

Deepening Cruelties and Delusions on the Greek Frontier Islands

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“Seventy-five years after the liberation of this place by the Red Army, we should all make this sacred commitment to never forget what happened here. And let us never forget that hatred, discrimination, intolerance have no place in our democracy” – Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, 27 Jan 2020, at Auschwitz 75th Liberation event, Ekathimerini 27/1/20

Just what does your sacred commitment to never forget “that hatred, discrimination, intolerance have no place in our democracy” mean? Your government has recently removed access to public health care to all new refugee arrivals; you are in the process of building new **closed** camps on Samos, Lesbos and Chios; you are planning to deport 10,000 people this year; you have done nothing to improve the physical conditions in the Hot Spots; you continue to hold refugees including children in police cells that have been continually and extensively denounced as inhumane; and you are sanctioning a significant militarisation of the seas around the border islands in conjunction with the EU. Did none of this come to mind as you wandered around Auschwitz? Surely your plans for the closed camps with their deliberate bleak design behind the razor wire fences in remote and barren locations which will also contain an even more secure detention area for holding those for deportation shadowed your mind, albeit briefly.

Hatred, discrimination and intolerance all feature centrally in the management of refugees struggling to find a future for themselves in Europe. This indeed is the central message of all the major refugee support groups in Greece which have universally condemned this government’s International Protection Act which came into force in January 2020. This legislation marks a significant hardening of the procedures and practices governing asylum seekers making it to Greece. As far as the refugees are concerned there is **nothing** positive in the legislation. “This new law expands grounds to detain asylum seekers, increases bureaucratic hurdles to make appeals, and removes previous protections for vulnerable individuals who arrive to the Greek islands. Specifically, all individuals that arrive from Turkey are now prohibited from leaving the islands until their applications are processed, unless geographic restrictions are lifted at the discretion of the authorities. These changes ultimately will lead to an increased population of asylum seekers trapped in Lesbos, [and all the frontier islands including Samos] and an increasing number of people trapped here who have had their asylum claims rejected and face deportation to Turkey” ([Legal Centre Lesbos, 22 Jan 2020](#))

Many of the new procedures increase the need for asylum seekers to have adequate legal support but in the almost total absence of state funded lawyers on the frontier islands there

is no chance of this happening. “Under the new law, asylum seekers in the islands’ hot spots have only five days to appeal a first negative decision, within which time they also have to find a lawyer and submit the precise grounds and reasons for this appeal in a memorandum in Greek. Given that there is only one state-appointed lawyer working in Lesbos [and Samos is no different) and that there are not sufficient NGO lawyers available to represent people for appeals, having a memorandum in Greek within five days, will be practically impossible for the vast majority of people seeking asylum” *No Rights Zone*, p7). Making it even worse are the actual realities of the hot spots where hundreds of desperate people try to access the Asylum Office every day and fail. The Lesbos legal centre gave one example this month of a family with 2 young children who tried for five days to get through the door of the Asylum Office in Moira Camp and only succeeded through a chance meeting with a lawyer. Under the new law failure to turn up for an appointment promises dire consequences including the presumption that their non attendance indicates that they are no longer seeking to continue with their asylum application. An application, which for many refugees has now been significantly further undermined by the Act’s identification of 12 ‘safe’ countries. As all the critics have pointed out the safe country designation will inevitably lead to many asylum rejections as the system now assumes that people from these countries are not deemed to be in need of international protection. In a September 2019 Press Release the Ministry of Citizen Protection argued that ‘the refugee issue –of Syrians and Iraqis –has shifted to a migration issue of Afghans and sub-Saharan’, implying that nationals from these countries cannot have valid asylum claims in an attempt to justify laws that violate international standards and safeguards. “ This assumption is inappropriate since irrespective of the country of origin, international law requires an independent assessment of each individual claim. It is also not supported by the facts: Afghanistan is still a top ‘refugee producing country’ according to UNHCR, with a recognition rate in Greece of over 70 percent during the first ten months of 2019” (*No Rights Zone* Dec 2019,p.7).

Neither is it re-assuring that the new Act now allows police and army personnel to conduct these first interviews. And to cap that further, the Government has made it a priority to achieve 10,000 deportations to Turkey in 2020. As the Greek Council for Refugees noted in its condemnation of the legislation:

“the Greek State, instead of planning a policy to solve the real problems of the Greek asylum and reception system chooses to handle the existing crisis with regulations that reduce fundamental guarantees of the asylum and reception system and are unilaterally directed towards the increase of returns.” (See [this](#))

In 2019, 74% of the refugees on the frontier islands were assessed as vulnerable. The majority of refugees now are young families. In addition, there are thousands of unaccompanied minors. So many of the refugees here are young; children, infants and teens, the lucky ones being with their parents. Even though the new legislation has been in force only for a few weeks it is clear from what our friends in the camp and elsewhere are telling us that it is frightening them and making an intolerable situation worse. They see and experience all too clearly the shift towards increased harshness and abandonment. They tell us that in the past few weeks there has been a marked increase in stop and searches, especially by plains clothes police. If your papers are not in order you are arrested and detained. They also tell us that more and more people now are getting rejections. Many of the African refugees are now more frightened that they are going to be deported. Last night I was on the phone with a Somalian friend now in Thessaloniki who told me that he had just

heard from Samos where a fellow Somalian who was initially rejected in December 2017 and then appealed, has just been told that his appeal was unsuccessful and that he will be deported. Cruel. There are no other words.

Back on Samos

In the meantime the Greek frontier islands have seen a spate of mobilisations over the past two weeks protesting especially the government's decision to build new, large, closed hot spots on Chios, Samos and Lesbos and turning the open camps currently on Leros and Kos into closed camps. The protests have been driven largely by the Mayors of Lesbos, Chios and Samos town, all of whom are New Democracy, as is the government. This has been reflected in the attention and time currently accorded the mayors by the Athens government with relevant ministers now regularly coming to the islands in an attempt to appease the mayors. But all the mayors are getting is soothing words and expressions of concern at the 'undoubted strains' facing the islanders. In so many ways it is little more than theatre for the mayors must know that EU/Turkey pact of 2016 is sacrosanct and cannot be threatened. It is this agreement which determines the necessity for the camps on the frontier islands. Turkey will only accept deportations from the islands and not the mainland. Consequently there is no chance to deliver on the mayors' demands that no new closed camps be built and that all refugees be removed leaving only a much smaller operation focused on rapidly transiting new refugee arrivals to the mainland.

Instead, what the government is promising for Samos and the other frontier islands is tighter control over the refugees through the closed camps alongside deepening the militarisation of the borders in an attempt to stop refugee arrivals. In the case of Samos this means the closure of the camp in Samos town and the building and opening of a bigger but closed camp in the middle of nowhere. Big money is being spent and committed and in the past three weeks the Samos media has reported on the order of 15 high speed patrol boats and the tender for a floating plastic barrier of around 2.5 kms length to be trialled in the sea around Lesbos with a view to similar installations to follow in Chios and Samos. According to Nikos Panagiatopoulos, minister of defence, "We will see what deterrent effect this [fence] will have when it is put into practice. But it will be a natural obstacle. If it works, as it did in Evros, I expect it will have some effect....We are trying to find solutions to somehow reduce the flow (*Samos Voice* 30 Jan 2020). This latest announcement has been widely derided as delusional as "even a child knows you can't build a fence out in the sea!". For many on the island it is all too reminiscent of the Zeppelin which was launched with such a fanfare barely a year ago. This too was to be a significant weapon in reducing arrivals. It didn't. It has gone. But unlike its arrival it departed in silence.

Much of what is now being implemented with the new legislation and being proposed with respect to the use of extensive detention, deportations without due process and the stopping of refugee arrivals is of dubious legality with respect to international law and conventions concerning refugees and asylum seekers. There will be resistance especially in the law courts as so many fundamental principles concerning rights to international protection are under threat. Implementation will almost certainly have to be modified and held back. Combined with the proven incompetence of the Greek state authorities and agencies and sheer lack of capacity to implement the proposals promises chaos with refugees bearing the consequences. For example, "the latest report of the European Court of Auditors highlighted that 'accelerated procedures' implemented in Greece have become lengthier and the time between the registration of the asylum seeker and the first asylum

decision increased from 236 days in 2016 (7-8 months) to 363 days (nearly a full year) in 2018 “(No Rights Zone, 2019, p.7) In Lesvos earlier this month the introduction of the policy to make refugees renew their papers every 2 weeks as against 4 weeks had to be abandoned simply because they were overwhelmed.

Not surprisingly then there is much scepticism on Samos as to what might happen. Even though the new camp is being built now many refugees and activists here don't think it will open. Despite notices in the camp posted this past Monday informing that all refugees would be moved, including families and minors in rental accommodation by April 2020, the scepticism remains. The day to day evidence of the relentless neglect of the authorities is overwhelming. And, like the islanders, they no longer believe the promises of government action because they too experience the sheer lack of both numbers and ability across the spectrum from lawyers to social workers; from asylum officers to doctors and translators to make any of the proposals work. It is a long list. But then as one young woman from Kuwait told me the other day, “What can I expect from a government which can't even provide us with a toilet?”

(It is 7am on Saturday 1st Feb 2020 and I can see from my room a cargo vessel heading towards Samos harbour full of accommodation containers for the new closed camp. As much as the scepticism over the opening of a new camp is understandable, it would be mistaken not to see that at this point in time there is a much greater sense of urgency and determination in the actions of the Greek government to shift towards even more repressive refugee policies and practices. But will it last?)

Sadly intelligence has not been a notable characteristic of the main public refugee debates on Samos. At this moment we have ranting mayors most notably exemplified by the mayor of Vathi who takes every opportunity to be televised telling the Greek people how awful life is on Samos for the people because of the refugees. It seems that their culture, language and identity are in dire danger. Sadly too many nod their heads even though there is not the slightest danger of this happening but on an island that has and continues to suffer from a collapsed economy and its associated emaciated and inadequate public services, the refugees offer a convenient scapegoat.



Samos mayor George Stantzios ranting at refugees in the central square of Samos town, December

A simple walk through Samos town made vibrant with the presence of young people and children is all that is needed to cut through the mayor's distortions. It is a walk that makes you think about how a small town like Vathi has come to live alongside up to 7,000 refugees when until recently it was rare ever to see a black or Arab person in the town. It is a walk where you see many smiles. It is a walk where you don't feel afraid or fearful. Just yesterday I was with a small crowd of local people who were watching 2 young boys, one from the Congo and the other from Syria playing marbles outside the refugee shop, *Open Doors*. Marbles was once a popular children's game here it seems as much of the chatter was about how good it was to see the game being played again. Lots of laughter and just one more example from our daily lives here which expose the endless distortions of the mayor and his vociferous supporters.



Samos Town, December 2019

It is not fear but a deep shame that shadows this town. It is an island which saw many flee the Nazi invasion and who ended up living for years in refugee camps in Palestine and Egypt. It is an experience not yet forgotten in many families here. Many islanders understand that what is going on here is both wrong and cruel. And for us, the camp is the tumour of Samos and what makes this beautiful island a dark place. This is what needs to change.

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