



His Excellency Mr. Alexis Tsipras
Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic
Prime Minister's Diplomatic Cabinet
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Athens, October 23, 2017

Dear Prime Minister Tsipras,

We, undersigned human rights and humanitarian non-governmental organisations, are writing to express our deep concern at the deteriorating conditions for thousands of women, men and children, seeking asylum and trapped on the Aegean islands as winter sets in.

We urge you to put an end to the ongoing “containment policy” of trapping asylum seekers on the islands if they arrived after the entry into force of the EU-Turkey Statement of March 18, 2016, and to immediately transfer asylum seekers to the mainland and meet their protection needs, including by providing them with adequate and dignified protection, accommodation and access to services.

We acknowledge the efforts of the Greek Government and the solidarity of the Greek people towards asylum seekers and migrants in the past years. Many of our organisations have repeatedly called on the European Union and its member states to demonstrate genuine collective action and share fairly the responsibility towards asylum seekers and migrants arriving in Greece since 2015 in a way that is humane and respects their human rights. However, the disappointing lack of real solidarity and commitment to responsibility sharing by many EU member states is no justification for the current state of asylum seekers on the Greek islands.

Since the EU-Turkey Statement came into effect, the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros have been transformed into places of indefinite confinement for asylum seekers. Thousands of women, men and children have been trapped on these islands in abysmal conditions and many lack access to adequate and timely asylum procedures and protection. Some who arrived on the islands in the early days of the EU-Turkey Statement have remained stuck there for 19 months.

The recent increase in arrivals, which are still comparatively quite low and should be manageable for Greece and the EU more broadly, include a considerable number of women and children, and have put further pressure on the already overcrowded hotspots. According



to recent government data, the situation is particularly critical in the hotspots on Samos and Lesbos, where a total of more than 8,300 people are living in facilities intended for just 3,000. We welcome the recent announcement that 2,000 asylum seekers will be moved from Samos and Lesbos to the mainland in the coming weeks as an emergency decongestion measure, and hope to see this commitment fulfilled as soon as possible; however, this is not sufficient to alleviate the current overcrowding of the facilities and does not sustainably address the systemic issues that have created this emergency situation. Only uplifting the geographical limitation imposed on the asylum seekers on the islands can provide a sustainable solution.

While the ongoing transition to full State management of the provision of services on the islands began in August, a harmonised, holistic response plan has yet to be released, reception conditions are deteriorating, and gaps in basic services, especially medical, are increasing.

On Lesbos, more than 5,400 people live in overcrowded tents and containers, with little access to proper shelter, food, water, sanitation, health care, or protection. Dozens of people, including very young children, are crammed into tents with only a canvas cloth separating one family from another. The living conditions are particularly harsh for pregnant women to endure, and place themselves and their babies' health at risk. Summer camping tents, designed to accommodate not more than two people, are now holding families of up to seven. Accessing water, sanitation and food is particularly difficult for the many people with physical disabilities—for example, people using wheelchairs simply cannot reach these basic services. Single women in the hotspots report harassment by some of the men. And some asylum seekers have gone through their asylum interview without having had the requisite vulnerability assessment critical for determining both the asylum pathway available to them and the care they may require to prevent further deterioration of their health. These conditions have a devastating impact on the long-term well-being of people trapped there.

A number of human rights and humanitarian non-governmental organisations, including Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) and Human Rights Watch, have documented the impact of these conditions on the mental health of asylum seekers and migrants – including incidents of self-injury, suicide attempts, anxiety, aggression, and depression. Professionals who have interacted with the asylum seekers note that in many cases, the psychological distress they experience has been factored and/or exacerbated by the policy of “containing” them on islands, which also impedes their access to adequate support and mental health care.

Implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement has been cited by EU and Greek officials as a justification for the containment policy. But forcing asylum seekers to remain in conditions that violate their rights and are harmful to their wellbeing, health and dignity cannot be justified. As we approach the third winter since large-scale arrivals on the islands began, and



the second winter since the entry into force of the EU-Turkey Statement, it is evident that the Greek authorities cannot meet the basic needs and protect the rights of asylum seekers while they remain on the islands.

Greece has a responsibility to protect the human rights of women, men and children arriving on the islands. That can only be achieved by ending the current containment policy and transferring asylum seekers to the mainland, so that they can be provided with adequate accommodation, services to meet their needs, and access to fair and efficient asylum procedures.

We thank you for your attention, and remain available for any further discussion with your excellency or a relevant government official on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

ActionAid

Advocates Abroad

Aitima

Amnesty International

Care

Danish Refugee Council

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

Greek Council for Refugees (The Greek Council for Refugees endorses the text, within the framework of its actions and scope)

Greek Forum of Refugees

Greek Helsinki Monitor

Hellenic League for Human Rights

Human Rights Watch

International Rescue Committee

Jesuit Refugee Service

Lesbos Legal Center

Norwegian Refugee Council

Oxfam

Praksis

Solidarity Now