

Bleak Times for Refugees on The Greek Island of Samos

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There have been a number of meetings in the past 2 weeks in response to the increased numbers of refugees – mainly from Syria but also from Afghanistan and Africa – coming to Samos. Sadly but not surprisingly these meetings have been mostly disappointing and are unlikely to lead to any positive action. For the refugees already here and those who will be coming over the summer months the prospects look very bleak. At the time of writing there are around 500 refugees in the Detention Centre including over 20 young children. Last week the number was over 700. This is in a centre which was built to accommodate 250 people. In August 2014 the numbers rose as high as 1,000. We know that this year the numbers will likely climb higher.

The camp, as we call the detention centre, was opened in 2007. The camp was built with funds from the EU. Its design and lay-out says much about its purpose and intent. As is clear in the photographs, the double barbed-wire fence speaks with clarity and eloquence. This is not intended to be a friendly place; a refuge, a haven, a place to rest and recover. It is a prison. It is managed by the police. It looks like Guantanamo Bay. Don't be taken in by the fact that it has a basket ball court. Nobody plays. Balls are not allowed in the camp. But the court does get used. This is where refugees sleep when all the huts are full. There are no activities for the refugees locked in.



For the refugees this is their first experience of Greece and of Europe.

The world wide refugee crisis embracing over 50 million people is not a catastrophe of nature. It is made by people. We can use any number of words to describe these people *whobenefit* and *profit* from this crisis. Probably the best word to describe them is criminal. Their criminal activities not only produce refugees. They manufacture poverty and fear on a global scale which stalks the lives of the majority of humanity. Their extra-ordinary wealth is drenched in the blood of the many. Their mantra of all for themselves and nothing for the rest drives the ruthless exploitation of the world's resources. It is what connects the

tragedies of the refugees to all the other dramas unfolding before us – the plundering of the forests and the seas, the degradation of work, insecure and low paid jobs, the explosion in prisons and mass surveillance, endless war and massive poverty which corrodes well being and shortens life. To see the issue of refugees as somehow an isolated and particular problem misses the point and leads to strategies that will ultimately fail.

The authorities on Samos responsible for the ‘care’ of the refugees on the island are not responsible for the wars and the cruel exploitation of resources and lands which drive people to leave their homes and often their families and friends. They find themselves in situations which are not of their making.

But sadly, these authorities – the coastguards, the port police, the police in general, the public prosecutor, the Mayor of Samos, are part of the problem and are not yet any part of a solution for the refugees coming to the island. They comply with EU and nation state policies which are nothing less than cruel and inhumane. They are active in making the journey to Samos more dangerous than it need be. Our sea here holds nameless and uncounted dead in part due to their activities. Never ever have we heard them advocate safe passage. They know their push backs and patrols will never succeed in stopping the flow of refugees coming to Samos. They know however brutal they make their camps and prisons that it will not discourage the refugees. But still they persist.

We must be relentless in criticising these authorities but it is not sufficient. We must also realise that these authorities are well down the chain when it comes to why the refugees come here in the first place and why these policies have been put in place. The camps, the patrol boats, the activities of Frontex which disfigure the Greek islands close to Turkey are all consequences of an EU strategy to keep the refugees at bay. It is the same logic which drives the externalisation of the European borders. London, Berlin and Paris and the other rich capitals of north Europe want the refugees to be managed at the periphery and further beyond if possible. So millions of Syrian refugees languish in massive tented camps in Turkey and Jordan.

Our focus on Samos and to a lesser extent Athens is because we live here and not because we believe it offers any special or unique opportunities in the struggle for a better and humane world. What is being played out here has been and is being determined by forces well beyond our control. But we dig where we stand. We try to give witness in such ‘far away’ and remote places to the cruelties and inhumanities which flow as sure as night follows day from a global system that favours the few. We hope by shining a light on places that power wants to hide to influence those that read our pieces also to consider their responsibilities and also to dig where they stand. The refugees who suffer, who die, who are robbed and humiliated need you; they desperately need your solidarity and your actions to change this bloody and completely unacceptable system.

So let’s get back to Samos. Last week the Athens based head of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Greece came to Samos to meet with the authorities here both to discuss the current overcrowding in the camp and the anticipated crisis as the numbers increase over the summer months. He wanted to know what preparations were being planned. From what we have learnt he went away disappointed. In terms of resources the island faces big difficulties. There is no money. This is self-evident. Samos like all of Greece is virtually bankrupt.

The police, largely through their union, have publicly proclaimed on a number of occasions that they simply don't have sufficient staff to manage the camp. Of course, there is no argument from the police that they are inappropriate people to be doing such work in the first place. The Syriza minister responsible for refugee policy, Tasia Christodoulou, only partially grasped this fundamental problem as is demonstrated in the government's initiative to retrain police officers for 'humanitarian work'. In any event it seems that this action is unlikely to have any impact for as she announced in a public meeting in Athens at the beginning of May only 20 police officers from the whole of Greece have volunteered for the programme. The reason for wanting more police in the camps is so that they can process the refugees faster and get them out of the camps. This is a deeply flawed approach which will inevitably mean that the refugees will be pushed out of the camps and on to the streets of Athens. But it is a policy which does attract considerable support simply because the camps are currently so obviously awful. It is our opinion that fast tracking the processing will soon become the main approach for handling the anticipated increases in the numbers of refugees coming to the islands. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that this will be a positive development for the refugees. The streets of Athens are not good places for refugees. As we discovered this week the police's general behaviour to the refugees in Athens has become less brutal since the Syriza victory. But the cheap hotels are now full with refugees who last year were paying 10 euros a night but are now being charged 25 euros. The refugees are being robbed. What is needed are places and camps which are managed and constructed on a completely different footing where refugees can be genuinely helped and can recover a little and be assisted on their onward journeys into Europe.

Given that Samos is in an area of active earthquakes, there are contingency plans for providing up to 400 places for victims of an earthquake. These contingency plans will not be used for the refugees. There is currently some discussion about using an empty military base near to Hora but the municipality is not happy about such a proposal believing that any additional facilities will make Samos an even more attractive destination for refugees, and that neighbouring islands would want to transfer their refugees to Samos. There is not a shred of evidence to support such assertions.

The Mayor and his colleagues are far more interested in preparing a bid to be the European Capital of Culture in 2021. (This is not a joke.) They simply do not want to think about the refugees in any positive fashion. They want them to disappear. And above all they want to keep the camp and its inmates away from the gaze of tourists. We have talked to many tourists this year and not one of them knew that Samos was one of the entry points into Europe for refugees. None knew about the deaths in the sea. None knew anything about the camp - this cancer which is just 2 kilometres from the centre of the island's capital. This is what the municipality wants and to a considerable degree has achieved for it is not only the tourists who know nothing but also many who live here. Even the students we met last week who 'want to do something about the refugees' knew nothing about the camp; none had been to look and visit; they seemed genuinely surprised to hear what we told them especially, as one said, 'I know this island and its people very well and I had no idea about this'.

The irony is that the municipality would have much to gain from embracing the refugees. The hill villages are slowly dying, more and more of the land is being abandoned, schools close for the lack of young children. This is true for much of Greece. Deaths are outnumbering births, people are leaving the country, and the population is ageing.

Without migrants from the Balkans and Albania over the past 20 years the population of the country would be falling faster than ever. Notwithstanding the crisis, which makes life extremely difficult and depresses the birth rate, it is blindingly obvious that Samos and Greece more generally could benefit greatly from such an influx of largely young people. But who in their right mind would want to stay here when their first encounters with the country are so bad. And on the other hand the minds of so many Greeks have been poisoned by state sponsored propaganda that has framed refugees as wholly negative – potential jihadists, carriers of disease, the dregs of alien societies that have nothing in common with the ‘timeless civilisation’ of Greece and so on. Our colleague was on the ferry that links Lesbos, Chios and Samos with Athens. There were many refugees on board when she came to Samos and all she heard from the crew members was that they had to keep them out of the lounge areas as they were dirty and diseased and made the toilets filthy. Hardly the basis for a popular demand to embrace refugees. Yet we have no doubt whatsoever that even a quick audit of the refugees would reveal a multiplicity of talent.

So the Samos municipality hopes and prays that the refugees will stop coming to these shores. They are living in a fool’s paradise. They are not interested in finding more positive and humane options which can and do exist here and involve little expense; no interest at all in mobilising the people of the island to help with clothes, shoes or food; no interest in all in providing social and educational activities for the refugees, and of trying even modest initiatives that would help the refugees come to terms with being in Europe. Instead they want to keep the refugees locked away and out of sight especially from the gaze of tourists and the people of Samos more generally. It has no interest at all in attempting to make Samos a place where humanity means something and to burn a beacon of justice and hope in a Europe that seems to get darker and crueller by the day.

How You Can Help

Write/phone/e mail the Chief of Police and the Mayor of Samos and;

Ask them what the police and the municipality is doing to help the refugees now.

Ask them why the camp remains locked and closed.

Ask them what plans they have in place to help the refugees who will be coming to Samos in ever greater numbers this summer.

At least let them know that they can’t keep the camp and the refugees a secret, hidden away.

Demand that they press for safe passage for refugees coming to Samos from Turkey. Ferries not smugglers.

Tell them that you don’t want to swim in a sea with dead bodies or relax on beaches littered with life jackets.

Press your own governments to change EU policy and to stop funding Frontex the agency which has responsibility for patrolling the borders. This money, should be spent on care and not control.

If you come to any of the border islands of Greece demand that your airlines collect money for the refugees and make provision for you to leave clothes and shoes to be passed on to

the refugees.

Go and visit the camps. You won't get in but at least witness what is going on.

If you travel on the ferries, especially those which travel back to Pireaus from the border islands talk to the refugees who are almost certainly travelling with you.

Be imaginative. Create your own demands!

Contact Details:

Chief of Police, 129 Them Sofouli St, Samos 83100; e mail adsamou@hellenicpolice.gr

Mayor, Michalis Angelopoulos, Town Hall, Samos Town, 83100; e mail mangel@on.gr

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