



# Time Witnesses from Greece

A report by  
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on behalf of  
A Drop in the Ocean  
(2019)



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Coverphoto: Knut Bry

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## PREFACE

The winter of 2018/2019 is the fourth consecutive winter A Drop in the Ocean assists aid workers in helping refugees in Greece. I wish we could report on better living conditions for people who have fled from war and terror. I wish we could tell you that the efficiency of the asylum process has improved. I also wish we could report that European governments and international aid organisations have stepped up and taken on a bigger responsibility. Unfortunately, none of this is the case. This report demonstrates that things are going in the wrong direction. Living conditions for refugees in Greece show that Europe's approach of dealing with refugees is still far from acceptable.

A Drop in the Ocean's voluntary fieldworkers have been in the field to help refugees in Greece every day since September 2015. 6000 voluntary fieldworkers from 60 countries have with their own eyes witnessed how the refugee crisis has been handled. The feedback we receive is unambiguous - this is not a European refugee crisis; this is Europe's solidarity crisis.

With great willpower and good governance, Europe is well equipped to find solutions to ensure children's safety and ensure their education. A joint European effort can prevent people from freezing to death in ice cold tents during the winter. It can prevent people from drowning in the sea, in their chaise for freedom. Instead, Europe chooses to pay millions to prevent these people from entering our countries.

During my time in the field I have met mothers who told me they would have preferred to stay with their children in Aleppo and lose their lives in the ruins of their house, rather than to slowly dying behind barbed wire in a European refugee camp. I have also met medical students and engineers who are refugees, asking "why doesn't Europe want me? All I want is to contribute to the society I live in".

With this report, we want to shed light on the current situation in the Greek refugee camps, through feedback from our own fieldworkers. These are not fieldworkers that sits hidden behind desks doing administrative work. They are 100% present in the refugee camps, with the people who live there, and are therefore best equipped to share the reality of the refugee camps in an honest and real way.

Oslo, September 2019  
*Trude Jacobsen*  
Secretary General  
A Drop in the Ocean.



## Introduction

A Drop in the Ocean is the only Norwegian humanitarian aid organisation that assists inside the refugee camps in Greece. Four years into a humanitarian crisis where conditions are deteriorating rather than improving, we would like to contribute with an updated and systematic description of the conditions in the camp.

We at A Drop in the Ocean are under the impression that the general public in Norway lacks knowledge of the severity of the situation in the Greek refugee camps, and that the attention of the crisis has dwindled. Therefore, we want to highlight the severity of the situation, which remains unresolved, as the living conditions for refugees in Greece have declined rapidly in the span of four years.

With this report, we want to describe the situation on the southern Schengen border in Europe and highlight how current European migration policies impact people. The situation in Greece challenges the human rights standards in several ways. This report covers international human rights standards - and EU asylum affairs regulations as well as the norms and standards set by these. All themes covered in the report are well documented by various stakeholders and in addition to our own field experiences, we lean on reports from humanitarian organisations, UN human rights bodies and the Council of Europe.

In this report, we have chosen to review the norms and standards that follow international human rights standards and the EUs regulations regarding asylum affairs. The themes in this report have been well-documented by other actors. In addition to share our experiences from the field, we have chosen to use reports from humanitarian organisations, human rights bodies of the UN, and the Council of Europe.



Photo: Knut Bry



## Methods

One of the overriding goals of this report has been to compile and convey empirically based knowledge gathered through four years of conducting humanitarian aid in Greece. Since September 2015, more than 6000 people from more than 60 countries have contributed to A Drop in the Ocean's work in Greek refugee camp. Contributions from volunteers and staff at A Drop in the Ocean is a vital part of the report.

The data was collected through in-depth interviews and structured questionnaires with open boxes to respond (cf. Appendix). We deemed it necessary to narrow the potential response group by applying two criteria; the interviewees had to be Norwegian, and they had to be volunteering in Greece after the implementation of the EU/Turkey deal in 2016. We used two methods to reach out to potential informants. We reached out to potential informants in two ways. Firstly, we emailed people we through our work knew had volunteered. Secondly, we posted on the FB "Dråpen i Havet" ('A Drop in the Ocean'), encouraging Norwegian volunteers to get in touch with us. Those who responded received an email containing information about, and our affiliation with, the project. Prior to conducting the interviews, the informants agreed to A Drop in the Oceans privacy policy: <https://www.drapenihavet.no/en/privacy/>.

The analysed material from 30 respondents is reflected through the text, and is represented in the main section of this report. Women and children make up 60 percent of the refugees who reside in Greece, therefore we decided to mention these groups separately. We had hoped to be able to interview refugees as well as volunteers but had to abandon this ambition; partly because many refugees have experienced being threatened that anyone who speaks with the media will have a negative outcome on their asylum application, and partly because an inquiry from us might cause additional pain and suffering for people who are already in a difficult situation.



Photo: A Drop in the Ocean





## Main section

An important part of the international order is the principle of state sovereignty, which entails that states have a relatively wide scope of actions they can take regarding immigration. The scope is limited by the Refugee Convention and human rights standards, as people who seek asylum and protection have fundamental human rights regardless of their residency status. Greece has struggled to manage a high number of refugees for years. The reception facilities and the system for asylum management were criticised for its shortcomings long before 2015. Greece was one of the countries that was strongly affected by the international financial crisis in 2008. During the autumn months of 2015, the country became one of the main recipients of the streams of refugees arriving in Europe.

In March 2016 EU made a deal with Turkey, which resulted in Greece not being able to return or forward refugees before they had processed their asylum application. Additionally, many of the state borders further north in Europe were shut, and several countries have introduced border controls and mandatory visa requirements. Greece has gone from being a transit country to becoming a country of long-term residence for thousands of refugees. During the winter of 2019, almost 75.000 refugees were in Greece. Despite the reduction in arrivals, there are still refugees coming to Greece.



Photo: Katrin Helen Siurek



## Asylum procedure

Article 14 in the UN Declaration on Human Rights determines that everybody has the right to flee to another country and seek protection there, if they are persecuted or in danger of being persecuted. The Refugee Convention's Article 33 states that one has the right to protection from being returned to a country where one risks being persecuted (non-refoulement). To fulfil the right to asylum, it is a precondition that one has access to a genuine, proper, and judicial asylum procedure.

The EU's Council Directive on minimum standards on procedures in Member States for granting and withdrawing refugee status sets the standards for asylum procedures. Article 6 regards States' obligations to guarantee access to an asylum procedure. Among important regulations is the right to have your asylum application registered, get necessary information regarding the process, and the right to legal support from a solicitor in case of rejection of the asylum application. Several reports consider regard the asylum procedures in Greece to be confusing and the process is unpredictable and in constant change. One of the main challenges is the lack of information and access to legal support.

OXFAM writes in their report that it can be challenging to even register an asylum application, and the proceedings take a long time. OXFAM states that several people have waited up to two years for a decision on their application:<sup>1</sup>

“Unaccompanied children, pregnant women, and people with physical and mental health conditions have to wait over 10 months before they can even meet with an asylum officer to determine what might happen to them, and whether they have any chance of seeing their families again.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the main challenges is the lack of registration and identification of vulnerable refugees. The EU-Turkey deal entails that refugees who arrive in the Eagan Islands<sup>3</sup> must stay there until their asylum application has been processed, unless they are registered as especially vulnerable. The failure to identify people results in them not getting the necessary papers allowing them to be transferred to the mainland. These conditions have been criticised by the European Commissioner for Human Rights:

«The Commissioner notes with concern that the vulnerability assessment procedure (...) is reportedly excessively lengthy and often fails.”<sup>4</sup>

A group of human rights solicitors in the European Centre for Constitutional and Human rights<sup>5</sup> conclude that the asylum procedures in Greece are characterised by “[...] a lack of essential procedural safeguards protecting their fundamental rights and the rule of law.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/world/europe/greece-lesbos-moria-refugees.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/world/europe/greece-lesbos-moria-refugees.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

<sup>3</sup> Chios, Rhodes, Lesbos, Kos, Leros og Samos

<sup>4</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-greece-from-25-to-29-june-2018-by-dunja-mijatov/16808ea5bd>

<sup>5</sup> ECCHR er en internasjonal organisasjon med menneskerettighetsjurister som arbeider med rettsikkerhetssituasjonen til flyktninger

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Fallbeschreibungen/ECCHR\\_Case\\_Report\\_Hotspots\\_Greece\\_EASO\\_March\\_2018.pdf](https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Fallbeschreibungen/ECCHR_Case_Report_Hotspots_Greece_EASO_March_2018.pdf)



## The volunteers' recounts: Asylum procedure

Our 30 informants are largely in agreement about the application process. They perceive the refugees' experience of the asylum procedure as difficult and complicated. They experienced a lack of access to relevant information to give the refugees, and Greek authorities who rarely were present in the camps. The absence of a translator was also a big challenge. In the eyes of the informants, translating services were mainly provided by volunteers or refugees who were multi-lingual. When the refugees managed to seek asylum, their initial asylum interview was scheduled as far as 4 years ahead. The information from the volunteers reflects that this left the refugees feeling frustrated, and the consequences could be lethal. Two informants recount that they witnessed a suicide attempt and a suicide. A man tried to take his own life by jumping down from a tree several times. The suicide attempt happened in broad daylight, in front of children and other refugees. Another man committed suicide by setting himself on fire. Both incidents occurred shortly after they received rejection on their asylum application.

## Asylum reception centres

Unpredictable and lengthy asylum processes, combined with borders that are shut down northwards in Europe, result in long-term accommodation for the refugees who arrive in the refugee camps/reception centres in Greece. This section of the report will focus on the factual surroundings of life in a refugee camp, and link these to relevant human rights and the EU's council directive. Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) states people's right to a satisfactory standard of living, hereby adequate food, clothing, and accommodation. The council directive sets mandatory minimum standards for member states to secure material elements, including accommodation, food, clothing, access to healthcare, access to education and possibility for employment, which secures an adequate standard of living and protects the residents' physical and mental health.

Major deficiencies in terms of the quality and capacity of what provisions the refugees have access to are documented. There is evidence reporting great deficiencies regarding the quality and capacity of what provisions the refugees have access to. Several reports state that the facilities of the reception centres are not in line with fundamental humanitarian standards. In August 2019, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that the situation for refugees is nearing a "boiling point".<sup>7</sup>

## Nutrition – food and drinking water

The UN Committee responsible for monitoring the ICESCR's state that the right to safe food and clean drinking water are fundamental human rights.<sup>8</sup> The right to food entails freedom from hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition, as well as the right to access food that is sufficiently nutritious. The right to water includes access to safe drinking water to maintain personal hygiene, for washing clothes, and cooking. Several reports point out that public supplies of food and water are insufficient. Refugees are often stuck in long queues to access food when it is distributed. In several cases, the food that is distributed is inadequate, stale, or destroyed.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR2556642017ENGLISH.PDF> [http://www.nchr.gr/images/English\\_Site/PROSFY-GE/GNCHR\\_Report\\_Asylum\\_system\\_final.pdf](http://www.nchr.gr/images/English_Site/PROSFY-GE/GNCHR_Report_Asylum_system_final.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4538838c11.pdf>



In a joint letter to the European Commission, 12 NGOs emphasize the lack of access to water:

*"People receive only a 1.5L bottle of water per day whereas the minimum amount according to WHO recommendations is 2L per day. Sometimes, there is not enough bottled water for everyone. On some weekends, there is no running water at all for more than 2000 persons."*<sup>9</sup>

## The volunteers' recounts: Nutrition – food and drinking water

In the camps where the government had not organised food distributions, the residents were handed cash cards to purchase food. An informant writes that the process to get access to these cards could take up to 6 months, meaning that the refugees were without any money during this period, unless they had their own means.

In the camps on the islands who had food distributions, several of A Drop in the Ocean's informants share that the food situation was extremely difficult and uncertain. One informant explained that there were long queues every morning, just to get a cup of tea. The food lacked nutrition and several people experienced food-poisoning. There were no incentives or measures taken to accommodate those who were unable to queue. Our volunteers share stories of refugees spending up to 6 hours daily waiting in line to get food. The children got a breakfast consisting of merely juice and a croissant, or maybe just an orange. A volunteer said that she witnessed children eat leaves because they were so hungry. Another volunteer witnessed that there was not enough food for everyone in line, so someone who waited 2 hours for food had to return empty handed.

The lack of food also affected pregnant women. The food lines were characterised by pushing and unrest, and were generally considered an unsafe place for children to be. A volunteer recounts that a woman showed him all the bruises she had gotten whilst queuing. A Drop in the Ocean's volunteers write that there were issues with little to no access to clean water, and an informant says that hot water was regarded as a luxury.

## Hygiene and sanitary conditions

The right to satisfactory sanitary conditions is recognised as a human right, in line with the ICESCR. States party to the covenant are obliged to secure access to sanitary facilities that are safe, hygienic, provides privacy, and ensures dignity. Additionally, satisfactory sanitary conditions entail proper maintenance of waste and wastewater.<sup>10</sup> The sanitary conditions are poor in many reception centres throughout Greece. There are not enough toilets and shower facilities, and those that are available are often out of order. Reportedly, queues to access bathroom/sanitary facilities and showers are also long, as there are also shortages with the existing offer, as faulty toilets and other sanitary conditions.

The humanitarian organisation Solidarity Now writes: *"amongst other problems, many facilities lack working toilets; several facilities are not equipped for people with specific vulnerabilities; and many facilities lack running water."*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.refucomm.com/includes/pdf/human-rights/open-letter\\_chios\\_european-commission\\_august-2018.pdf](http://www.refucomm.com/includes/pdf/human-rights/open-letter_chios_european-commission_august-2018.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-24\\_E.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-24_E.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.solidaritynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EU-Petition-by-SolidarityNow\\_eng.pdf](http://www.solidaritynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EU-Petition-by-SolidarityNow_eng.pdf)



Waste and rubbish are not sufficiently handled. Reports show evidence from camps where sanitary facilities have broken down and sewage seeps between the tents, attracting mice and rats. The local authorities demanded that Moria camp needed to shut down in the fall of 2018, precarious conditions can create a high risk of infectious disease and epidemic outbreaks.<sup>12</sup>

### The volunteers' recounts: Hygiene and sanitary conditions

One of the volunteers who was a field worker in a refugee camp on the mainland explained that the water often froze in the camp during the winter. The lack of access to water made it difficult to carry out daily tasks and caused diseases among the refugees. Our informants' reports on hygiene and sanitary conditions on the Greek islands tell stories of critical conditions; not enough toilets, showers with cold water only and lack of access to washing facilities.

One informant writes: *"the hygiene is lacking, and you could see a lot of filthy people. Mothers use single-use wipes to keep their kids and themselves somewhat clean"*. Pregnant women and new-borns lived in these challenging conditions. The informants share that many people could not afford diapers. Therefore, they had not changed their baby's diaper for several days.

Two other field workers describe the situation like this: *"all the toilets were covered in filth and were defect, so people would defecate at random places outside of the camp. You'd step in feces and waste. These are perfect conditions for bacteria and diseases. The lack of washing facilities was a huge problem. They threw away their unbelievably filthy clothes. Big piles of filthy clothes were everywhere. This could potentially be a pollutant. Rubbish was floating all over the place"*.

### Accommodation and housing

The right to adequate housing is linked to an adequate standard of living, in accordance with Article 13 of the ICESCR.<sup>13</sup> The EU's directive regarding reception facilities includes States' duty to ensure adequate accommodation, as one of the material obligations. Most refugee camps are characterised by being overcrowded. Refugees are offered accommodation in iso-boxes or tents with no without heating, where women often must share tents with other families or unknown men. The tents are only suitable for summer temperatures and during the cold Greek winters, these tents are covered in snow and ice.<sup>14</sup>

Not all refugees are offered accommodation, due to constant overcrowding in the camps on the mainland combined with a lack of capacity to provide housing to everyone. Therefore, many refugees have to improvise to create «housing» outside of the camps, either in tents or directly on the ground. In urban areas on the mainland, many people live on the street or in occupied houses that has been abandoned.

### The volunteers' recounts: accommodation and housing

Most of the informants describe how the refugees struggle to cope with the cold weather, and the difficulty of the situation, which has led to diseases and difficulties sleeping. It is

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/greeces-moria-refugee-camp-plagued-desperate-conditions-despite-threat-1162740>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.refworld.org/docid/47a7079a1.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/world/europe/greece-lesbos-moria-refugees.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>



also challenging to maintain sanitary conditions, as dishes and laundry must be done outside, regardless of the season. The informants who were voluntary field workers on mainland Greece shared that the refugees lived in iso-boxes or tents. The iso-boxes were often divided between several families, with only carpets dividing them, and 7-8 people would share 4 mattresses. Another issue was that the power was highly unreliable.

Many volunteers highlighted that it was undignified to live in these types of accommodation for a long period of time. It was difficult for refugees who arrived on the mainland after being transferred from the islands, as Greek authorities visited the camps infrequently. This entailed that the refugees had to wait for long periods of time to be assigned accommodation.

A volunteer writes: *"everyone who lived in the camps stayed in iso-boxes, meaning they all had a roof over their head. During the week, two families arrived in the camp. They had to spend the first couple of nights outside, on the ground, as no one was there to assign them to an iso-box. There was available accommodation, just no one there to assign it to them"*.

Most of the informants shared stories of considerably more challenging housing situations on the islands, where most of the refugees were placed in what an informant refers to as *"ice cold tents"*. One informant described how water would seep into the tents when it was raining and how people would get sick as a result of the cold weather. The sanitary facilities resembled a shed, where the power went out all the time and there were frequent power cuts. One informant said that several people chose to move out of the camp to live in abandoned factories and properties where they had no without access to water or toilets. Volunteers share that many people also lived under the stars, only covered by tarpaulin, and several thousand people lived in tents outside the camps. These people had neither sleeping bags nor blankets. They slept on cardboard and were frequently visited by snakes and rats inside their tents. One volunteer said several refugees got bitten by snakes.

### Physical and mental health

Article 12 of the ICESCR affirm that states must undertake measures to ensure the highest achievable physical and mental health of all the residents in the country. In practice, this involves implementing measures to reduce fetus- and infant mortality, prevent, treat, and control diseases and ensure medical assistance and medical care in case of illnesses. The EU Council directive also demands that the states receiving asylum seekers are obligated to ensure physical and mental health services to asylum seekers. This include emergency services and fundamental healthcare in case of illnesses and severe mental illness. The state is obligated to ensure medical assistance and assist residents who have special needs, including mental health care if needed.<sup>15</sup>

Commonly, refugees have accumulated health challenges as a result of war and incidents that occurred during their escape. It is also well-documented that the asylum process and reception facilities in Greece in itself possesses a health risk, both physically and mentally. For example, contagious diseases and epidemics are prevalent in the camps due to poor sanitary conditions.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <https://issuu.com/folkehjelp/docs/rapportfrahellas>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/greeces-moria-refugee-camp-plagued-desperate-conditions-despite-threat-1162740> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/moria-refugee-camp-closure-greece-lesbos-deadline-waste-dangerous-public-health-a8531746.html>





The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants writes about the access to medical assistance in a report from 2017:

*“Access to a medical doctor and medical staff is insufficient, particularly for vulnerable groups in need of highly specialised medical assistance. The Special Rapporteur observed a lack of secondary health care: people with diabetes or chronic diseases find it difficult to access appropriate medication. Specialized services required for mental health care or for torture victims are insufficient in most of the places of accommodation. Accessibility of drugs and medical examinations is challenging, as the public health system is overwhelmed. In addition, there are barriers to effective access to health care, when cultural sensitivities are not taken into account or because of a lack of interpreters”.*

The coordinator for Doctors of the World, an NGO working in Greece, states that one in three refugees they assist have medical issues that requires special healthcare services. Consequently, treatable conditions worsen, and infectious diseases spread.<sup>17</sup>

HRW states that refugees with disabilities and/or chronic diseases go unidentified, making it very challenging for them to receive necessary health care.<sup>18</sup> The large gaps and deficiencies in the Greek asylum system as well as the living conditions in the camps inflicts trauma and severe psychological stress on the refugees. Medical aid organisations are united in reporting that there has been a clear increase in serious mental health issues among refugees.

An increase in cases of self-harm and attempted suicides has been registered,<sup>19</sup> and survey conducted by the NGO Refugee Rights Data Project in 2017, show that one in three refugees who were interviewed had witnessed someone take their own life.<sup>20</sup> Neither the reception facilities nor the public healthcare services in Greece have the capacity to handle the increasing need for mental healthcare services.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) writes the following about the situation: *“as the scale and severity of people’s mental health condition worsen, there is little capacity to respond to these needs, itself contributing to a deterioration of people’s health... Patients on the islands can wait three to six months for appointments with the psychiatrist and in August 2017, the hospital on Lesbos stopped taking new appointments for the psychiatrist all together. On Samos, severe patients that constitute a risk to others or themselves are kept in the police station’s jail, again without appropriate access to healthcare, and without staff technically equipped to respond to their needs.”*<sup>21</sup>

### The volunteers’ recounts: physical and mental health

The informants agree that there was a lot of physical illnesses among the refugees. Several of them had «never-ending colds» and a volunteer writes that there were many cases of head lice and onychomycosis (a fungal infection of the nail) among the children. The viruses went around in circles, as people lived so close to each other. A volunteer was infected and was ill for three weeks after they return home. The informants stated that they saw many people that were clearly affected mentally by the situation. One informant who had experience from

17 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/greece/2016-07-28/refugees-and-greeces-health-crisis>

18 <https://waha-international.org/human-rights-watch-greece-refugees-with-disabilities-overlooked-underserved/>

19 <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/one-year-eu-turkey-deal-challenging-eus-alternative-facts>

20 <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/i/EI/OAI/flyktninger-paa-chios-er-vitner-til-selvmord>

21 [https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/2017\\_10\\_mental\\_health\\_greece\\_report\\_final\\_low.pdf](https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/2017_10_mental_health_greece_report_final_low.pdf)



working in health care stated that he saw people with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The informant, who has travelled to Greece several times, says that on a general note, he experienced a greater indifference among the refugees now compared to previous years. He considers this to be a defence mechanism. Several of the refugees spoke to the Red Cross about mental issues. Many stated that they felt stuck in a hopeless situation.

The volunteers said that some refugees were struggling with severe mental disorders that were not treated: *“this resulted in self-harm in several cases. We witnessed a lot of self-harm. Empty looks everywhere. Many people were depressed”.*

One informant shares that the most difficult part of volunteering for her was having to witness the deteriorating mental state of many refugees. She writes: *“I saw several people with cuts as a result of self-harm. Two friends of mine found a person on the side of the road who had cut themselves severely and needed medical assistance”.* One informant believes that there is a high number of unrecorded suicides.

Another volunteer highlights the fact that the mental state of refugees who have lived in the refugee camps on the islands is probably ruined forever and refers to how living in constant fear can break even the strongest people. A volunteer shares stories of how he drove sick refugees to the emergency room, run by MSF, and made several trips back and forth each day.

### Lack of security and hazardous conditions

Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) establishes that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and personal safety. Article 11 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD) establishes that persons with disabilities are entitled to protection and safety in hazardous conditions, hereby armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies, and natural disasters. Article 19 of the children’s convention (CRC) emphasises children’s right to be protected against violence. The council directive from the EU demands through article 17 that the states are obligated to ensure adequate material standards that protect residents’ physical and mental health. The states are also obligated to implement measures to prevent assaults and gender-based violence. Several reports describe a growing frustration, discontent and conflict among residents of Greek refugee camps.

Solidarity Now lists several reasons for this growing dissatisfaction: *“there is a rising frustration and discontent among camp residents, primarily due to overcrowding, restrictions on movement, poor living conditions, the slow processing of asylum applications, preferential treatment of certain nationalities over others, and prevailing feelings of uncertainty about the future.”*<sup>22</sup>

The UN Special Rapporteur on migrants paints a similar picture of the living conditions in Greece: *“Serious overcrowding in reception and identification centres and official and unofficial camps on the mainland, substandard living conditions, and a lack of adequate food, health care and information have led to anxiety, depression, confusion and frustration among the migrant population both on the mainland and on the islands. Hunger strikes, violent confrontations and threats of self-immolation occur across the country.”*<sup>23</sup>

22 [http://www.solidaritynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EU-Petition-by-SolidarityNow\\_eng.pdf](http://www.solidaritynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EU-Petition-by-SolidarityNow_eng.pdf)

23 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1709841.pdf>



There is recurring evidence that the refugee camps are considered unsafe, and the lack of safety is a great concern. The safety measures that have been implemented are insufficient to protect the residents. The special rapporteur writes: *«Insecurity is another problem. Although there are police patrols, these remain insufficient, particularly at night, and don't cover extended areas adjacent to the RICs, where people stay in tents without any security presence. In addition to the harrowing accommodation conditions, the overall security provided within accommodation facilities is gravely insufficient and becoming increasingly dangerous and unsafe.»*<sup>24</sup>

These conditions have lasted for a long period of time; Belgium withdrew their nationals from the EU-led aid work in the autumn of 2016 due to poor security conditions.<sup>25</sup> Accidents are another threat to camp residents' lives and safety. Lack of heating often results in deadly fires as residents try to heat up tents that are not insulated.<sup>26</sup>

### The volunteers' recounts: lack of security and hazardous conditions

One informant highlighted that they probably had not witnessed the worst incidents in the camps, as A Drop in the Ocean's volunteers do not have access to the camp after the activities are done for the day. Several informants describe the difference between day and night. Where the days are usually relatively quiet, arguments, acts of violence, and fights occur during the at night. The refugees do not let their children go outside in the evenings, as they consider it to be unsafe. The informants who volunteered on the mainland state that there was little or no control over who had access to the camp. One volunteer had the impression that the Greek authorities had given up sending guards to the camp in the evenings and during the at night. Trespassers could therefore enter the premises, and there were rumours of human trafficking in the camp.

Another volunteer states that the absence of control from public authorities caused led to vulnerable situations: "since the authorities are rarely present in the camp, some residents took control over the camp, unofficially, and started collecting money from the residents. If they could not pay, they were kicked out of their caravan". One informant, who volunteered on the islands, writes about an incident where several hundred Kurds escaped from the camp due to continuous riots. Many of them were homeless for a period before they were placed in another camp on the island.

### Racism and acts of violence

Freedom from racial discrimination is an acknowledged human right. Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) establishes the right to be protected from hate speech while article 5 establishes the right to personal safety and the state's obligation to protect against acts of violence or aggravated assault.

Greece is a country with right-wing parties and extremist groups that have proclaimed an anti-refugee agenda. These groups in the Greek society constitute an additional threat against the refugees.

24 [http://www.unhcr.org/5a7d67c4b?utm\\_source=PR\\_COMMS&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=UNHCR%20Communication%20Service&utm\\_campaign=HQ\\_EN\\_BriefingNotes\\_171027](http://www.unhcr.org/5a7d67c4b?utm_source=PR_COMMS&utm_medium=email&utm_content=UNHCR%20Communication%20Service&utm_campaign=HQ_EN_BriefingNotes_171027)

25 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/concerns-grow-over-the-security-of-eu-personnel-at-greek-hotspots/>

26 <http://www.solidaritynow.org/en/joint-statement-many-refugees-must-die-safety-guaranteed-greece/>



Photo: Stephen Dover

The Greek NGO Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) highlights incidents of racial remarks or acts of violence in their annual report from 2017. The incidents described by RVRN include an episode where asylum seekers reported having been attacked by motorcyclists with sharp objects, as well as an incident detailing attacks on people who work for refugees' rights.

27

The EU-Turkey deal has caused a bottleneck of refugees unable to leave the islands, combined with a continuous stream of new arrivals. This has led to increased tension between refugees and the Greek nationals, and increases in xenophobia and racial hate speech are documented. RVRN writes:<sup>28</sup> *“the Network underlines the link between the rise in xenophobic trends and racist behaviour and the overcrowding of refugees over a long period of time on the islands”*. The network reports of an increase in registered racial remarks and acts of violence against refugees.

### The volunteers' recounts: Racism and acts of violence

One of A Drop in the Ocean's informants describes open displays of racism and xenophobia in the camp she worked in. Some informants stated that right-wing groups threatened aid workers, and one informant shares that there were demonstrations against the refugees, and people threw firebombs into the refugee camp. One volunteer recounted an incident where a group of people gathered outside the camp to throw rocks and bottles at the refugees.

Many of the people affected were women and children.

27 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-racism/racist-violence-creeping-up-in-greece-report-finds-idUSKBN1H41VF>

28 [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Report\\_2017eng.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Report_2017eng.pdf)





## Focus on Women

Female refugees face greater challenges and are often more vulnerable than men. Women have specific needs regarding sexual and reproductive health. Article 12 of the Convention on Ending All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) demands that signatory states ensure customised services regarding pregnancies, childbirth, and the postpartum period. Women must be offered free services where applicable, as well as enough nutrition when pregnant or breastfeeding.<sup>29</sup>

It is documented that the provisions for reproductive health among refugees in Greece are insufficient. The non-governmental organisation Hellenic Action for Human Rights writes that there is no regular healthcare provisions for women, and they highlight this in a report where they provide evidence of miscarriages as a direct result.<sup>30</sup>

Bashira Outreach Centre, targeted specifically towards women, states in an interview that women who have given birth are not followed up: “Women who give birth to babies in the local hospital are sent back to the camp within three days of childbirth, she says. “There’s a high possibility of catching an infection. You cannot have babies living in these tents. The dirt, the smell, the heat, the snakes, the spiders.”<sup>31</sup>

In situations of conflict and war and whilst on the run there is an increase in sexual violence against women. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) writes: “Displacement, uprootedness, the loss of community structures, the need to exchange sex for material goods or protection all lead to distinct forms of violence, particularly sexual violence against women”.

Both CEDAW and the EU council directive establish the receiving states’ duty to implement effective measures to protect women against sexual violence. The CEDAW Committee has developed specific recommendations regarding female refugees<sup>32</sup> and recommends that states:

- Secure better reception of women and their children who are displaced, to ensure their security, safety, and necessary rights regarding their health, hereby enclosed bathrooms and sleeping areas for women and men, in both short-term and long-term accommodations.
- Secure women’s access to adequate protection and support against gender-based violence at the reception centres, and make sure that the employees have the necessary training.

It is documented that the Greek refugee camps fall short in securing women, and the measures implemented do not provide effective protection. One issue is the physical space. Solidarity Now writes: “Toilets are not always located in a separated area for women or properly lit at night. This poses a serious safety issue resulting in women and children being sexually assaulted and being too afraid to utilize facilities during night hours”.

29 [https://www.reproductiverights.org/sites/crr.civicactions.net/files/documents/ga\\_bp\\_conflictcrisis\\_2017\\_07\\_25.pdf](https://www.reproductiverights.org/sites/crr.civicactions.net/files/documents/ga_bp_conflictcrisis_2017_07_25.pdf)

30 <http://hellenicaction.blogspot.com/2016/10/hric-europe-summit-report-greece.html>

31 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/violence-and-disease-in-overcrowded-greek-camp-for-migrants-1.3631271>

32 <https://www.refworld.org/docid/54620fb54.html>



Amnesty International interviewed several female refugees who resided in refugee camps in Athens and on the islands and produced the report “I want to decide about my future. Uprooted women in Greece speak out”. Several women share stories about either witnessing or being victims of domestic violence.<sup>33</sup>

OXFAM describes the situation in these words: «Although data on incidents of Gender Based Violence (GBV) is not systematically collected, service providers and refugee and migrant community members alike report that women and girls experience various forms of GBV in the sites, including domestic violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, forced prostitution, survival sex, early marriage, and trafficking.”<sup>34</sup>

## The volunteers’ recounts: focus on women

Several informants share stories of women being sexually assaulted whilst using the sanitary facilities. They report that several women stated they rarely dared to take a shower. It is unsafe for women when it is dark outside, and many women and children do not go outside during the evenings and nights, out of fear of harassment and assault. An informant writes that many women were treated violently by their husbands and other men and were living in a state of constant fear. With regards to reproductive health, a volunteer shares that women who gave birth were unable to shower until 1-2 weeks later. Pregnant women who gave birth in hospital were sent home shortly after. Some of them had to get back to the camp they lived in on foot.

## Focus on Children

Children’s right to education is established in article 28 of the CRC. The council directive also established guidelines for the receiving state to provide education for minors on the same terms as citizens of that state. Refugees’ access to education must not be postponed for more than three months. Children and young refugees in Greece have often lost access to education due to war and conflict and will often have an uncertain residency status for a long time. The long wait highlights the importance of educational programs.

It is documented that many children and young refugees do not get access to education. The UN Special Rapporteur on Migrants writes in their report from Greece: “At the time of the Special Rapporteur’s visit, migrant and refugee children did not have access to schools, resulting in long-term gaps in their education, as the majority of children had been out of school for far longer than their journey to Europe.”<sup>35</sup>

The lack of schooling is highlighted in a report from Human Rights Watch, who writes that less than 15 percent of 3000 refugee children on the Greek islands were registered in public school records in 2017/18.<sup>36</sup>

The extent of the children’s education is limited to the free education they receive from

33 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR2590712018ENGLISH.PDF>

34 <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/summary-assessment-findings-and-recommendations-situation-refugee-and-migrant-women>

35 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1709841.pdf>

36 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/18/greece-asylum-seeking-children-deprived-school>



voluntary efforts made from aid organisations.<sup>37</sup>Article 27 of the CRC states that children are entitled to an adequate standard of living. This entails a right to fundamental living conditions that are vital to secure the child’s development. Children and minors who reside in refugee camps are particularly vulnerable and are affected more negatively than adults by having to live in unstable and uncertain environments over longer periods of time.

The NGO Lighthouse Relief describes the children’s situation: “As service providers in Lighthouse Relief’s Child Friendly Space in Ritsona camp, we regularly encounter behavior tied to trauma, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation, likely linked to the loss of any sort of stable home environment.”<sup>38</sup>The organisation writes that they observe children as young as nine years old express thoughts of committing self-harm.

### The volunteers’ recounts: focus on children

Several informants highlight the children’s lack of access to education, especially on the islands. One of the volunteers who assisted in a refugee camp on the mainland says that it took a long time from the children was registered until they got access to education. Some people chose to not sign their children up for learning activities, as they were afraid this would make their asylum application more difficult in other European countries. Another volunteer writes: “the information regarding learning activities was provided by a translator, but the information about the information meeting inside the camp was poor. Several people were not informed about the meeting.”

Regarding the children’s general living conditions, several volunteers write about children affected by having depressed parents who were burnt out and unable to see and meet their children’s needs. They depict parents who are exhausted, and children aged 2-3 who wandered around alone in the refugee camps. The informants witnessed young children without clothes, who were obviously hungry, who wandered around in sandals midwinter. The volunteers also share stories about women in despair, who had young children and had fallen pregnant again. One informant witnessed children who were obviously lacking sanitary routines who had fallen ill: “several children had a bad body odor, dirty hair, ingrown nails or nails that were broken, as well as damaged teeth. I met a lot of children who smelled of urine and feces. I also noticed that a lot of the children had different skin diseases with wounds in their faces, on their arms, and in their ears.”

The informants state that the situation clearly has a negative effect on the children’s mental health, and many reports of apathetic children who had stopped playing. They describe the children as scared, and one informant says that the children were terrified of stray dogs who had attacked people. Mothers said it was breaking their hearts that they could not help their children. One informant said that a woman asked him to bring her child back to Norway with him.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/18/greece-asylum-seeking-children-deprived-school>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-who-defends-the-rights-of-refugee-children-on-the-fringes-of-europe-91581>



## A message to the Norwegian Government from the informants

In the survey that we developed, we asked the volunteers to give a message to the Norwegian Government regarding the situation in Greece. The experience the informants gained after volunteering in Greek refugee camps made them question the Norwegian government’s efforts to improve the situation. They question why Norway contributes financially to support Moria, the worst refugee camp in Europe. The informants worry that the refugees’ human rights are violated. They believe that the people who live in the refugee camps are resourceful and deserve living in dignity. Instead, they are met with human right violations and an absence of a children’s convention. The volunteers highlight that the way refugees in Greece are treated will have long-term consequences for Europe. One informant writes: “Greece has exceeded their capacity in terms of safety, sanitary conditions, and processing of asylum applications. When young people grow up without any hope for the future, joy, or receive the help they need, the whole world becomes a much more dangerous place”.



Photo: Stephen Dover



## Conclusion

It is well documented that the situation for displaced people in Greek refugee camps violates the provisions of the Refugee Convention and the human rights treaties. The provisions for refugees are not in line with the minimum standards that are detailed in the EU's directives regarding asylum procedures and receiving conditions.

The current situation in Greece is largely a consequence of asylum and migration policies developed in the EU after 2015, such as the EU-Turkey deal. The Norwegian government has had several opportunities to contribute to solve the humanitarian crisis in Greece. For example, how Norway executes the Dublin Regulations, which regulates states that the asylum application is to be processed in the first country an asylum seeker's fingerprint was taken, will be of great importance. Norway cooperates with the EU on other aspects of asylum and migration, such as the Schengen agreement, the EEA funds, and the European border- and coastguard agency, Frontex.

The government can influence and improve the situation for refugees in Greece. This is reflected in government documents. The strategy for Norway's cooperation with the EU in the period 2018-20 states: "The government will contribute to a joint European migration policy which include a number of strategies, to ensure that human rights are protected.

The Government will emphasise safeguarding the needs of women and children, who are considered especially vulnerable migrant groups. We will work to ensure that more states comply with international standards regarding the protection of fundamental human rights and refugees."<sup>39</sup>

A Drop in the Ocean would like to give some advice on how the government can achieve their goal of a European migration policy which complies with human rights standards.

### Here are our recommendations to the Norwegian government:

- Initiate the establishment within the EU of a new plan on how to relocate refugees currently stuck in Greece to other European countries and establish joint European criteria for which countries can be considered 'safe'.
- Be the initiator for a joint European action of relief, to evacuate the refugees from the Aegean Islands by establishing a safe, humanitarian air bridge out of Greece and to other European states.
- Stop transferring asylum seekers to Greece in line with the Dublin Agreement which was reinstated in 2017.
- Reinstate the funds to rescue- and aid operations in the Mediterranean.

Reverse the policy changes on the right to family reunification which were implemented after 2015.

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/vedlegg/europapolitikk/eustrategi2018\\_2021\\_a.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/vedlegg/europapolitikk/eustrategi2018_2021_a.pdf)



## Appendix: interview guide

Thank you for helping us by answering our questions. As previously mentioned in the email we sent out, the aim of this interview is to collect and analyse the experiences of A Drop in the Ocean's volunteers. We want to learn about the actual living conditions in Greek refugee camps. There are still many arrivals in Greece, but they are rarely mentioned, if they are mentioned at all.

This report was compiled because A Drop in the Ocean is witnessing reprehensible living conditions in the Greek refugee camps. The refugees' asylum status is often unclear, and the receiving centres are generally in a terrible state. This report presents several themes we want to highlight. These themes include the asylum process, the refugees' living conditions, their access to food and water, hygiene and sanitary conditions, physical and mental health, xenophobia, and acts of violence. The report will have women's and children's situation in focus. Therefore, the questions will be grounded in these thematic aspects.

The information you provide will be deleted after the project is finalised in the middle of February. By responding to this interview, you accept that A Drop in the Ocean can save and process your personal information, in accordance with the privacy policy: <https://www.drapenhavet.no/en/privacy/>.





# Dråpen i Havet

At which location did you volunteer?	
When did you go, and for how long did you stay?	

How would you describe the refugees' situation in the camp/area you volunteered?

We have included a list of themes we want you to use as a basis for your answers.

Elaborate as much as you would like to, we do understand if you are not able to answer everything.

Living conditions:	
Food and water:	
Hygiene/sanitary conditions:	
Physical and mental health:	
Xenophobia and racially motivated acts of violence:	
Women and children's situation	
The application process to get asylum, including access to translator and judicial support	

If you could tell Norwegian politicians about the refugee situation in Greece, what would you tell them?	

Thank you very much for responding to our survey! It helps us a lot.

A Drop in the Ocean can contact me via phone or email for additional interviews or for more in-depth answers:

Name (optional)	
Email (optional)	
Phone number (optional)	

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