



Vulnerable
lives on
hold

Refugees are hardly surviving the mass camps in the Athens region

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Introduction

On March 8, 2016, following a gradual restriction since February 2016 of access to the Balkan route based on ethnic origin criteria, the border between Greece and FYROM (Macedonia) was closed for all third-country nationals. In the aftermath of this closure, over [54,000 refugees](#) – about 60% of who are women and children – have suddenly become trapped in Greece. There are hundreds of disabled and elderly people, cancer patients and persons suffering from other severe chronic or incurable diseases, as well as psychologically traumatized persons, pregnant women, families with new-borns and unaccompanied minors. A very high percentage of them is estimated to be admissible for family reunification or relocation. All these people are barely surviving the inhumane and devastating conditions in the reception centres, while at the same time the dirty deal agreed by Turkey and Europe turned the hot spots on the islands of the Aegean into detention- and deportation centres, keeping out those who were planning to follow. Within the framework of the PRO ASYL project “Refugee Support Program in the Aegean” (RSPA), this report was collated based on research¹ conducted for the RSPA-Newsletter by the colleagues Salinia Stroux and Chrissi Wilkens and the firsthand accounts of refugees in Greece.

Following an overnight shift in European migration policy from “legal corridors to the North” to “closed borders”, thousands of people escaping the war in Syria, the daily conflict in Palestine and the suicide attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq became stuck in the muddy fields of Idomeni, or the impromptu camp at the gates of Piraeus port, while more than [32,000](#) people have been transferred to mass tent camps set up all over the country mainly by the army, in a kind of “emergency reception state”. Greece is overwhelmed by the consequences of the European decision to keep refugees out. The humanitarian crisis all over the country was predictable, but European leaders were apparently prepared to accept this consequence. "I think that there is a [lack of vision at the EU level](#) — there's no long-term human rights-based migration policy. We need a generational strategy of where we'd like to be in 10 or 20 years," the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants Francois Crepeau said on May 16, 2016 and after visiting Greece. "The (EU) needs to respond to the crisis with pre-prepared tools and not try to invent them every time a crisis happens."

In the official camps of the Attiki region (Greater Athens) alone, there are currently approx. [11,500 refugees](#)²; most of whom are accommodated in state-run emergency reception sites. Many of these people lack the provision of even basic care, information on their situation, their rights and obligations and access to the outside world. In most of these places, there is no system in place to identify people with special needs, to support and protect them or to refer them to adequate accommodation, and there is no access to apply for asylum, relocation or family reunification. Only after two months since the closure of the border, where lives of refugees have been just ‘on hold’, a large part of them (mainly Afghans) have documents, which expired, and they fear detention and deportation. The devastating conditions in the camps have lead to an increase in suicide attempts (see below), and

¹ Research was carried out in the period 15.3.-30.4.16.

² The informal camp of Piraeus port and the reception centre Lavrion excluded.

many refugees have decided to put an end to their suffering in exile by signing up forIntro “voluntary” return, despite the perilous situation in their home countries. Many of these people belong to highly vulnerable groups which cannot find adequate assistance if they return to war and conflict. Among them is the family of S.M., his 9-month pregnant wife and their two children. Colleagues of the Refugee Support Program in the Aegean (RSPA) met them in Athens by the IOM offices, as well as the family of F.M. and N. from Afghanistan³ with their 2-year-old child. Back home in Afghanistan they had received death threats by the Taliban, forcing them out of the country. *“We have been in Elliniko Olympic Arrivals Camp for two months. There are 1,500 people in one space. There are six toilets and not enough showers. Many people want to go back. My children contracted breathing problems in the camp. I broke my hand on the stairs. 15 days ago we decided to return. If we stay here, we will be killed slowly and we will die many times over. If we go back to Afghanistan, we will be killed quickly, without suffering. In Ghazni, the Taliban said they’d kill me because I had worked in a leading position for the government and I helped save the life of a person fated to death by the Taliban. But we can’t continue this life here. Some people have been waiting for over a month to go back. I am afraid to return, but we don’t have any other dignified choice.”*

According to the IOM⁴, *“after the EU-Turkey agreement, certain nationalities have indeed increased their interest in returning to their home country. Monthly registration and return data for the currently implemented Assisted Voluntary Return programme clearly demonstrate the effect of the current situation at the borders. In January, we had close to zero departures by Afghanis and Iraqis, but in April Afghanis are the main nationals returning to their country of origin, followed by Iraqis [...]”*



Picture 1: Syrians in Ritsona camp were six days on hunger strike for their right to access asylum procedures and relocation. Copyright © Salinia Stroux

On May 16th refugees in Schisto emergency reception site started a three-day [hunger strike](#) protesting against the closure of the border to Macedonia, the inaccessibility of the Asylum Service and the devastating conditions in the tent camp. They described the camp to be [“worse than a prison”](#). Also in [Ritsona camp](#) a dozen of refugees from Syria mainly held a six-days hunger strike as they were not able to gain [access to the relocation procedure](#). *“My wife is pregnant and we live among snakes and scorpions,”* M. from Syria told PRO ASYL. Refugees residing in provisory camps

³ Interviewed on April 28, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

⁴ Written answer, April 27, 2016.

under squalid conditions in different regions of Greece had protested also earlier in [February](#), March and April against their desperate situation of being trapped in limbo.

No detection of vulnerable persons, no support, no protection

M.S. (aged 24) is a single mother from Afghanistan. She is desperate to find help and protection after all: *“I was sold as a child to a man whom I had to marry. I was ill-treated repeatedly. I have been in Greece for 1.5 months. I am in a camp far from the city. I tried to ask for help, but no one listened. The other day I took my children and I went to the highway looking for a passing car to put an end to my misery.”*

Hundreds of highly vulnerable persons have arrived to Greece within the last months. Among them are many who are in need of immediate medical treatment: some require emergency hospital care and many others need other forms of special care and protection.

In the majority of cases, the refugees arriving in Greece come from [war-torn and conflict areas](#)⁵. There are many people who were injured in the war, leaving them disabled or with severe physical and mental health problems. Additionally, according to UNHCR a very high percentage of the people arriving are women and children, and many of the women are pregnant.

Furthermore, Greece has no special accommodation facilities for vulnerable persons other than unaccompanied children and specifically lone children under the age of 12. There is no special accommodation for disabled people, victims of torture or other forms of exploitation or violence, or persons suffering severe diseases or psychological problems.⁶ Despite the scale of the humanitarian crisis, with huge numbers of refugees trapped in Greece, there are currently still only 523 places for vulnerable persons and asylum seekers in open reception centres in the entire country, and another 477 places specifically for unaccompanied minors. The result is that most vulnerable refugees are forced to stay in emergency reception sites, which, according to a new law, could be turned into closed detention camps at any time.

As the number of people trapped in Greece rose rapidly with the closure of the border, what little support for vulnerable refugees there is – better accommodation, social care or medical and mental aid – is reaching only a very small number of persons. For this reason, and the fact that provisions for vulnerable persons have neither improved nor significantly increased (the only exception is a slight rise in accommodation places for unaccompanied minors), vulnerability of refugees is now measured by an individual’s closeness to death. Priority is given to persons participating in the relocation programme and, within that group, the most vulnerable.

The *First Reception Service (Law 3907/11)*⁷ – now renamed the *Reception and*

⁵ The majority of people come from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. According to UNHCR 90% of arrivals have departed from the world’s top 10 refugee-producing countries. Source: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83> (visited May 5)

⁶ Email by Christos Dimopoulos, former Co-ordinator of Service for the Management of Accommodation Requests for asylum seekers and unaccompanied children (EKKA), March 23, 2016.

⁷ Law 3907/2011 as modified by Law 4375/2016, which will come into force in parts on April 20, 2016 and in parts two months after the publication.

*Identification Service (Law 4375/16)*⁸ – is legally responsible for

- identifying vulnerable cases (among others, unaccompanied minors, victims of violence, pregnant women and people with disabilities);
- providing information and medical screening;
- the provision of necessary medical treatment and psycho-social support; and
- making referrals to appropriate accommodation and support services, including the Asylum Service and the National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA).⁹

In practice, however, the procedure of identifying vulnerable cases is clearly not working. The whole reception system,

which has not worked effectively even before the recent events, has now completely broken down, and currently only individuals with life-threatening health conditions, who are identified and find the support of NGOs or volunteers have access to proper accommodation and further support.



Picture 2: Hundreds of vulnerable people, disabled, babies, sick persons, pregnant etc. sleeping side by side in the Gates of Piraeus port. Copyright © Pro Asyl

During the visits of RSPA to emergency reception sites in Athens and to an informal camp in Piraeus, we found that even for unaccompanied minors there was no functioning detection system in place in any of the camps visited; a finding backed up by many refugees' testimonies. Both during their short visits and later through established contacts, RSPA colleagues identified dozens of unaccompanied minors who have never received any information on their rights, nor has anyone asked them if they were in fact older than 18, or if they were unaccompanied. In most of the vulnerable cases documented, the affected individuals reported that they had never been approached by any state-, UNHCR- or NGO employee. Only in a few cases the vulnerable persons themselves approached UNHCR employees, and – in fewer cases still – refugees were approached by representatives of UNHCR or non-governmental

⁸ Law 4375/2016 passed on April 1, 2016. Source: <http://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/n-4375-2016.pdf> (visited May 5)

⁹ According to the Reception and Identification Service their responsibilities are limited to the operation of the Hot Spots (Samos, Leros, Kos, Lesbos and Chios) and only three of the open emergency reception sites: Diavata, Schisto and Eleonas. Written answer, May 13, 2016.

organisations. At the same time, volunteers and activists who want to provide support for refugees have no free access to these camps, but instead encounter many obstacles during cumbersome registration procedures.

While the state appears not to provide almost any of the support for vulnerable refugees required by law, the Greek public health system is also suffering from severe underfunding and understaffing, which makes it very difficult to provide support even for the small number of vulnerable refugees who are identified and referred. Many hospitals have closed or are lacking in basic medical and other provisions. It should be noted, however, that in most of the cases documented, doctors, nurses and other health professionals were very co-operative in helping refugees, in just the same manner as they were helping Greek nationals. However, there were also single negative experiences reported, where the sick were left to wait for hours before being examined and treated and/or where they encountered racist behaviour of individual hospital employees.

One major problem identified in public hospitals, as reported by refugees and volunteers, is a lack of interpreters and a lack of available beds. Reportedly, in many cases where no beds were available, sick people were returned to the desolate camps the very same day they had been admitted to hospital. The same happens with pregnant women, who, after giving birth, immediately are returned to the camps. There is a very limited number of places reserved to accommodate some families with their newborns for the first week after birth at NGO-run accommodation places, while the mothers with their babies have to return to the emergency reception sites promptly to make space for the next ones.

Additionally, many refugees complained that the medication required was not available free of charge, and that they had to leave hospitals by their own means, which in many cases, where no money was available to pay for a taxi or other kinds of public transport, meant walking back to the camps no matter how far away they were.



Picture 3: Z. has to stay in Schisto in a tent while she is in a very difficult health condition.
Copyright © Katja Lihtenvalner



Picture 4: Playing outside of Elliniko at the former airport arrival. Copyright © Salinia Stroux

No access to information: “What is their plan for us?”

“When I left Afghanistan the borders was open. I arrived in Greece only shortly after it closed. When will it open again? What is their [Europe’s and Greece’s] plan for us?” This is what S.A. (aged 28) from Afghanistan asked; nine months pregnant and living in the former arrivals section of Elliniko Airport, only a few days before giving birth to her first son. This echoes what hundreds others asked during RSPA’s recent visits to the camps. People could not understand, and even less accept that the borders were closed. This is why many of them explained that it was impossible for them to consider other solutions.

“Is it true that we will be deported to Turkey?” a 12-year old unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan asked. There are thousands of people who have no proper understanding of what was decided in the EU-Turkey deal. As they lack any kind of information on their situation and legal options, every piece of new information turns into a new nightmare. A young Afghan girl, who had come to Greece with her parents and sisters, while a few months ago her underage brother went to Germany all by himself, says: *“We were told by UNHCR that we have to choose between an asylum application or voluntary return. Is this true?”* At least every fifth person we talked to turned out to have relatives in Europe. Many of them could apply for family reunification, but they rarely knew about their rights and even less so about the procedures.

Overall, RSPA observed a huge lack of access to any kind of information on rights, including asylum, relocation and accommodation options. Two families and one unaccompanied minor had managed by themselves to find information on family reunification in Elliniko Olympic Arrivals; only two of them had approached UNHCR staff and the unaccompanied minor had found an NGO worker in Athens to assist him. All others even lacked basic information on any of their legal options. *“I have my 15-year-old son in Austria – can I apply for family reunification? Can my wife and children also come with me?”* an Afghan father asked. *“I have my mother in Sweden, can I go?”* an underage and unaccompanied girl from Afghanistan asked. *“If I apply for asylum in Greece, what are my rights here and how can I live and survive?”*

Substandard conditions in most emergency reception sites in Athens

Based on [figures](#) from the *Co-ordination Centre for the Management of the Refugee Crisis*¹⁰ on May 20, 2016, there were 45,638 persons in mainland Greece while the total official capacity in the camps is 34,650. Another 8,592 were at the same date on the Aegean islands. According to UNHCR, the 37¹¹ mass camps all over mainland Greece are categorized as emergency reception sites according to the new law published in April 2016. Eight of these emergency reception sites are located in the Attica region: in Eleonas (2,287), Elliniko I / Hockey stadium (1,265), Elliniko II / Olympic Arrivals (1,374), Elliniko III / Baseball stadium (959), Schisto (1,850), Malakasa (1,311), Ritsona (717), Lavrio (385), Aghios Andreas (187), Oinofyta (100) and Skaramangas (2,880). Currently another 1,468 refugees still remain in the informal camp in Piraeus port¹². Meanwhile, dozens are camping outside of the camps in Eleonas, Skaramangas and Elliniko hoping to find in this way a place inside.

Until now the sites intended to accommodate refugees with irregular status are of very different standards. Not even a minimum standard for a dignified human existence had been achieved, and in most cases refugees were transferred to the camps before their construction had been completed.

Eleonas camp, the first such emergency camp built, was created in the summer of 2015. It is the best equipped of all the camps, and is always held up as a shining example by the government even though it was not even handicapped accessible during the research period. Meanwhile, according to the refugees RSPA spoke to, all other camps are in a very poor state.

¹⁰ Co-ordination Centre for the Management of the Refugee Crisis Figures. Source: <http://www.unhcr.gr/sites> (visited May 5)

¹¹ Idomeni and Piraeus informal camps as well as Lavrion asylum seekers reception centre are not included in this number as they have a different kind of status. Nevertheless, in official maps they are mentioned in the same vein as the emergency reception sites, while the long established open reception centres for asylum seekers are not included in general. See for example camp list of May 21, 2016 (in Greek). Source: <http://media.gov.gr/index.php/υπηρεσιες/προσφυγικό-ζήτημα/συνοπτική-κατάσταση-προσφυγικών-ροών-21-05-2016> (visited May 21)

¹² UNHCR. Source: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83> (visited April 27, 2016)



Picture 5: No handicapped access in Eleonas in April 2016.
Copyright © Salinia Stroux

In *Elliniko II* (Olympic Arrivals), where during peak times as many as 1,500 persons were staying on the first floor in the old departures hall, single women and mothers particularly reported their fear of regular fights and

harassment by drunken men. Unaccompanied minors also reported they had not received regular meals, and being harassed and even beaten by adult men on several occasions. Most people suffered so much from the noise and lack of privacy, the filthy conditions and the smell that they decided to move outside onto the parking area and to stay in tents. Newborns, women with pregnancy complications, people with heart disease and toddlers with asthma all shared the same room. Some refugees explained they would spend all the day queuing for food.

In *Malakasa Camp*, around 40 kilometres outside of Athens, refugees reported that initially they were very afraid, as most of them were transferred to the camp in the middle of the night, and the first image they saw was barbed wire and armed soldiers guarding the army camp next door. They also described how the temperature in the tents could go from very hot to very cold, and that the tents were not water-tight. Most of the people do not have the financial means to take the train to Athens (which costs €4 each way), and either permanently stay in the camp, where there is nothing to do, or they board the train without a valid ticket and risk having to walk the entire way if they are caught. By mid-April, when the refugees who had previously been accommodated in *Elliniko II* were transferred to *Malakasa*, numbers there rose to approx. 1,300. There were reports of overcrowded tents, no electricity, sightings of snakes and insufficient sanitary infrastructure.

In *Schisto* camp, located in an industrial area near the port of Piraeus and at the outskirts of Athens, people mostly complained about a lack of information, while the tents were described as giving insufficient protection from the changing weather conditions. The refugees had dug ditches around the tents in order to protect themselves from the rainwater. Hundreds of people were living provisionally in tents or in big rub halls that had originally been intended for some other use.

In *Ritsona* camp, refugees were in great fear of insects, snakes and wild animals. The camp is in the Evoia region in the countryside, where no electricity is supplied to the tents. A couple of disabled refugees in wheelchairs had severe problems to move on the pebble stone ground.

In *Skaramangas* camp, which is the newest camp of all and which is the only camp other than *Eleonas* which has pre-fabricated container houses, there is reportedly insufficient medical care and a severe shortage of staff for basic tasks such as distribution of goods.

A large part of the refugees in these camps are people with an irregular status whose documents have expired – mainly refugees coming from Afghanistan. However, there are also a growing number of asylum applicants and persons who applied for family

relocation among them. They were transferred to the camps upon arrival from the islands, or after being evacuated from the port of Piraeus, from Victoria Square, or from the informal camp at Idomeni in an effort of the government to remove them from public spaces and put them in controlled and manageable camps. In most of the cases, according to the people interviewed, officers and other officials involved in their transfer were giving them misleading information on the camps while advertising them as reception facilities with all basic supplies.

During the research period UNHCR had a regular presence only in some of these sites. Most refugees reported that they had never talked to the UNHCR. First Reception Service and the asylum service were also not present everywhere, and in some camps very few or even none of the established Greek NGOs were active. The camps had no system for identifying people with special needs or special areas assigned to them (in Athens area this is only the case in Eleonas and Schisto camp¹³), or any special protection systems in place. Even access to interpreters and basic information was

not provided in all places. Most of the camps are in remote locations, thereby marginalising the refugee population and cutting them off from the rest of society. The capacity of most camps in Athens region is upwards of 1,000.



Picture 6: The squalid conditions in the former arrivals hall of Elliniko in March 2016. 1,500 refugees among which were newborns, children with respiratory problems, persons with mental illnesses and other vulnerable persons stayed all together in one hall. Copyright © Pro Asyl

The [European Commission](#) recently announced an €83m fund for international NGOs, the UNHCR and the International Red Cross, to cover primary health care needs, catering, and hygiene- and infrastructure provision for the many children and the thousands of refugees and immigrants in Greece. Another 56 million in [emergency aid](#) were approved on May 20th to support the work of UNHCR (30 million), the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) to support specifically the vulnerable population among refugees (13 million) and the final amount of 13 million will be split between the Interior Ministry, the Administrative Reform Ministry and Greece's

¹³ However, RSPA during one visit spoke with four unaccompanied minors who were living more than a month in Schisto without ever having been identified as underage lone travellers.

state asylum service to boost the efficiency of the asylum processing system.¹⁴ These funds might help to address some of the most urgent, life-threatening grievances, however they cannot alter the fact that vulnerable persons in the camps are trapped without any perspective of getting protection, the needed services or an actual perspective for the future.

Available accommodation for registered asylum seekers has remained much below the level actually required. According to a report by the National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA)¹⁵, 1,839¹⁶ asylum seekers applied for a place in a reception facility in 2015, while as many as 12,771 people sought asylum the same year¹⁷. The actual need is much higher than the number of referrals in 2015, as many asylum seekers do not ask for accommodation knowing that they would need to wait for a very long time.

In early 2015 the UNHCR announced the creation of an additional 20,000 accommodation places, intended mainly for relocation applicants but also for vulnerable persons. By the end of March, 3,600 of these places had been created (700 in flats, 1,900 as hotel vouchers and another 1,000 vouchers for especially vulnerable individuals). Nowadays, 5,500 places exist. On May 20th [UNHCR announced](#) the soon creation of 660 more places in Thessaloniki.

A further 10,000 places are planned by July; in rented flats, rented buildings, with families, and a smaller number in hotels. On April 21st the government opened a relocation accommodation site in [Lagadikia](#), Thessaloniki for a further 1,400 persons, while the facilities in Eleonas and Skaramangas are to expand further. The government has focused efforts to create new camps mainly in [northern Greece](#), as it begun on Tuesday May 24 to re-move the almost 8,000 refugees still remaining in the informal camp of Idomeni.

According to RSPA's findings on acceptance criteria, it appears that accommodation in these places, provided for by UNHCR, is given to persons who are both extremely vulnerable and relocation applicants. There are currently very few available places, and many relocation applicants remain without proper accommodation. In theory, provision for vulnerable asylum seekers and family reunification applicants should also be in place, but given the current lack of spaces this is no real option. Relocation applicants have the option of being housed for 2-3 months initially, with a possible extension if necessary. However, currently the entire application system at Asylum Service is blocked and EU member states are not willing to open new relocation places. It was pledged in September 2015 that 66,400 asylum seekers would be

¹⁴ For more detailed information on the financial aid for Greece from the European Union, check the European Commission page (last updated 24.05.16). Source: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/20160412/factsheet_managing_refugee_crisis_eu_financial_support_greece_-_latest_update_en.pdf (visited May 5)

¹⁵ EKKA is a government agency under the Ministry of Labour, Social Insurance and Social Solidarity, which coordinates social support services in Greece. Source: <http://www.ekka.org.gr/EKKA!show.action?lang=en>. (visited May 5)

¹⁶ EKKA Statistics for the year 2015. Source: http://www.ekka.org.gr/portal_docs/forceaccount/picture/25_1072.pdf (visited May 10)

¹⁷ Asylum Service Statistics 2015. Source: http://asylo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Greek-Asylum-Service-statistical-data-2015_gr.pdf (visited May 5)

relocated from Greece. According to the Asylum Service, by April 14, 2016 only 769 individuals had been transferred to other EU states and by the May 13 transfers reached [909](#). As a matter of fact, neither do the EU-member states show sufficient solidarity with Greece by offering a satisfactory amount of places for relocation, nor does the program itself function in terms of the whole underlying concept, as refugees to a high degree [withdraw from their applications or abscond](#). As it seems, one in seven asylum seekers dropping out of the relocation program, is not willing to be sent somewhere far from their relatives or in a country where survival for refugees is similarly difficult as in Greece.

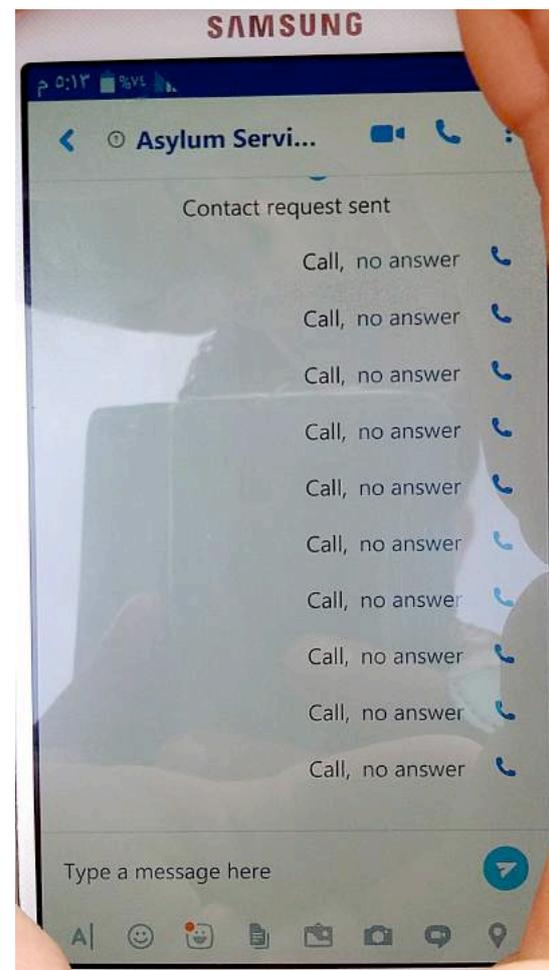
According to the European Commissioner for Migration, Dimitris [Avramopoulos](#), 70% of the refugees trapped in Greece are eligible for relocation. “There’s [no alternative](#) to the relocation, or a plan B. Relocation from Greece must move ahead and urgently,” Avramopoulos said.

No access to relocation, family reunification and asylum

Anyone who wants to apply for asylum, family reunification or relocation currently has to do this via Skype; the only exception being unaccompanied minors and highly vulnerable persons who are able to get a registration date with the help of NGOs. In the Attica area, persons speaking the languages that are most common among the refugees (i.e. Arabic and Farsi/Dari) have access to the Skype procedures only three hours per week, while two hours per week are allocated for the fast-tracking of Syrians, and five hours per week for relocation applicants. Meanwhile many people do not even have access to a smart phone or the internet.

Until recently a small number of NGOs have been offering assistance with the Skype procedure. On April 19, in a press release the Greek Council of Refugees [denounced](#) the lack of access to the asylum service. It announced a cessation of the Skype procedure and instead demanded proper and real access to the asylum service for all persons in need of protection. The organisation reports that on March 23 alone their Athens office registered 291 persons who had no access to the asylum service. Similar numbers were also recorded the following days. Most of these persons are refugees from Syria who want to apply for family reunification or relocation, as well as Afghan and Iraqi refugees, stateless persons and Palestinians who aim to apply for family reunification or asylum. *“We underline here that the majority of the people lacking access to the procedure are vulnerable persons; specifically unaccompanied minors and babies, women in advanced pregnancy, persons in need of immediate medical care, as well as a large number of families, including single-parent families with small children that need immediate protection.”*

Picture 7: No access to asylum service: The Skype 'Beep!' is most probably among the worst sounds currently heard by refugees in Greece, while they call hundreds of times without ever receiving an answer. Copyright © Chrissi Wilkens



According to Spiros Rizakos of the NGO AITIMA¹⁸ there is effectively no access to the asylum service, as many people lack internet access or knowledge of how to use the application. Furthermore, it is not the intention of the law that the personal presence of a person in need of protection in front of the asylum services should be replaced by internet services. The organisation has sent many letters reporting the lack of access to the asylum services, the ombudsmen, the UNHCR and the Migration Policy Ministry. *“There is a need for a real solution, not only in the emergency reception sites, but also at the regional offices of the asylum service. On April 25 AITIMA reported the case of 80-100 Syrian refugees who had left the camp they were staying in (at Drama) in order to access procedures at the Alexandroupoli asylum service, and were camping in front of the building. They could neither access the procedures via Skype in the camp nor directly at the offices.”*

“It should be highlighted that out of the persons stranded in Greece after the closure of the Northern Borders with FYROM, the great majority are family reunification cases, according to estimates by stakeholders working in the field,” Efthalia Pappa, Head of the Ecumenical Refugee Programme (ERP) in Athens, reported to RSPA.

“There are many separated families whose members managed to reach other EU countries during the past months. In March, almost ten times as many new arrivals in need of family reunification contacted the ERP office, compared to the number of cases registered during the previous two months. The increase in demand at our project includes telecommunications and emails from foreign stakeholders, especially from Germany (organisations that assist family members, asylum seekers or recognised refugees in Germany whose relatives are in Greece). During the first three months of the year, the UNHCR-funded project assisted almost 500 cases (registration and processing by the legal service of ERP, although the great majority are pending cases for access to asylum (registration of Dublin cases)).

In addition, there have been many other cases (referrals) pending registration, as the project simply did not have the human resources and operational capacity to respond immediately (in the space of only two weeks) to the exponential increase in demand for assistance and processing. There are great difficulties in registering asylum applications (including Dublin cases) due to the very limited access to the Attica regional asylum service and other regional asylum offices for asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan (Arabic and Farsi/Dari speaking persons). The lack of access to the Dublin procedure considerably delays the whole processing and outcome of the family reunification demand. Additionally, these deficiencies create a substantial internal backlog of pending Dublin cases.

¹⁸ Telephone interview, 27 April, 2016.



Picture 8: Afghan women demonstrate in Athens against a life in limbo with borders closed and expired papers. Among the protestors are many children - even newborns. Copyright © Salinia Stroux

Even in very vulnerable cases, where refugees seek humanitarian or family reunification visas from the German Embassy to reunite with an immediate family member with refugee status in Germany, rejections are now based on very strict preconditions. The Ecumenical Refugee Program supported a case of shipwreck survivors. The couple involved, who were in Greece, had an underage son in Germany who had acquired refugee status there. The woman was eight months pregnant and they had lost a baby in the shipwreck. After two months' processing and a pre-approval visa from the migration authority in Cottbus, the visa section in the Embassy refused to give the family a reunification visa because the couple had not been able to have their papers legalised in the embassy in Ankara or Beirut. According to Efthalia Pappa: "The German Embassy should apply more flexible and humanitarian criteria to facilitate the family reunification with family members that live in Germany."

The [asylum service](#), which took up operations in 2013, is suffering from severe understaffing. According to information Mrs. Maria Soulioti from the Human Force Department, provided for in an interview for a Greek newspaper on April 11th, there is an urgent need for 700 more employees, but the service is encountering severe obstacles in hiring new staff due to the complicate legislative framework and a memorandum that prohibits the hiring of new staff in the civil service. From 2013 onwards, employees were given six-month work contracts. New staff has to be relocated from other civil services to the asylum office. At the date of the interview, a

total of 300 employees were working in Kos, Chios, Samos, Leros, Crete, Lesbos, Rhodes, Attica and Thessaloniki. Most of them are in the Attica main offices, while 5 are in Lesbos, 2 on Leros, 2 on Chios, 9 on Rhodes and 5 on Samos.

At the same time, in the period between March 20 (when the EU-Turkey deal came into force) and April 7, the asylum service registered 2,113 asylum applications, while another 4,861 persons reported their wish to apply for asylum to the authorities – a total of 6,974 claims in only 18 days. In comparison, in all of 2015, the number of applications filed was 13,197. Additionally, in recent days more and more of the refugees stuck on mainland Greece in the mass camps have slowly begun to understand and accept that the border to FYROM might stay closed, and they try to apply for one of the three procedures. According to UNHCR, in theory everybody has access to the procedures through Skype.

Access to relocation has also proven to be problematic due to a confusion of the role of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO)¹⁹, which refugees reported about. According to EASO²⁰, their role in the relocation programme is to provide information, distribute leaflets on relocation and to make referrals of applicants to the Greek asylum service. Despite this, some refugees have reported being confused about the registration numbers they received after reporting their interest to be relocated to EASO. They considered the card handed to them as proof that their claim had been officially registered and therefore never took further steps to get an appointment with the asylum service, resulting in additional delays of the entire procedure.

The asylum service in Attica recently stated that they currently receive sometimes up to 2,000 calls daily via Skype.²¹ *“At this moment, 50,000 people are trying to get an appointment via Skype. This is why we have decided to implement a registration procedure in the facilities accommodating them,”* Maria Stavropoulou, director of the asylum service, said in a statement to [a Greek newspaper](#).²² The procedure is supposed to be a *“pre-registration exercise”*²³ run by the Asylum Service and with the help of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from end of May to end of July 2016. It will start at the official camps and then continue in informal sites, finally concluding with the urban refugees. Meanwhile, many vulnerable persons have left the camps, either by their own means, staying in informal hotels, or with the help of volunteers and activists, staying in private housing or squats - only in the region of Athens there are seven of

¹⁹ Currently, 132 of their experts are active in Greece. Around 60 experts are deployed inside and outside the hotspots areas to support the Greek authorities for the relocation scheme. Around 70 experts are working on the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement. These experts are supporting the registration and interviewing of migrants for the admissibility procedure in the framework of the EU-Turkey agreement.

²⁰ Written reply by Cristina Vladut (EASO), April 12, 2016

²¹ In: Real News (Greek-language newspaper). Alexandros Kondis: *Ενα δωμάτιο για χιλιάδες πρόσφυγες*. April 17, 2016, page 48

²² See also. Source: <http://media.gov.gr/index.php/υπηρεσιες/προσφυγικό-ζήτημα/σχεδιασμός-για-τη-διευκόλυνση-της-πρόσβασης-στη-διαδικασία-ασύλου-των-προσφύγων-που-βρίσκονται-στην-ενδοχώρα> (visited May1)

²³ The respective Press Release on EASO internet page is for some reasons not available anymore. See for the content of the Press Release for example here. Source:

<http://www.eurasiareview.com/17052016-eu-to-begin-registration-of-asylum-seekers-in-greece/> (visited May 5)



Picture 9: Dozens of tents separated by mere beddings were set up by refugees outside of Elliniko in March and April.
Copyright © Pro Asyl

them housing a total of approx. 900 refugees.

The Asylum Campaign, run by most of the mayor refugee supporting Greek NGOs and solidarity groups amongst others, in a recent [open letter](#) (May 19) demanded the immediate complete registration of all asylum claims and a fair procedure while criticising the planned pre-registration exercise as no solution. Only the decisive and effective enforcement of the Asylum Service with specialized personnel and a respective infrastructure in order to respond adequately to the increased needs, coupled with a radical change of the Office's orientation, focussing by priority on providing effective protection to refugees, would render a sustainable approach possible that would avoid a new backlog creation.

Individual cases

a. Advanced pregnancies and newborns

RSPA talked with dozens of women in the advanced stages of pregnancy, all of whom were suffering under the living conditions in the emergency reception sites or the informal camp in Piraeus. Some of the women reported a high degree of stress and difficulties in their pregnancies, such as pain and even irregular bleedings. A major problem for them is getting access to a female gynaecologist. The women stayed in the camp until giving birth and were returned to the camp immediately after being released from hospital with their newborns. Only very few families reported they had the opportunity to be accommodated by organisations or volunteers for a short period of a few days after giving birth. During the hospital stays, interpreters were not available for most of the time. We talked to pregnant women and women who had just given birth, telling us they had to stay in tents and sleep on the floor. Some newborns with health problems had to stay in the hospital while their mothers had to return to the camp, some of which were many kilometres away, in order to take care of the rest of their children. Especially single mothers who already have other children face the problem of how to take care of both the newborn and their other children.

N.T. (aged 29) from Syria²⁴ has five children and currently lives in Ritsona camp. In March 2016 she gave birth to her newborn. But she has not seen her baby for over a month, as the baby had health problems and had to stay in a hospital in Athens, while the mother had to return to Ritsona camp, which is about one hour's drive away and has no public transport connection to Athens. The family has no money to go to the city. N.T. also has a disabled son, A.I. (aged 15). They all stay in a tent without electricity. In May the newborn baby was finally transferred to the family's tent in Ritsona. At night there is no light and she cannot clean her disabled son until sunrise, meaning that he has to sleep in his excrements. Meanwhile, her 16-year-old daughter lives in Germany, and they want to be reunited with her.

N.D.²⁵ is from Aleppo, Syria. She is a single mother and has a newborn baby, as well as five underage children and one adult son. *"I arrived on Lesbos on February 24. It was the second time we tried to come to Europe. The first time the boat sank when it hit a small rock. The Turkish coast guard saved us. I didn't tell anyone in Moria camp about my daughter's mental illness and about the fact that I was pregnant. They gave us our papers and we travelled to Piraeus the next night. Upon arrival in Piraeus we took the train to Thessaloniki and went directly to the border with Macedonia.*

On that same day the border closed. Just 15 persons could pass, but the authorities returned another 10 at the same time. I heard that on those days two persons were electrocuted and died on the rail track. When we arrived at the border in Idomeni, we told some members of an NGO about our problems, but they said they could not help us. They said to me that if I am going to give birth, I can do it normally [with their assistance] but they cannot help my disabled daughter.

I was in the camp in the border for one week. We were sleeping in a tent we had been given. The situation there was awful. I couldn't take a bath for a month, not even before giving birth. After 2-3 days in that camp, they transferred us to another camp, again with tents [Diavata]. An ambulance came at 5 o'clock in the morning and took me to the hospital. I gave birth there and stayed for four days. Then I was released, but my newborn baby was not. They transported it by plane to Athens because she had a health problem. They told me to sign some papers to make that possible. I was in a tent in the camp and became sick. A volunteer helped me to go to a private home in Athens.

In Diavata the conditions were a little better than at the border; UNHCR gave us some information. We faced no violence anywhere in Greece, but we suffered a lot. I just want to go to my husband and calm myself down. I haven't seen him for seven months. He is in Germany. In the hospital nobody was with me after I gave birth. I was crying in order for somebody to give me just a glass of water. In the camp I also had no particular assistance."

b. Unaccompanied minors

Until the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, unaccompanied minors were trying to avoid getting registered in order not to be put into protective custody. While the 15-

²⁴ Interviewed on April 26, 2016 in Ritsona, Greece.

²⁵ Interviewed on April 1, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

17 year-olds registered giving their age as 18, the youngest, who were not able to conceal their real age, registered as accompanied by distant relatives, friends, or people they merely knew from travelling. The authorities transferred most of them directly to emergency reception sites. They all reported that since staying in the camps, nobody has come to inform them about the rights of unaccompanied minors or the option of family reunification. Only six out of 30 cases of minors assisted by RSPA during March and April referred to have found refugee support organisations by themselves in the city of Athens after some weeks, but they could not fully understand where they had to go and what to do.

Almost all of the following cases of unaccompanied minors concern family reunification. Most of them have relatives in Germany.

F.²⁶ (aged 12) from Afghanistan lost his family on the way to Europe. He is now completely alone. In Greece until recently he was staying with three Afghan women he met on the road, but now he is all by himself in a tent in a camp, where daily fights take place and he doesn't feel safe.

A.²⁷ (aged 12) has come all the way from Afghanistan by himself. Police registered him with some random adult. Along the route, he was often sleeping rough, without food and always in fear. At first he stayed for some weeks in Elliniko II camp, sleeping on a blanket in the arrivals hall, where a total of 1,500 people were staying. *"In Greece I first stayed two nights in a camp on the island. Then I spent one night outside in Victoria Square. From there, police took us to Elliniko camp. For 50 days no one came to assist and counsel us there, no one asked me anything. There is a problem with the cold water in the shower, at night it was very cold, and I don't always get something to eat and I don't feel safe."*



Picture 10: Sleeping with another 1,499 refugees in Elliniko camp. Copyright © Pro Asyl

²⁶ Interviewed on March 26, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

²⁷ Interviewed on March 26, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

M.²⁸ (aged 13) left Afghanistan three months ago. He registered himself in Greece with a family of distant relatives in order to escape detention. From the islands he went directly to the Macedonian border but the police forced them back in buses after only four days. He was transferred to Elliniko camp. The family now signed for voluntary return. He remained alone and decided to earn some money as a harvest worker. *"In the camp I cannot sleep well. I miss going to school. And I miss my family. I have no money to call them. We have only talked 2-3 times since I left."*

A.²⁹ (aged 12) from Afghanistan travelled with a family of strangers. He is registered on the same paper as his supposed mother. The family who helped him with registration did not allow him in the beginning to go and re-register as an unaccompanied minor and apply for family reunification as they feared they might get in trouble. In the camp he was beaten up while queuing for food. Even the father of the family protecting him beat him up. When Elliniko camp started to get evacuated, he was forced by the employees to leave along with the family as they were on the same paper, even though he did not want to go to Malakasa camp. *"I didn't know where to find help. After one month in Athens I found a flyer with some contacts. I finally found a lawyer after many days of searching. Now I have arrived in a place worse than the one before. There are snakes, there is no electricity, the family won't allow me to stay with them in the tent, so I do not even have a place to sleep and I don't have money to go to the city of Athens."*

Picture 11: "Please get me out of here. I am afraid." H. (14) from Afghanistan lives with his brother in one tent. Copyright © Pro Asyl



The two brothers, H.³⁰ (aged 14) and S. (aged 15) from Afghanistan, are staying by themselves in Malakasa, a camp which is a one-hour drive from Athens. They didn't know they could reunite and travel legally to their aunt in Sweden. Their tent is completely empty. They own only the clothes they wear. H. explains: *"We are from Kabul. We couldn't go to school there. I had to work in a car workshop. My father had enemies. We weren't safe. We arrived three weeks ago in Greece. They brought us to a camp on the island. We registered with the family of a woman we knew a little as she travelled with us. We all have separate papers. We stayed one week on the island. Then we bought a ticket and came to Athens. We wanted to go to the border. We bought tickets to Idomeni and entered the busses in Piraeus. The police just told us to enter the busses. Later we understood they were heading elsewhere with us. Everyone in the*

bus was saying they would deport us. We got very afraid. But they brought us to Malakasa camp. It was night and very dark. At 3 o'clock in the night we arrived. We were 30-40 persons in the bus. When we exited the bus the first thing we saw were the soldiers with their guns. We are here since two weeks. No one came to the camp to

²⁸ Interviewed on March 26, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

²⁹ Interviewed on March 26, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

³⁰ Interviewed on April 3, 2016 in Malakasa, Greece.

talk to us until now. No translator was here. We are alone. We have nowhere to go. We have no money to go somewhere. Here there are people who fight with us. They don't let us get clothes. We cannot speak with our mom because we have no phones and no money to call. I miss my mom too much. We called her only once from the island and once from here, using our friends phone. I am afraid they will deport us to Turkey or to Afghanistan. Will the border open? I want to move on and start school as soon as possible and become an engineer."

Picture 12: Rain flooding the tent camp of Schisto in May 2016. Copyright © Pro Asyl

O.³¹ (aged 14) from Afghanistan looks very exhausted while he is talking. *"We got of the boat in Piraeus in an unknown land with foreigners. The police put us in busses like prisoners. There were two busses filled with Afghans and 10*



with Syrians. We had no choice. They told us they'd bring us to a quality camp, which is well equipped. But what we first saw was fear and terror when we saw the army and the barbed wire. The Syrians were brought elsewhere. It was rainy and cold. We had to enter the tents in darkness. No one came here since one month to give us any information. Dawn never comes; days never pass by. No one could help us in Afghanistan and now no one shows compassion here. Who doesn't feel love for his home? Who leaves home without reason? Where is our future here? Who listens to our voices? I cannot go anywhere in the night alone out of fear. I can not raise my voice here without fear. I have to fight in the queues for food or clothes and I am not even going to school. There are snakes and scorpions entering the tents. The longer I am here, the worse I feel. I can't even sleep in the nights"

W.'s³² father is sentenced to death in Afghanistan and currently imprisoned. The shy boy (aged 15), cannot speak about him without crying. He has his family in Denmark and wants to reunite with them. *"I thought I had been registered as a minor. I came here two weeks ago. Yesterday I just understood they registered me as an 18 year old. No one came to our camp to ask about the minors or to explain the situation here or our rights. I haven't been able to contact my mother and tell her I am alive. I have no money."*

³¹ Interviewed on April 3, 2016 in Malakasa, Greece.

³² Interviewed on March 16, 2016 in Schisto, Greece.



Picture 13: Rain entering rub halls in Schisto.
Copyright © Katja Lihtenvalner

W.³³ (aged 16) from Afghanistan asked himself to be re-registered as adult after experiencing for two days the so called “protective detention” minors had to go through. *“When I arrived in Greece I told them my age and they brought me to a small room. I was closed up in a space with 20 others behind the barbed*

wire. We were not allowed to go out. We were just sitting and sleeping. I changed my mind because the other boys told me, if I was an adult I could go to Athens and anywhere. I asked the employees of the camp to change my age. They stroke out my birth date on the paper and wrote a new one on top. The other minors stayed more than two weeks in detention. I couldn’t even stand two days. I am living since one month in a big tent among adults I never met before in Schisto. I don’t feel safe.”

c. Cancer patients and persons with other incurable and severe diseases (such as heart disease)

Hundreds of refugees with incurable or severe chronic diseases stay in remote camps far from hospitals and NGOs providing them with the necessary medications. There are people with cancer, cardiologic problems, diabetes, some who have been recently operated and others with epilepsy or severe respiratory problems whose lives depend immediately on their living conditions in general but also specifically on the accessibility of medical aid and treatment. “My mother has diabetes. We live in Schisto. She has to get her insulin from an NGO in the centre of Athens. We cannot go there regularly though. She also depends on being able to store the insulin in the adequate temperature, but we have no access to a fridge in the camp and it is getting hot lately,” told K.S. A similar case was reported also from Malakasa camp. “I had a cardiologic operation two months ago in Turkey. They told me I had to take my medicine regularly. The tablets finished some weeks ago. I have again some of the symptoms I had before the operation and I am very anxious about that,” F. from Afghanistan said. Three families with toddlers and babies living in Elliniko II, reported their children had started to have respiratory problems ever since they were in the camp as there were too many people in one saloon, it was stifling with many people smoking inside and a few even cooking. M.W. (aged 17) [died](#) on April 19th in Laiko public hospital of unknown medical reasons. As her mother reported, she had unspecified heart problems. After a first transfer of the sick girl to the hospital, it took reportedly more than two hours for a doctor to examine her. She was released a few hours later and returned back to her tent. She was sleeping with her family in front of Elliniko II camp. In the same night she collapsed and her father brought her to emergency care where she passed away after a few days of being in coma.

Due to the lack of staff in Greek hospitals, [cancer patients](#) currently have to wait for

³³ Interviewed on March 16, 2016 in Schisto, Greece.

more than six months in order to start radiotherapy, which puts the lives of those patients in danger. Free medical examinations and treatment are currently also not certain if the sick person has an irregular status. In general, medicines are available, but the lack of consumables constitutes a severe problem. Anastasia Lagari, a volunteer from the Association of Cancer Patients, Friends and Volunteers (KEFI) says: *“The state’s public health system calculation does not include any provision for refugees with cancer. The budget for the uninsured, which is much too small as it is, currently provides €10 per Greek uninsured citizen. We help refugees mainly through our own and other people’s and institutions’ donations.”*

M.A. from Homs (Syria) arrived in Greece at the end of February. She stayed in the camp for about ten days, and four days in the port. She was not approached by anyone, except for a journalist, while staying in the port of Piraeus. *“Only members of the press came to inform us about the situation.”* Together with her husband and her four children, she lived for one and half months in a tent in the port of Piraeus. She has another two sons, who are in Sweden and Turkey. Her husband suffers from cancer in many parts of his body and has war injuries on his foot. Volunteers are transporting him to the hospital regularly. Now they have moved to Skaramanga camp. Her husband needs immediate therapy for his cancer. He has not had any therapy for four months, and it is possible that the cancer has spread in that time. His wife is desperate: *“I don’t know what we should do. Maybe it’s better for us to return to Turkey in order to get faster access to the necessary cancer therapy. No organization helped us, only two Greek volunteers who brought us to the public hospital, but it took a while until we got access to the therapy.”*

F.A. (aged 28) from Sarepul / Gusfand (Afghanistan)³⁴ arrived on Chios on March 18. She was detained along with her husband and her two sons (aged 2 and 8) in the “Vial” hot spot for one night and was then released as part of the mass evacuation which took place before the implementation of the new Turkey Agreement which took effect on March 20. *“When we arrived at Piraeus port they put us on buses. We didn’t know where we were going. It was two in the morning when we reached Malakasa. It was dark. We saw the barbed wire, the soldiers and their guns. It was terrifying. We thought we would be detained. We had to get off the buses and they would allow us to leave. We were brought to a tent. The floor was wet from the rain. There was mud all over the camp. The inside of the tent was also very wet. Our small son was sick. We were shivering with the cold all through the night and the day. The next morning we went to the camp doctor. There were no translators. We showed him the documents of my examinations. I was never transferred to the hospital. I have strong pains in my breast. We left Afghanistan so I could get healed. Now my cancer has spread. No one is listening to us.”* Meanwhile her husband’s brother is an unaccompanied minor in Germany. He wants to be reunited with his older brother who had looked after him back in Afghanistan. *“We finally went to see the doctor on April 11, when volunteers from the Society of Cancer Patients, Friends and Volunteers (K.E.F.I) together with RSPA arranged for some treatment. When we returned from the doctor in Athens, we were caught on the train without tickets and they made us leave the train. We had to walk to Malakasa from Aghios Stefanos station. One-way tickets cost €4 per person. We have no money left.”* The doctors diagnosed breast cancer and said she would need to apply for asylum in order to have

³⁴ Interviewed on April 11, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

access to free medical aid, and that she would need to stay close to the hospital in order to be able to receive therapy. She stayed until recently in Malakasa camp in an unlit tent, far from the hospital she will be treated in.

d. Disabled persons

Most of the reception structures in Greece are not equipped to care for disabled persons. In many cases refugees are not able to bring medical certificates with them and they have to go through very expensive examinations in Greece, as most of the time they lack the relevant status to be eligible for free medical aid.

Viglas Athanasios³⁵ is the Chairman of the Greek Union of Paraplegics, who, despite their limited capacities, hosts seven disabled Syrians. He reports: “We have no



financial resources. We are struggling by ourselves to take care of these disabled people. We try to help with the allowance the state gives our families. We have not much, but we cannot leave these people alone. No other organisation takes care of them. We are co-operating with volunteers and individual doctors. There is no help from the state or NGOs; although we have tried many times to seek get support, we never receive any response.”

Picture 14: Malakasa camps' pebble ground is a severe obstacle for people in wheelchairs. Copyright © Salinia Stroux

Antonis Rellas³⁶, an activist with disability and member of the “People with disability emancipation movement Zero Tolerance”, finds that there are too many problems for disabled refugees in Greece: “Many accommodation structures do not meet accessibility standards. NGOs dealing with refugees are not familiar with the situation of disabled people and the problems they face. The asylum service also has no special procedure for disabled people. For example, how can a deaf Syrian refugee register for asylum through Skype? Generally there is little concern for Greeks with disability, so you can imagine that there is also no concern for refugees. In Eleonas we asked for some containers with disabled access to be built, but our request was ignored. We visited a refugee we knew in Eleonas and he told us that he doesn't want to eat drink or eat anything because he has to ask somebody to take him to toilet and that is very difficult there. We also met a Syrian woman with two babies who had lost a leg. How can anybody ask her to queue up and wait to be registered? There are many places where these people could be taken, but there is no will to do that. So we try to find solutions ourselves, such as putting up refugees in our own houses. There are also refugees with mental disabilities; nobody cares and

³⁵ Telephone interview, April 20, 2016.

³⁶ Telephone interview, April 20, 2016.

understands why they react aggressively sometimes. We had one case like that in the harbour. It was a small child who was very aggressive. But who knows what experience this mentally disabled girl had gone through?”



Picture 15: Ritsona camp has also pebble ground. Copyright © Salinia Stroux

Y.A.Y., a 20-year-old aluminium engineer from Syria³⁷, is disabled and in a wheelchair. He stayed in a tent in the port of Piraeus for more than a month. First he was there together with his brother; then a Syrian friend took care of him. RSPA met Y.A.Y. at the beginning of April in the port of Piraeus. Together with activists who had been helping in the port for some time, RSPA tried for weeks to find accommodation for Y.A.Y. Referrals to UNHCR remained unsuccessful, as his case was not considered vulnerable enough for one of the few housing options for severe cases. Access to the relocation programme could also not be achieved. RSPA provided a hotel room for a few days, as neither the National Rehabilitation Institute had any housing options, neither the Association for the Disabled. Following a referral by the people with disability emancipation movement “Zero Tolerance” and the National Rehabilitation Institute in Athens on April 15, Y.A.Y. finally was examined by a doctor. As “*there was no order for hospitalisation from the National Health Operations Centre (EKEPY)*” he was released from hospital back onto the streets. By April 16 Y.A.Y. was back in the hotel. The man who had supported him had left, as he could not handle caring for him any longer. With the help of volunteers Y.A.Y. could be transferred back to the National Rehabilitation Institute in Athens where he stays until today receiving the necessary medical treatment and physiotherapy. “*I left Syria in 2014 when I was hit by some shrapnel during a bombing raid. I went to Turkey. I was in a coma for 100 days. At the beginning of March 2016, and after trying unsuccessfully to cross to Greece in a dinghy on four occasions, I finally arrived on Lesbos and was transferred to Moria. We stayed there for four days without food.*”

³⁷ Interviewed on April 12, 2016 in Athens, Greece.



Picture 16: Living in the 'jungle' camp Ritsona far from civilization, hospitals and public transportation.
Copyright © Chrissi Wilkens

Our plan was to take the overland route to Northern Europe, but when we arrived at Piraeus, we didn't go to the border of FYROM because they told us the border had been closed. We stayed for some days in the port, in the open, without any shelter. Then some people brought us a tent to sleep in. Later EASO came and told us to register for relocation. I was with my brother. He didn't want us to register because he hoped that the borders would reopen. I wanted to register with EASO but he didn't let me. A volunteer took me to the hospital in order to have me examined. My situation there was very bad. I had a lot of pain in my waist.

My brother finally left me alone in the port and went to Skaramangas camp on one of the buses. For the last 20 days I have been alone. A Syrian friend has been trying to help me with daily life. I don't want to go to Skaramagas. I don't want to be transferred from one tent to another. There is not even any infrastructure for disabled persons in that camp. I would like to go to Germany, because I have my cousins there. But at the end of the day, it doesn't matter which country I go to. I just want to go some place where I can get adequate medical treatment. I want to be healthy again."

W.A.³⁸ is from Aleppo (Syria) and travelling with his disabled son. *“I arrived on the island of Lesbos in Greece on March 3, 2016. My 19-year-old son is in Germany. I came to Greece with my 22-year-old disabled son and my other 16-year-old son. When we arrived in the camp in Lesbos, the Red Cross saw us and immediately took us to a hotel. They saw that my son is disabled. I am mother and father at the same time for him; my wife was killed in the war. My house is destroyed; just mice can stay there now. I, too, have some signs on my body from the war; on my foot and on my head. I have been in the port of Piraeus since March 10 and since then I have been sleeping with my two sons in a tent outside building E3, because inside there is no space. It often rains and it is cold. One doctor came and examined my son, but he just gave him some medicine for his fever, nothing else. My disabled son wets himself. Sometime he covered in urine and faeces, because I cannot shower him or take him to the bathroom. I fill a plastic bag with water and make a small hole in it in order to clean him a bit. Nobody came here to inform me, just one woman with a blue jacket; she said she would try to find accommodation for us. Somebody came and told the people here to go to the camps. They also told us to go.”* Since April 7, 2016, the small family has been in a Hotel in the centre of Athens after the intervention of a Greek NGO. W.’s child has been disabled from birth. He said that he is very tired of taking care of his son all by himself. He has been doing so ever since his wife was killed; his other son has been helping him. *“I do not need food or water. All I need is to have fast access to the asylum procedure in order to get reunited with my older son in Germany.”*

The Kurdish siblings A.M. (aged 30) and G.M. (aged 28)³⁹ fled Syria because of the war, together with their elderly mother, their underage sister and a brother. They are both in wheelchairs. *“We left from Hasaka City because of ISIS and the war. The first time we tried to go to Turkey, the Turkish police opened fire on us. We had to return and take the route via Kurdish Iraq into Turkey. It was a very hard journey. We arrived in Turkey and then they put us in a basketball stadium. More than 4,000 people were sleeping on the ground. We spent eight days in that camp. We paid money to the Turkish police in order to leave. When we were going to Greece in a dinghy, we spend four hours in the water. My sister and I were seated on bottom of the boat and everyone else put their things on top of us. A large lady even sat on my sister’s legs. We were 40 adults and 20 children.*

We stayed on Chios for eight days. We tried to register with EASO, but we didn’t succeed. They took our names for relocation but they haven’t contacted us again since. They also didn’t give us any registration papers. In Athens the authorities put us on buses and brought us directly to Ritsona camp. They told us: ‘The borders are closed. We will take you to a camp and when the border re-opens we will take you there.’ We have been in the forest camp in Ritsona for about one month now. My father and sister are in Bremen, in Germany. The UNHCR told us they would try to contact the German government to reunite us with my father, but that the procedure would take more than six months. They also told us to try to register for family reunification ourselves via Skype. But it does not work. Every time we try to make a call with Skype nobody answers. I tried more than five times. I tried from my mobile phone, but there is no internet connection in the camp. It’s too expensive from the

³⁸ Interviewed on March 31, 2016 in Piraeus, Greece.

³⁹ Interviewed on April 26, 2016 in Ritsona, Greece.

mobile, so we cannot use Skype often.

I had tried in Turkey to get a visa to go to my father, but they don't give visas to Syrians. Only one in fifty persons get a visa. My father has been in Germany for seven months. In Ritsona camp life is very hard; everything is awful: the food, bathroom, toilets, the floor, the room. It's not for humans. I think this was an army camp in the 1980s and no one has lived here ever since. Yesterday a wild animal attacked people here, a wild boar. There are many snakes, too. My mother killed a big one five days ago. Our place has no windows, no doors. It's especially cold at night - even below freezing sometimes. It's very hard to sleep here. We cannot even enter by ourselves.

Picture 17: Ritsona: Specifically, vulnerable people suffer from the difficult hygiene conditions in the tent camps.

Copyright © Salinia Stroux



My disability is from birth. I need care, not medicine. But there is no possibility for care here, because we are very far away from civilisation. No hospitals are near us. I hope they open the borders. I cannot leave Greece now; not even vulnerable people like us are allowed to move on now.

Irregular routes are very difficult and expensive. To go another way you must be healthy, you must be able to stand on your feet in order to run and jump, so I can't. I have bad dreams. We sometimes see ourselves standing at the closed borders. All our dreams are about the borders. My biggest wish is to see my father again. I want to see him and kiss his hand."

e. Victims of torture and other forms of violence

Nikos Gionakis⁴⁰, a psychologist and scientist in charge of the Day Centre Babel (a mental health unit for migrants), told RSPA that over the last few weeks they have seen an increase in cases where refugees stuck in Greece attempted suicide or clearly display suicidal tendencies. *"We encounter cases like this more often now than in the past. It's not easy to determine the causes of this, but the hypothesis, that it could be attributed to the rejected asylum requests, the closure of the borders etc., should be examined. People are desperate. In the past we didn't need to get involved so often in*

⁴⁰ Telephone interview, April 20, 2016.

cases of people with severe disabilities, for example. Even people with serious disabilities were passing the border towards the North. Greece was a transit country. Now they stay here, and there is no infrastructure for them. We had 5-6 cases that needed specialised care after treatment in the hospital. And there is no place for them to stay. In one case, we referred a woman who had been in a psychiatric clinic to a normal reception guest room... it was a risk. We try to focus on special cases, as we do not have enough staff to go to the camps and see all refugees there. We accept referrals from the reception centres at Eleonas, Ritsona, Piraeus and others. The number of cases has increased because of the desperation people feel, because their only perspective has been taken away. We are walking barefoot in the thorns.”

R.M.H.⁴¹, a 16-year-old Yazidi boy from Iraq, arrived in Greece with his mother and three brothers and sisters. On August 3, 2014, ISIS attacked the Yazidis in Senghal, in what amounted to genocide. The whole family – except the oldest son – escaped to the mountains. The eldest son was abducted by ISIS, stabbed with a knife, treated very badly and had to witness the sexual abuse of Yazidi girls. He managed to escape to the mountains. He now suffers from PTSD due to ISIS’s treatment: ever since his ordeal, the 16-year-old boy gets terrified when he sees a group of bearded Arab men. After the escape, YPG/PKK helped the family during their stay in the mountains.

Later the family stayed in Kurdistan (in Duhok and Zaho) for 1.5 years. Then the teenager came to Greece via Turkey, together with his mother and his three younger brothers and sisters. The father had already reached Germany in December 2015, where he remains until now as an asylum seeker.

“We came to Greece on March 19. We arrived on the island of Kastelorizo and we stayed there for ten days. Then my son became sick and they transported him by plane to a hospital in Rhodes. We followed him there and stayed for four days on the island. We were telling everybody about my son’s problem but nobody helped. On April 3 we arrived in Piraeus. Since then we have been here, living in a small tent. We want to go to the camp in Skaramangas. Every day we ask: “When we can go?” and they say tomorrow. They take other people but not us. We don’t know why. My son had to go three times to the hospital since we have been in Piraeus: the first time for one day, the second time for two days and the third time for seven days. And now he is still in hospital. I don’t know what kind of medicine he takes. We only heard about the possibility of family reunification recently through RSPA.”



Picture 18: Skaramangas camp is the newest among around Athens. Most of the residents got transferred there from Piraeus port. Copyright © Pro Asyl

⁴¹ Telephone interview, April 23, 2016.

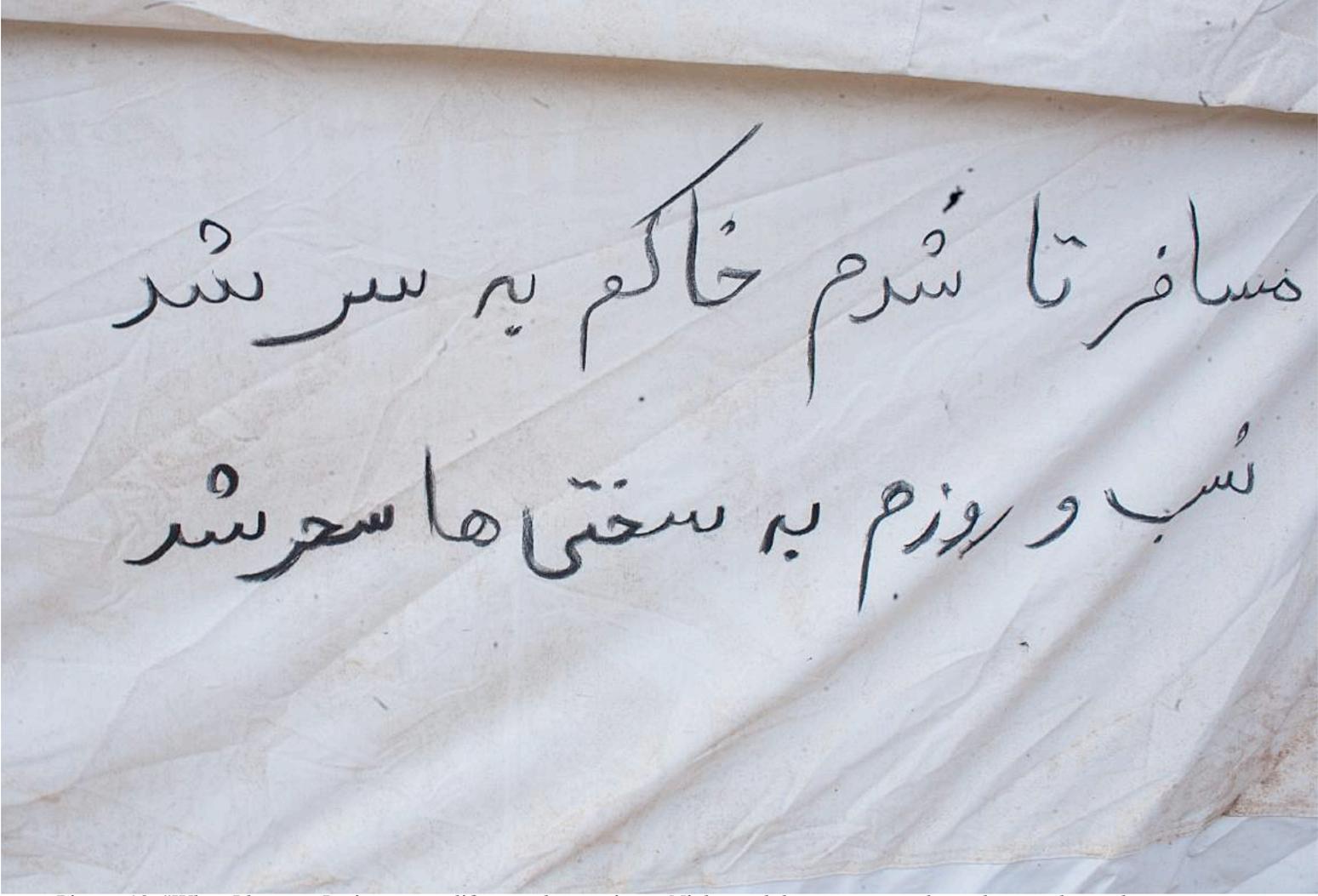
S.A.R.⁴² (aged 23) from Afghanistan is a victim of torture in Afghanistan and Turkey. He described that staying in a camp guarded by armed soldiers would make him lose his sleep over night having often nightmares. During one month of stay, he had not received any information on his situation in Greece, his legal options or his rights. There was no one he felt he could approach to talk about his problems. When we met him first, he had not been identified as victim of torture, he had not received any psychological support or medical examination of the secondary damages he suffers from up till now. *"It was two months ago. We were 71 persons - all Afghans: families, small children, and pregnant women. The Turkish Gendarmes caught us in the bushes near Meriç border river [Greek name: Evros] when we were trying to cross to Greece from the land route. It was 4 o'clock in the morning. They said, they'd just take our signatures and a blood test and until the night they'd send us back to Istanbul. They then transferred us to the Edirne detention centre for migrants. But then they took our passports, documents and phones away, separated women and men and put us in cells. After one week they asked to sign voluntary return to Afghanistan. I didn't agree so they brought me to the prison cells in the cellar that were never visited by any human rights organization. Then they started beating me and others every day. 'Deport? Sign return or stay 12 months in prison,' they threatened daily. We couldn't see if it was day or night. There was no lamp, no light, no window. They were giving us once in the morning a piece of dry bread and once in the evening. No other food. My cell was 3x4 meters and we were 14 persons locked inside. We slept on the stone floor. Without blankets or mattresses. The toilette was inside the cell. We never went out. There were Afghans, Iraqis, Egyptians, Sudanis, Iranians and other nationalities locked up in the cellar. Women, men and children. The responsible person for our beatings was the chief of the deportation department. He punished us every day. They just didn't beat us on the head and stomach so no signs or marks would remain. But they beat on all the rest of my body. Every day. On their police uniforms was written 'Güvenlik' [Turkish for: Security]. First, one officer came, put me on metal handcuffs and brought me to an empty cell. The officers were wearing hand gloves. They wouldn't pass us by the security cameras to keep the beatings hidden. Then another 2-3 officers would enter the cell so they were 3-4 in the end and strong enough. They didn't open my hand cuffs. They pressed me on the floor and made me lie down with my face turned down. Then one of them would press his feet on my neck and push my head down. The others would beat me with clubs while my hands were still locked on my back. They beat from the back with clubs and punches and they kicked me. They started the beatings at the feet and then reached the back. They beat me also with cables. They didn't break my bones, but they beat me black and blue. Then they would release my hands from the handcuffs, I had to stretch my arms in front of me on the ground, the hands turned up to the sky. One of them would hold my arms tight; another would beat with all of his power my fingers and my palms with his club until I lost the feeling. Then they said always: 'Either prison, either die here, or deport.' The beatings lasted two hours every time. I stayed 41 days in Edirne and 34 in the cellar cells. Every day they beat me in the cellar in 34 days, because I disagreed to sign deport. My life is in danger in Afghanistan. I cannot return. So I wouldn't sign for return. I had no choice. Most of us signed voluntary return. We were only three who got released by the help of private lawyers whom we had to pay. Until today I take medicine, I suffer pain. I cough blood sometimes. And I can't sleep. I get angry very quickly. I feel stress*

⁴² Interviewed on April 7, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

constantly. These days turn up in my nightmares until today. There were many Afghans already in prison for 2-3 months. Some of them told me they had been returned by Greek police from Didimoticho and Alexandroupoli or from Soufli. Others had been caught before reaching Greece. Like me.”

M.Q.⁴³ (aged 39) was working in logistics for the German forces in Afghanistan. When the forces left he and his family received more and more threats by the Taliban. A visa application to Germany he did showed no results. When the danger grew, he fled over Turkey to Greece where he got stuck. M.Q. is a victim of police violence at both sides of the Greece/FYROM (Macedonia) border. He just arrived there by the end of February, when Afghans were not anymore allowed to pass and only dozens of refugees from Syria and Iraq were still crossing until the border got completely closed in March 8, 2016. Within only two days he experienced tear-gas and, stun grenade attacks by the Macedonian police, when he participated in protests at the border on February 29, 2016. He later got beaten on both sides of the border by the two countries' police forces. Ever since, he reports, he cannot sleep and gets sometimes panic attacks. *“When I arrived from the island I got immediately a ticket to the border and left with the bus. I was sleeping outside in a tent near the rails when the police came and kicked me from outside in my tent. When I got out, I saw the officers with the clubs. They beat me without any comment. They beat many refugees. Then they said: ‘Return to Athens!’ It was about 20-30 officers – some with blue uniforms, some riot police in green uniforms. They forced many of us in the busses. The next day we demonstrated for the opening of the border. When the Greek police started beating us again, I escaped with a small group of refugees in the bushes. The police was hunting us. 8 hours we were running until we reached some dried river, we crossed a fence into Macedonia and we reached a village with white houses. The police of Macedonia caught us and put us on hand cuffs with the hands tied on our back. They beat me with clubs on my back, on my feet and everywhere. It was early in the evening. Then they put us in their soldiers' cars and drove us back to the official border crossing point. They beat the ones being to slow to get off the car with clubs make them move faster and pushed us through the border gate back into Greece. The Greek police put us in the busses and sent us by force to Athens. Since then I am in this camp.”*

⁴³ Interviewed on April 14, 2016 in Athens, Greece.

The image shows a piece of crumpled, aged paper with two lines of handwritten text in Persian. The first line reads 'مسافرتا شدم خاکنم به سرشدر' and the second line reads 'نُوب و روزم به سختی ها سحرشدر'. The paper has a yellowish-brown tint and visible creases.

مسافرتا شدم خاکنم به سرشدر
نُوب و روزم به سختی ها سحرشدر

Picture 19: "When I became I migrant, my life turned to a misery. Nights and days never pass by and narrowly reach dawn." Copyright © Salinia Stroux

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