



Statement by Samos Volunteers on the Deteriorating Humanitarian Situation along the Greek Border

[4 March 2020]

It is difficult to capture the gravity of the troubling and unprecedented developments that have unfolded in Greece and its surrounding region this past week.

On Thursday 27 February 2020 Turkey announced the opening of its border with the European Union. This was a political decision, widely recognised as an attempt to pressure the EU and NATO into supporting Turkey's military operation in Syria. Almost immediately thousands of people started making their way towards the Greek border with the hope of seeking asylum in Europe.

However, Europe's border remained closed.

Greek security forces used tear gas to hold back the large crowds of people gathering at the border with Turkey. Leaders called for restraint, Frontex reinforcement was dispatched, and Europe looked on.

Meanwhile, on Lesbos, Chios and most recently, Samos, existing tensions surrounding the construction of new camps boiled over. Fed up with carrying the brunt of Europe's inaction and angered by the Greek Government's use of force against protesting locals, extremist gangs took to the streets to express their frustration. NGOs and their volunteers became the targets of violence, boats of new arrivals were forcefully blocked from docking, and the road to Moria camp was set alight.

Faced with mounting pressure, the Greek Government announced on Sunday the suspension of asylum applications for one month by invoking article 78(3) of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, and the immediate removal of anyone who crosses into Greece during this period without papers. Additionally, the Greek army has launched military training along its land and sea borders until 6 March 2020, during which time live ammunition rounds will be fired.

These are unprecedented developments that undermine the very core of the Geneva Convention.

What has followed is a perfect storm of political chess-playing and diplomatic inertia, resulting in human suffering on a deplorable level. On Monday, a young Syrian child drowned during an attempted sea crossing, and a Syrian man was reportedly shot in the neck along the Greek-Turkish border at Evros. It is predicted that boat landings on the Aegean islands will continue



to rise, despite reports that new arrivals remain locked in port facilities, awaiting deportation to their countries of origin.

We condemn the decision of the Greek Government to undermine the fundamental right to asylum. We condemn violence on the Aegean islands. We condemn the cynical use of human life to achieve political ends.

But equally, we condemn the inaction of the European Union in the face of a growing humanitarian crisis. Once hailed as the defender of the liberal values of justice, equality and human rights, the European Union has turned its back on those founding principles.

Greece and the communities of the Aegean islands have too long been left alone to manage a situation that Europe will not. Local communities that once welcomed and supported asylum-seekers in 2015, have reached breaking point. Normal life has ceased to exist and daily routine now operates under the ugly shadow of a humanitarian crisis reached catastrophic levels.

We call upon elected European officials to take action and restore international norms. Political decisions carry a human cost - inaction is a decision.

We can do better. We must do better.