

Europe's Shameful Treatment of Refugees: Fire in Greece's Samos Island Refugee Camp

Highlights Appalling Conditions

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Last month a fire roared through the refugee camp on the Greek island of Samos, a few miles from the coast of Turkey. The immediate cause of the fire is unclear, but there were clashes between Afghan and Syrian refugees in the nearby town of Vathy earlier in the evening, which some witnesses said continued in the camp. There were chaotic scenes during the fire, and almost the entire camp was evacuated, according to Doctors Without Borders (MSF) Field Coordinator Eirini Papanastasiou.

"The shelters are totally burnt down," she told [Newsweek](#). "They're mainly made out of tents and plywood and plastic sheeting and all of this has burned down."

The camp, originally constructed as an army base meant to house 650 individuals, now hosts close to 6,000 refugees. Roughly 3,000 reside in the camp itself, while the remainder scramble to find a spot to pitch their makeshift tents on an adjacent hillside, which is known as the Jungle. Because of the extreme overcrowding, the shelters are built close to each other, and it does not take much for a fire to spread. While no serious injuries were reported, the blaze did destroy the shelters of [700](#) people residing in the Jungle.

Samos is one of a handful of Greek islands where migrants arrive seeking refuge in Europe, fleeing war, hunger, torture and poverty. At the height of the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, over a million asylum seekers used this route to make their way to Germany and other countries. In March of 2016, however, the European Union and Turkey, in an attempt to stem the flow of refugees, signed an agreement that would allow the EU to transfer Syrian refugees on the Greek islands back to Turkey. The deal has been criticized on many points, including the fact that it is based on the premise that Turkey is a safe country for refugees. One of the provisions of the deal was that refugees would be detained on the Greek islands until their asylum cases were heard, after which those who were refused asylum would be deported. However, the Greek asylum service was overwhelmed by the number of asylum applicants, and refugees have been staying on the islands—sometimes for two or three years—waiting to have their future decided. As a consequence, the Aegean islands in practice have become detention centers.

The conditions on Samos—as well as the other islands—are deplorable.

"C'est l'enfer," said Jean, a forty-year-old refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo told me a week after he arrived on Samos with his six-year-old daughter. It is hell.

Aref Kassem, his wife Fariba and three of their children, refugees from Afghanistan, are lucky because they live in the camp itself, rather than the Jungle. They stay in a container with fifteen other families. Their own space is two meters by two meters, separated from those of the others by curtains. The container has four toilets and one shower, used not only by the residents of the container, but by the refugees living in the Jungle, where there are no toilet facilities at all.

"It is not a place for human beings," said Aref.

The food and water is a particular issue of contention for many of the refugees. Everyone gets 1.5 liters of water every day, which is not nearly sufficient for the hot days of summer. The food is generally of poor quality, and much of it is expired.

"We get potatoes, rice, beans and sometimes chicken for lunch. But no vegetables. I have been here one year and have never seen a vegetable," said Farzaad, a twenty-two-year-old from Afghanistan.

To obtain breakfast, which consists of a small pastry and a juice box, residents must rise at 2 am and wait in line for six hours. This process is repeated for lunch and dinner. It is so arduous that many of the residents buy their own food in the town.

Violence is a consequence of the extreme overcrowding and the deplorable conditions. The fighting on the evening of the fire resulted in stab wounds. Clashes are especially common in the food line.

"There is always fighting in the line. Every day. Every breakfast. Every lunch. Every dinner. Women against women. I was in front of you. I was here first," said Farzaad. "Every day. Sometimes with knives. I saw one guy stab another."

The camp and the Jungle are both filthy, and there are snakes, scorpions, rats and bedbugs.

"Some of the refugees bring stray cats to the camp in the hopes they will chase away the rats," said Abdul, a refugee from Yemen. "But the rats are so big that the cats are afraid of them."

The access to medical care in the camp is almost non-existent, as there is only one doctor for the 6,000 refugees. Residents often spend the night on the ground in front of the doctor's office, hoping to be seen the next day. More often than not, they are turned away.

"The worst thing about being in the camp is the waiting," said Farzaad. "All you do is wait. For food, for the doctor, for your interview."

Farzaad is speaking about an interview with the Greek asylum office, where the fate of the refugees is decided. A survey recently administered by NGO's on the island revealed that over 40% of the respondents have their first interview with the asylum office in 2021 or later.

The situation has become untenable for those affected directly by the fire. Sandrine

Vollebregt, a doctor working for a medical NGO on Samos, described the situation.

“When you walk around town, you see many women and children lying on the street. The playgrounds are full of people,” she said. “Many people lost their medication. We saw babies that couldn’t stop crying after the fire. Some mothers couldn’t produce breast milk anymore.”

The Greek government has attempted to alleviate the situation by transferring [700](#) asylum seekers from Samos to the mainland, with plans to move another 300. While this will help in the immediate aftermath of the fire, a real solution will not be found until Europe changes its policies vis-à-vis the refugees and discontinues its practice of forcing those fleeing the horrors of war and torture to suffer in these camps in abominable conditions.

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