

LEGAL AID NEEDS IN LESVOS, GREECE

The context

Greece has once again become Europe's main point of irregular entry for migrants and refugees receiving 74,613 persons by sea and land in 2019 (as of the end of Jan 2020),¹ a number that surpasses the arrivals in Italy and Spain combined.

During 2020, a total of 5,297 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece by sea. The majority are from Afghanistan (45%), Syria (23%) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (7%). More than half of the population are women (23%) and children (37%), while 40% are men.

On February 2020, 2,161 people arrived on the Aegean islands, a decrease from previous month's 3,136 arrivals but an increase from last year's 1,486 arrivals during the same period.² Indeed, arrivals during 2020 are 59% higher than those in 2019.

Lesvos received the majority (47%) of all new arrivals, during 2020, followed by Samos (22%), the Dodecanese islands (20%) and Chios (11%). Lesvos received the highest number of people from Afghanistan comparing to the overall number of sea arrivals in Greece in 2020, whilst nearly half of the people arriving in Samos originated from Syria.

Similar to last year, over one-third of arrivals in 2020 are children. Of those, more than 6 out of 10 are below the age of 12. Additionally, 15% of all children were registered upon arrival as unaccompanied or separated, mainly from Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia. Some 35% of arrivals are men between 18 and 39 years old. Only 3% of arrivals are 50 years old or older. The majority of new arrivals in 2020 are from Afghanistan (2,396), Syria (1,208) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (359). While, similar to last year, the majority of arrivals from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq arrived in family groups.³

Since 2015, Lesvos hosts one of the five hotspots set up on the islands and referred to in Greece as Reception and Identification Centers (RICs). The population received in the RIC in Lesvos has always surpassed its actual capacity of 2.757 people. The overcrowding in Moria camp has reached an alarming level with a population of 19.224 people.⁴

The need for legal information, aid and representation

As a response to the COVID-19 spreading in all Europe, on 27 March 2020, the Greek Ministry of Migration introduced new measures to protect the population in the hotspot camps in Greece. The measures include a curfew on the camps during the night and limitations on the number of people who are allowed to leave it during the day. Instead of being transferred to suitable and safe accommodation, where they would be able to practice social distancing and self-isolation, asylum seekers are forced to remain locked in overcrowded and unsanitary facilities, and with little or no information.

¹ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

² <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74693>

³ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74685>

⁴ <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/8357/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-29-3-2020/?lang=en&fbclid=IwAR2Ncm-OmmGgz448OF7lmhfHGgnVV4ko-6JVnazwB9bPqgflfkW39WYPcik>



Moreover, since 1 March 2020, people who arrive on Lesbos are forced to stay near the beach for more than two weeks, where there is a minimum presence of protection and other humanitarian actors. While this is explained as a measure to protect the island's population from COVID-19, the people staying on the shore have no access to proper accommodation, health services and absolutely no legal information about their right to claim asylum.

As of March 20 the Greek Council of Refugees has established and operates a helpdesk via Facebook.⁵ The online helpdesk gives information in eight different languages and it is open to everyone, including asylum seekers and refugees around Greece, to address their needs during the coronavirus outbreak and complement GCR normal operations on the field. As of April 15, 400 beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers has reached out for help at the Helpdesk.

There is an emergent need for more expert asylum lawyers to provide legal aid to asylum seekers, ensuring their access to asylum procedures, denouncing unlawful practices, violence and abuse and advocating for their rights.

One extra lawyer in GCR team could address the needs of approximately 10 beneficiaries in one month providing them support for the preparation before the personal interview, representation before the Regional Asylum Office, appealing first degree negative decisions, representation before the competent Courts, challenging 2nd instance negative decisions as well as police return decisions etc.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/GCRhelpdesk/>