leaving them on the streets.



On December 5, Human Rights Watch published a report documenting that **women and girls in Moria** face relentless insecurity. Unaccompanied girls are housed in a “safe zone” that holds both unaccompanied boys under 14 and girls under 18, though they should be housed in separate, secure sections to mitigate the risk for gender-based violence.





Two unaccompanied sisters, 16 and 17, sitting at a table outside Moria. Unaccompanied girls are housed in a “safe zone” that holds both unaccompanied boys under 14 and girls under 18, though they should be housed in separate, secure sections to mitigate the risk for gender-based violence. Lesbos, Greece, October 2019. © 2019 Eva Cosse/Human Rights Watch

Under Greek and international law, unaccompanied children are also entitled to special care and protection. Following a screening procedure, the authorities should identify unaccompanied children and refer them to appropriate support services and accommodation. However, a shortage of doctors, psychologists, and social workers to conduct vulnerability screenings in Moria has created a backlog. Unaccompanied children can wait months to be fully registered, in the meantime living in the open with unrelated adults and no arrangements for their care.

Delays in the registration process and the lack of representation and legal support for unaccompanied children in Moria undermine their ability to reunite with family members in other EU countries. A three-month deadline to submit a family reunification request is often not met because unaccompanied children are not identified during that period. Delays are compounded by the lack of legal support and the overstretched Asylum Service. EU countries should take into account the humanitarian emergency on the Greek islands when it comes to deadlines for submitting family reunification requests. For children who miss the deadline, the authorities should make use of the “discretionary clause” of the Dublin III Regulation.

The government’s No Child Alone plan includes a commitment to swiftly create new structures to provide long-term accommodation for 4,000 unaccompanied children. Under the plan, each new structure will provide housing, food, education, access to pharmaco-medical care, and psychological support for a small number of children. It will also provide the necessary legal services to unaccompanied children who have relatives in other European countries and who want to reunite with their families.

Accounts from Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Moria

All names have been changed to protect privacy and security.

Ali A., 15, and Reza R., 16, from Afghanistan, became friends soon after they arrived in Moria, about 2 months before Human Rights Watch interviewed them. Ali described his first days in Moria:

I came 10 days earlier than [Reza R.] did. When I arrived here, I spent one night in the ‘karantina’ [the Rubb Hall]. Then, they gave me a sleeping bag and said “Now you have to find a place to sleep.” Until now, I sleep with the sleeping bag, outside. They don’t give tents to the underage.

Reza R. added “We asked [those responsible for tent distribution in the camp] for some pallets and tents, but they said, ‘We can’t give them to you. You are underage.’ We tried to make a shelter by ourselves but they told us that they will call the police and destroy the place.”

Both boys were still sleeping on cardboard without shelter in the open area of Moria.



Jafar J., 16, from Afghanistan, photographed after he had been on Lesbos for 20 days. Before finding shelter in a large tent in the Moria camp, he slept outside for four days, and still does not have a proper bed: “They [authorities] never gave me a tent. I was sleeping outside. Totally outside. I don’t have a bed here, only a cardboard carton that I put on the floor and that’s where I sleep.” Lesbos, Greece, October 2019. © 2019 Eva Cosse/Human Rights Watch

Jafar J., 16, from Afghanistan, has been on Lesbos for 20 days. Before finding shelter in the Rubb Hall, he slept outside for four days, and still does not have a proper bed:

They never gave me a tent. I was sleeping outside. Totally outside. I don’t have a bed here [in the Rubb Hall], only a cardboard carton that I put on the floor and that’s where I sleep.... You cannot count how many people there are in total. At night, you can see that it’s full. There’s no space at a We can’t sleep.... It’s mixed with a lot of people: four or five families, some people with health issi

single men that drink a lot of alcohol, and unaccompanied minors.... There is no control who will come and sleep in there.... The most difficult is that there's no light in the tent at night because the lamps are broken. It's terrifying because you don't know who or what is moving inside the tent.

Hussein H., a 17-year-old Afghan boy sleeping in the Rubb Hall, said:

Conditions are really difficult ... they don't give tents to the underaged because they say they will transfer us to the section [for unaccompanied children]. But it takes months to be transferred to section.... I've been three times to Eurorelief [the aid agency tasked with tent distribution] to ask a tent. Not just one time. But they have told me, "We can't do anything."

Samir S., a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan, was living in a tent in the Olive Grove that he purchased with 3 friends, also unaccompanied children. He said that when he arrived on Lesbos six days earlier, the camp authorities told them that there was no space for minors and that they had to find a place to sleep:

They said "You are underage so we can't give you a tent. You have to wait, they will take you to the doctor, check if you are underage, and if you are, they are going to transfer you to the section [for unaccompanied children]." But we know this can take up to two to three months.... They gave me blanket, a used T-shirt, and this small mat and they told me to find a place to sleep.

Samir and his friends borrowed money from other Afghans in the camp to buy their tent.



Yunus Y., 14, from Afghanistan was living in the Olive Grove: "I asked for a tent, they didn't give me one. I asked for at least a sleeping bag, they didn't give me one either. They told me to find people who could accept me in their tent. I found two [unrelated] single men. They agreed and took me in their tent. Then they left to live somewhere else and gave me their tent." Lesbos, Greece, October 2019. © 2019 Eva Cosse/Human Rights Watch

Yunus Y., 14, from Afghanistan, was living in the Olive Grove, next to Samir S.'s tent:

I asked for a tent, they didn't give me one. I asked for at least a sleeping bag, they didn't give me either. They told me to find people who could accept me in their tent. I found two [unrelated] men. They agreed and took me in their tent. Then they left to live somewhere else and gave me the tent.

Saleh S., a 16-year-old boy from Somalia, said he had been sleeping outside on the ground since his arrival, 10 days before the interview:

I sleep on the street. I and some other guys my age. There are drunk people at night and we are very scared. We don't have a container or a tent. We just live outside, on the street, inside the camp. When we sleep on the ground, at night it's wet and cold. We have a small carpet like the one Muslims pray on that we sleep on. And I have something to cover myself but it's very thin, it's not enough.... I have been told that I am a minor and can't stay in a tent. I need to be in the place for minors.

Javet J., 15, from Afghanistan, described the symptoms of psychosocial distress he's experienced since he arrived: "I forget a lot of things. In the last few days I have headaches and I forget a lot. It's very bad here.... I spend most of my day inside the tent or in the line for food."

Ahmed A., 16, also from Afghanistan, said:

Everywhere you need to go, you have to wait in line. To take food, to go to the toilet, to go to the doctor. It's making you feel that you are losing hope. I am feeling lost. Only to see a doctor to tell you your age, you have to wait for two months. This is exhausting.



Makeshift tents in the Olive Grove, a rocky hillside outside Moria where people set up their own tents for shelter. Lesbos, Greece, October 2019 © 2019 Eva Cosse/Human Rights Watch

Habib H., 16, from Afghanistan, lives outside the official camp, in the Olive Grove, sleeping in a sleeping bag near a family he knows. He described the dangers in the camp:

There are no rules here in Moria. After 9 p.m. you cannot walk around because people will start drinking alcohol. If I have to go to the toilet, I will wake up the family I know and we usually go to four people together.

	\$50	\$100	
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