

JOINT STATEMENT

Open the islands - No more dead from cold

Solidarity groups and organisations call for urgent action as winter is coming for refugees in Greece

12 October 2017

Over 40 solidarity groups and organisations are calling for urgent action from the Greek local and national authorities to prevent more refugees from dying in the cold as winter sets in once again. They expect more groups and organisations to join them over the next days and weeks.

Several places woke up on Thursday 12 October to find their neighbourhoods plastered with the emblematic picture of Moria camp on Lesbos, covered in snow last winter, while the collective has also launched a campaign on social media with the hashtag #opentheislands.

Six people who were seeking refuge and protection in Europe died in Moria last winter, their deaths linked to inhumane winter living conditions. Their families are still waiting for answers from the authorities as to how and why their relatives died, and for those who are responsible to be held accountable. Only last Sunday 8 October, a five-year-old Syrian girl died in Moria. The cause of death is yet unknown.

The collective of solidarity groups and organisations, expresses their shock and outrage at the current situation in the islands as winter sets in. Approximately 5000 people currently live in Moria camp, which has a capacity of around 2000. This includes the seriously ill, the disabled, pregnant women, many children including unaccompanied minors, and survivors of torture and other trauma. Many now live in woefully inadequate summer tents and have to sleep on the floor on thin sleeping mats or blankets. Likewise, the other Greek hotspot islands - [Samos](#), Chios, Kos and Leros - are dramatically overcrowded, leaving 8000 more asylum seekers without appropriate shelter. The so-called hotspots are currently uninhabitable and to date a clear plan to prevent the tragedies of last winter from being repeated has not been released.

A refugee forced to stay in Moria camp reports about the conditions:

“Living in Moria makes us all sick. In the morning you wake up in a cramped tent or container between other people. It smells disgustingly and I hate that I cannot wash myself properly. In winter it is freezing. Everything is soaked. When you wake up you cannot move your limbs. And you’re covered in ashes. Last winter we burned paper and plastic to stay warm. It is as if we were not human beings.”

The collective stresses that the current situation is not caused by the onset of winter or a sudden increase of arrivals. Rather, it is a direct result of the EU-Turkey Statement and EU asylum and migration policies of exclusion. These policies keep people trapped on the islands for prolonged periods of time, prevent people from ever reaching Europe, and prevent people who are eligible for relocation and family reunification from moving

on to other countries in a reasonable time.

Everybody knows that winter is coming. 700 million Euros have been made available to the Greek authorities to manage the situation. As a collective, we want details as to how and where this money is being spent. We also urgently demand that the several relevant actors in the Greek government, at national and local level, assume and clearly communicate their responsibilities. They must then be held accountable for what will happen to refugees and migrants this winter in Greece. The ongoing practice of dodging blame and responsibility for the systematic violation of refugees' rights in the Greek hotspots is unacceptable and has to stop. It is the role of the prime minister to ensure that all levels of the government function and are held accountable. We call on Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to clarify the responsibilities of different actors both locally and nationally, and to present a plan for winter.

Likewise, we condemn all the European governments who have created the EU-Turkey Statement and who put pressure on Greece to implement the EU-Turkey Statement, through the European Commission and other channels. The Statement prioritises maintaining Fortress Europe over all else, trampling roughshod over international human rights law. All European governments share the responsibility for the human rights violations suffered by refugees in Greece today, for those deaths that have already occurred, for those which could follow this winter.

It is with great interest that we have taken notice of the various statements by UNHCR, municipalities, and RIC staff, sounding the alarm over the current situation in the Greek islands. But without action, these statements are empty. We need solutions and immediate action from all responsible actors, including UNHCR, whose mandate is to provide international protection and seek permanent solutions for problems faced by refugees.

We call on Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to:

clarify the responsibilities of different actors both locally and nationally, and to present a plan for winter.

We call on the Greek government, at local and national level, to:

- Close the hotspots and decongest the islands by ending restrictions on the freedom of movement of asylum-seekers arriving on the Greek islands and provide them with adequate reception on the mainland outside of detention facilities.
- In the meantime, provide appropriate, winter-proof shelter for refugees staying in camps throughout Greece.
- Stop returning asylum-seekers to Turkey under the EU-Turkey deal, since they cannot fully access their right to apply for international protection in Turkey. Therefore, Turkey cannot be considered a “safe third country” or a “safe first country of asylum.”
- Examine all asylum claims on their merits in a full and fair asylum process with all

procedural and substantial safeguards.

- Stop arbitrary detention. Stop the current practice of generalized detention of asylum-seekers based on nationality with the intention of returning them to Turkey. Children must never be detained.
- Ensure access to medical care (including mental health care) and legal aid for asylum-seekers.

We call on the European Commission to:

- Revise the recommendations made in quarterly reports and joint actions plans, and remove recommendations to increase security forces and detention facilities for people seeking protection in the European Union.
- Remove recommendations to legalise the detention of minors, as outlined in the recommendations of the European Commission on 7th of March 2017, as the detention of minors violates the rights of children.
- Remove recommendations for limiting the number of appeal steps and for including vulnerable asylum applicants as well as those with family links in the EU under the EU-Turkey deal.

We call on the European Union Member States to:

- End all returns to Greece from other European States of refugees and asylum seekers under EU Regulation No. 604/2013 (Dublin III), due to the inhumane conditions in Greece.
- Increase the number of available relocation places by allowing access to the scheme for those who have arrived after the conclusion of the EU-Turkey deal, and swiftly match relocation requests in order to ensure that the minimum reception conditions to safeguard human dignity can be met, as required by EU Directive 2013/33/EU.
- Expedite the Dublin III reunification of families, many of whom have been forcibly separated by war and persecution and have been waiting years to be reunited.
- Cancel the inhuman EU-Turkey deal.

For more information, including press materials and the list of signatories so far, please visit: <https://opentheislands.wordpress.com>