

# Greece's Samos Island Refugees: A Reluctant Update on Enduring Cruelties

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*Over the past few months I have been asked by various groups and individuals to provide an update on the refugee situation on Samos.*

Until now I have not responded to these requests for the simple reason I have nothing new to add to earlier blog articles. For as far as the refugees here are concerned it is still the same old shit.

Of course there have been changes over time the most notable being the EU/Turkey pact of 2016. Before the pact, refugees on the whole were held for months, sometimes just a few days, before being allowed to move off the islands. Now it can be years. But whether it has been just for a few days or 3 years the refugees have **never** been welcomed or embraced by the authorities. This is perpetually demonstrated by the penal like design and construction of the camp, its appalling accommodation, its unspeakable food, lack of basic medical facilities, wholly inadequate toilets and showers, the refusal to open empty schools and hotels to offer decent spaces for people to live,.....the list goes on<sup>1</sup>. Its been like this for so long now that it's almost normalised. And there is no end in sight. All of the latest proposals from the recently elected conservative (New Democracy) government promise more repression and more detention. It is always hard to predict in Greece what will actually be implemented but on Samos at least the Government is now building a new camp located on the site of an old slaughter house in the middle of nowhere which will not only be closed, but will also contain a prison for holding those identified for deportation.

So there is simply nothing to update on this basic reality except to say that the main responsible agencies have become masters of consistency in the reproduction of shit. The seemingly endless publication of critical reports which highlight many of these issues on Samos and elsewhere have not made one iota of difference. Water off a duck's back.

In the meantime the refugees continue to arrive. 600 last week which makes a mockery of the government's periodic 'decongestion' efforts of periodically shipping ferry loads of refugees to the mainland. Turkey has long recognised that the massive numbers of refugees living in Turkey (3 million plus) and its awareness that the EU is desperate that they should stay there and not move onto Europe gives them a powerful weapon. Currently there is little doubt that the recent increase in refugees arriving on the frontier islands is an attempt by the Turkish government to force the EU to stop harassing Turkey over its oil and gas explorations around Cyprus. To that end, Turkey is now making life very difficult for refugees especially those living in Istanbul with forced deportations especially back to Syria and Afghanistan. This is the context of the current increase in numbers seeking to escape from Turkey. Refugees are little more than a pawn in this conflict used mercilessly to extract

concessions from one side or the other.

On Samos, as with the other frontier islands, it has now become widely seen as a 'bad thing' for refugees to be detained for so long on the islands. But on Samos at least the reality is more paradoxical. Today increasing numbers of refugees on Samos would prefer to stay here rather than be moved to the mainland. Many know that camps such as Nea Kavala in northern Greece – an isolated former airfield- are far worse than Samos. It is hard to forget David's reaction when he arrived from Samos to the Nea Kavala camp. Total shock! He told me that he along with the 300 refugees who were moved there from Samos just walked around in a daze at what they found. Many wanted to come back to Samos where at least they had easy access to the town and its facilities and some much needed services provided by volunteer groups and NGOs. But most importantly, because of their extended stay on Samos this is where they have established networks of friends and in the 'jungle' surrounding the Hotspot, they have built shelters and homes some of which are breathtaking in their comfort. No one in their right mind would dispute that the camp and the surrounding jungle is a hell hole. But it is also much more. It is also a place of homes and of people (including thousands of children) making a life. To ignore this as many do leads to a fundamental mistake in failing to acknowledge the extent of refugee well-being falls on their shoulders and their humanity. This week Younis a young Palestinian from Gaza was telling me how much he enjoyed visiting his friends in the jungle and spending the evening laughing and eating sitting around an open fire. In parts of the jungle the refugees are developing clusters of around 10 shelters with each cluster having its own shower and toilet!



Part of the Jungle

Last week over 600 new refugees arrived on Samos. Included in that number was Juno from the Congo, traveling alone. Once finished with the initial processing he and the others in his boat were taken to the camp. They were told to find somewhere to sleep in the jungle. He was given no tent, no blanket and no money for at least 2 weeks. All he was told was where the Africans have their tents. This is now the common experience for new arrivals, especially single men and women. Families with children usually fare better. If it wasn't for the solidarity and self-organisation of the refugees Juno would have found himself in danger.

Within days of his arrival he like hundreds before him were hauling wood and polythene into the jungle where at a small cost he had his shelter made. There is a thriving shelter building business now in the camp!

So there we have it. Despite the shit and their abandonment the great majority of refugees irrespective of origin are engaged in that elemental human activity of making a home drawing on whatever materials they can afford or scrounge.

But the skills, the talents, the ingenuity and the extraordinary resilience of the refugees as a whole is not applauded and not even noticed in most cases. Although in an Open TV broadcast in late November 2019, the reporter Zizi Mousios observed “ what is happening in Samos is something unprecedented, we started in Leros, we went to Kos , here [on Samos] we have a favela” (*My Samos Blog*, 29<sup>th</sup> November 2019).

Since the autumn we have had a new mayor (Giorgos Stantzios) in Samos town. He is making a lot of noise about the camp and refugees. He wants the lot out. “There is no way that Samos, which doesn’t have a mosque, will accept a Muslim village” (*The Samos Uprising, Ekathimareni* Nov 28<sup>th</sup> 2019). Amongst his latest announcements he has expressed concern about the high number of ‘unauthorised’ structures that the refugees have built in the jungle, and the creation of ‘neighbourhoods’ there. The fact these shelters allow the refugees to survive is utterly ignored. That we are not burying bodies every week is almost entirely due to the refugees. Amidst the anger, the tensions and conflicts which are ever present realities of refugee life on Samos there is also a deep resource of solidarity and care which in the end is far more significant.

In stark contrast to the authorities, the refugees have been and are busy still preparing for the heavy winter rains which started a few days ago. I can’t speak of the other frontier islands but Samos has monsoon like weather, especially in January and February, but also earlier like now when it can rain torrential for days at a time. To my knowledge, never in the past 13 years have the authorities done anything significant to help the refugees get through this season. Adherence to the deterrent doctrine which so self-evidently fails to halt the movement of refugees, is as strong as ever. So nothing, nothing at all is or should be done to improve conditions and services for refugees as to do so would attract even more. And flowing from the same deterrence doctrine resources which should and could be directed towards refugee welfare are flowing with ever greater rapidity into border hardening, surveillance, and militarisation:

*“The European military and security industry through their successful lobbying has succeeded in framing migration as a security threat rather than a humanitarian challenge. This has turned on a seemingly limitless tap of public funding for militarising our borders yet prevented the policies and investments we need to respond humanely to refugees and to tackle the root causes of forced migration.”*

*Available data shows at least €900 million has been spent on land walls and fences, €676.4 million on maritime operations (2006 to 2017) and €999.4m on its virtual walls (2000-2019). In addition, companies have benefited from the €1.7 billion budget of the European Commission’s External Borders Fund (2007-2013) and the €2.76 billion Internal Security Fund – Borders (2014-2020). In the next EU budget cycle (2021-2027), the European Commission has earmarked €8.02 billion to its Integrated Border Management Fund (2021-2027) and €11.27 billion to its coastguard agency Frontex. ([TNI](#), November 2019)*

Here on Samos, the much heralded Zeppelin airship has come and gone (no explanation given for its departure) but now we are more likely to see patrol boats and warships from our beaches than fishing boats; we now have to negotiate our departures through intensively policed ports with their accompanying plain clothes officers sidling up to you in the queue to board the ferry asking for your papers, as well as the armoured ninja turtle police crawling around and on top of the lorries seeking out those refugees trying to escape from Samos. This impacts on all of our lives. We can see the growth in police numbers in Samos town as well as their modern paramilitary vehicles on our streets and the coach loads of riot police sitting day in and day out on the roads around the camp.



Welcome to Samos!

For the refugees these changes have made their journeys from Turkey to Samos more difficult and hazardous. It is common place now to hear that refugees have made 5, 6, 7 or more attempts to cross. According to the Aegean Boat Report between November 11<sup>th</sup> and November 17<sup>th</sup> 2019 a “total of 164 boats started their trip towards the Greek Islands, carrying a total of 6097 people. However, 91 boats were stopped by TCG/police, and 2444 people arrived on the Greek Islands. So far this year 2849 boats have been stopped by The Turkish Coast Guard and Police.” (See [this](#)). But for the moment at least the patrol boats operating out of Samos are still rescuing refugees who have made it into Greek waters and bringing them to the island. Ten years ago this was not the case and the Samos coastguards were notorious for their push-backs.

This is what I witness on Samos this little Greek island that finds itself on the frontier of Europe. This tiny spot on the map has and continues to be a gateway into Europe for tens of thousands of refugees. It is for the great majority their first taste of Europe. And what a taste they get! Over the years it takes to become a ‘legal’ human being again, they are treated like SHIT. If they were horses, or dogs, those responsible for their cruel treatment would be hauled in front of the courts.

But tiny as it is, Samos along with all the frontier islands must not be ignored for these are some of the places where a terrifying politics of cruelty has taken root and is flourishing, virtually unopposed. Sometimes the press will fleetingly remind a wider world of Samos if there is something sensational to report, usually deaths at sea. But as with mushrooms the policies, practices and doctrines that are being played out on Samos and elsewhere along the frontier flourish better in darkness. This is what it feels like.

And it is dismaying and disheartening that such elemental cruelties are allowed to continue year on year. The consequences, many yet waiting to be revealed for both the refugees as well as the people of Europe are certain to be dire. It would seem that others are now recognising this. Dr Christos Christou, International President, Médecins Sans Frontières has just published an open letter to 'European Leaders'. Returning from the Greek frontier islands, he wrote:

"[The situation is comparable](#) with what we see after natural disasters or in war zones in other parts of the world. It is outrageous to see these conditions in Europe – a supposedly safe continent – and to know that they are the result of **deliberate political choices**. (my emphasis)

Rather than acknowledging the human cost of your approach, you continue to call for a more forceful implementation of the EU Turkey deal. You even consider more brutal measures, like the Greek government's recently announced plans to convert the hotspots into mass detention centres, and to accelerate deportations.

Stop this madness.....

As MSF, we can't accept this blatant dehumanisation. No matter what assistance we provide to our patients, afterwards we have to send them back to the conditions which are making them ill, conditions that you have deliberately created. ....

As a medical doctor representing a humanitarian organisation, I am outraged to see how you have justified and normalised this suffering, as if it were an acceptable price to pay to keep as many people as possible out of Europe.

No political reasoning can justify measures that deliberately and consciously inflict harm – and [we have repeatedly warned you](#) these policies do. Stop ignoring it, stop pretending that they don't."(November 27 2019, see [this](#))

The entire approach of the authorities responsible both in Greece and the EU has led to the creation of a mega business with powerful vested interests which has much to gain and is unlikely to be shifted. It is naive to think otherwise. The growing grass root mobilisations around the world against global annihilation are fueled by the understanding that the greed and avarice of the powerful will drive us to extinction. And it is the very same values that frame the cruelties unleashed on the refugees. Any chance of a future for humanity rests not in the citadels of existing power. This is where MSF and other NGOs get it wrong, time and again, for none of their critical reports or statements over the years have had any impact on power and their policies. Change will only come from the 'bottom' and only when we realise more widely that virtually all the major challenges facing humanity – environmental destruction, wars, massive inequalities and poverty and the flows of people forced to move as a consequence are deeply inter-connected. They draw their power from the same well.

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*This article was originally published on [Samos Chronicles](#).*

#### Note

1. Missing from the list is any mention of the Greek Orthodox Church which has a massive presence and influence on Samos and Greece as a whole. Sadly, at least with respect to refugees it has demonstrated no compassion and no humanity. For the global Christian world it must be deeply shameful to be associated with such a cruel institution

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