

SAMOS VOLUNTEERS PRESS RELEASE

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COVID-19, FIRES & APPALLING LIVING CONDITIONS: REPLY FROM SAMOS VOLUNTEERS ON THE NEW PACT ON MIGRATION.

On September 15, the first cases of COVID-19 were announced in the Vathy Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) on Samos. (S) Anxiety caused by the news, and the subsequent lockdown of the entire facility, compounded existing tensions, frustration and hopelessness. Turbulence reached a climax on the same evening, when a fire broke out. On September 20, another fire damaged three containers in the section that houses unaccompanied minors. (S, S)

Two weeks later, the total number of confirmed cases in the RIC has increased to at least 76 and the lockdown has been extended until October 12. (S) Although the fires left the Vathy RIC mostly unscathed and there have been no reports of violence since, tension is palpable as the Greek authorities struggle to control the spread of the virus in the camp.

Protective measures such as frequent handwashing and social distancing are virtually impossible in the severely overcrowded centre—built for 648 but housing more than 4,500 people—where access to adequate sanitary facilities is limited. Experts repeatedly raised the alarm about the deplorable conditions in the camp (already a public health concern before the pandemic), fearing that coronavirus would spread uncontrollably if it reached the camps on the Aegean Islands. (S, S) In March, various actors, including Médecins Sans Frontières, called for the evacuation of the camps. (S)

The advice from experts went unheeded. With the exception of increased transfers, in an attempt to decongest the camp—the population fell from nearly 8,000 to 4,500 inhabitants—few measures were taken to improve and prepare the RIC's health infrastructure for a potential outbreak.

Six months later, there are only 40 places to quarantine confirmed COVID-19 patients. The number of cases is rising every day and there still is no clear medical response plan in place. Camp residents are particularly vulnerable as the appalling living conditions in the camp, underlying health conditions and past traumatic experiences adversely impact people's resilience. (S)

In the aftermath of the Moria fires in Lesvos, the European Commission finalised the New Migration Pact on September 23. Despite guarantees from Commissioner Ylva Johansson that there would be "no more Morias", the New Pact mirrors the clearly failed EU-Turkey deal: deterrence at the border, fast border procedures, quick returns, containment of asylum seekers and the responsibility for processing their asylum applications in border countries. "[It's] unlikely to work," says Judith Sutherland from Human Rights Watch Europe, "but very likely to produce more suffering." (S)

Asylum seekers will see the effects in 2023 at the earliest. This means that the policies that led to these conditions remain in place for the next three years. The situation may even deteriorate if migrants are moved to closed camps, the number of cases of COVID-19 increases and the lockdown in the camps are extended.

In Vathy, the same conditions that led to the catastrophe in Moria can be observed: years of inhumane living conditions, interaction of existing tension and frustration with fear of COVID-19, insufficient access to medical care and lack of communication from the authorities. Pressure is mounting as most NGOs that normally provide psycho-social support, education, food, shelter, medical services, legal support, hygiene services, recreational activities and clothing distribution are closed. Measures must be taken now, before it is too late.

We are thus calling on the Greek and European authorities to adhere to the Guidelines laid out in the European Commission's 2013 reception conditions directive and improve living conditions in reception centres across Greece and Europe. We support the demand to evacuate the camps on the Aegean Islands to safe accommodation on the mainland or in other EU countries right now.