

Refugee Camp on Lesbos Burnt Down: Moria's Last Days

The refugee camp Moria no longer exists after a devastating fire. More than 12,000 people had been locked up 176 days in it due to the corona pandemic.

A report by Christian Jakob

They arrived on the evening of the 176th day of the curfew. It dawned, but the sun had not fully set over Moria, Europe's largest refugee camp on the Aegean island Lesbos. Authorities identified 35 corona cases by Tuesday night in the camp, roughly 100 contacts were reported. NGO staff were to bring them to an isolated center in a factory building only a few kilometers east. "They went into the tents and tried to violently drag out individuals," reports Mohammed Alizadah, 30 years, a refugee from Kabul, about the night when the camp caught fire.

But the people were afraid, some were reluctant to go. "Some got so angry, they tried to stop the deportation," said Alizadah on the phone on Wednesday morning. The police and ambulance were supposedly attacked with stones. "It was a rebellion." Alizadeh's statements are in accord with the reports of the Wednesday edition of the island's newspaper *Sto Nisi*. The Greek civil protection suspects arsonists.

„There was a small fire burning around midnight, then another one, at around half past midnight it grew much bigger very quickly.”

Mohammad Alizadah, refugee from Afghanistan

„Darkness fell, there was a small fire at first, then another one, at around half past midnight it grew much bigger very quickly,” Alizadah adds. "The police yelled at people, everyone was to leave the camp, head to the streets, had to leave their belongings behind." However, the flames cut off some of their escape routes very quickly. "Many fled into the olive groves behind the camp," points Alizadah out, others made their way on foot towards the island's capital. Halfway along the route, the police set up a road block. "Thousands are trapped now," notes Alizadah. There have been no supplies so far.

After the fire, there was hardly anything left of the camp. The government declared a state of emergency in the morning, sent airplanes with special police forces. Up until noon, there had been no statement on how the people can be provided for in that chaos.

It had been known for weeks that a corona outbreak and its consequences could end up in a catastrophe in the camp. The Greek ministry for migration already imposed a curfew on Moria on March 13th, fearing a major spreading of the virus.

In April, on the 31st day of the curfew, migrants wrote a letter and demanded an evacuation. "The virus in the camp would be like a death sentence to the elderly and sick." On the 55th day, they wrote a second letter: "Are we not worth an answer, while so many talk about Moria, even a German minister called it 'Europe's shame'?"

Life in Moria is about queuing

Mohammad Alizadah is among the initiators of this letter. On a Monday at the end of August, the 163rd day of the curfew, he heads to the camp's gate to explain the camp's inner situation. Despite the heat, he wears a blue long-sleeved shirt, his wavy hair is parted at one side. He arrived on the island in 2018, with his now 24-year-old wife and their 4-year-old son. No official invitation has arrived so far to his asylum request. He studied pharmaceuticals in Kabul, worked four years in a pharmacy. "I know a lot about hygiene," he says, so he educates camp inhabitants about hygienic issues.

"Life in Moria is about queuing," observes Alizadah, "for food, water, toilets; in the summer there are more than 30 degrees, with no shade in sight." "Keeping distance is impossible." When inhabitants gather to take turns in the queue, "fights are inevitable."

The mixture of traumatization, stress, uncertainty and impoverishment has led multiple times to aggressions and violence in the camp, even to arsons. What happened in the night before Wednesday, is the result of a deprivation of rights for the migrants for years on end.

On this morning, two weeks after the fire, people are hectically running in and out of the entrance, they carry bags and boxes on their shoulders. It smells like trash and feces. Some women take their babies in prams for a walk. When a bus stops, dozens gather, they present white paper slips from their pockets. Permits that are only valid today. They are handed out daily to a maximum of 120 migrants. Now, they are allowed to leave the camp for "urgent reasons". The bus driver checks all paper slips before they get on. Two police cars control the curfew, which are on both sides of the street that passes the camp.

Up until the fire, the original camp of Moria was surrounded by a barbed wire fence. In 2014, the camp was opened for 3,000 people. At some point, it became horribly overcrowded and as a consequence, the inhabitants had to move into huts in the surrounding bushland. The vast majority had lived there until Tuesday night with no toilets, the entire area was full of feces and rats.

No country in the world has received proportionally more financial help for refugee supplies than Greece. Between 2015 and January 2020, 2.23 billion euros were transferred from Brussels to Athens. About one million refugees entered the country in that time period, but most of them left the country right away or were deported again to Turkey by the authorities. Less than 150,000 people have actually been admitted in Greece since 2015, with or without an asylum application. On the contrary, the EU government provided 6 trillion euros for almost 4 million refugees to the national government of Turkey. But the display of poverty is a way to keep more refugees away.

Violence rises

"Before the curfew, most people wanted to leave their tents, because inside it is twice as hot as outside," warns Alizadah during our visit in August. "But now, as fear of the virus is prevailing, they are likely to stay inside to avoid unnecessary contacts." The nights are the worst. "People have been attacked, especially women. Many stay in their tents." Thirteen have been seriously injured, six dead in the past months due to stabbings in Moria according to the UN refugee organization UNHCR.

There are yellow cabs in front of the entrance, their drivers wait in the shade of olive trees. The ride of eight kilometers to Mytilene, the capital of the island, costs approximately eight euros. And no police officer stops them. If you have the money, you can skirt the law, go shopping, pick up money from relatives at a MoneyGram office. The fine for getting caught is 150 euros.

Everybody in the camp receives 90 euros per month from the state, children and spouses a bit more than half of it. As of September 1st, the government cut the payment to 75 euros. Even standing in queues can be a matter of social differences. Every morning, local traders arrived at the gate and delivered bags of fruit and vegetables. Some migrants resold the commodities in the camp. Solvent migrants bought everything in the camp, cooked their own meals and did not have to stand in line that often.

But now, at the end of summer, grassy areas look more like sand. It is high season for bushfires. Along the coastal road, between Moria and Mytilene, the island's fire department has its headquarters. The director's office is dark and cool, a bottle of rum and glasses for guests stand on a sideboard of dark red wood. "The situation is not ideal," confirms Konstantinos Theophilus two weeks before flames destroy the entire camp.

200 fires in 2020 according to Fire Department

Since the beginning of the year, Moria and the closer vicinities have already experienced about 200 fires, in July about three per day. "We had to deploy two firefighting units that are constantly watching over the camp," comments Theophilos. It is of course an additional load, but saving lives is "of utmost importance." Many fires are ignited in cooking areas. Theophilus decides to remain silent about other causes of fire.

Support organizations on the island believe that many fires were caused by right-wing extremists. The initial solidarity of the islanders for the refugees has changed to the extreme.

In February, the Turkish President Erdoğan signaled to open up Turkish borders for refugees. About 30,000 people rushed to Greece, some to Lesbos. The Greek government panicked. They closed borders and declared the right of asylum null and void. On Lesbos, people sensed a pogrom atmosphere, right-wing extremists from all over Europe arrived and attacked refugees and humanitarian helpers.

„We had to take the same security measure we usually do in war zones," explains Marco Sandrone. The young Italian is head of the children's hospital of Doctors Without Borders in front of the camp entrance. The government previously declared to erect a new, closed camp in the north of Lesbos. The protests against it were so fierce that Athens sent 200 police officers to the island. But that did not help to settle the outrage. The government cancelled the plans of a new camp, the police withdrew. "Thereafter, the state lost control completely," says Sandrone about this particular time. The outrage of the people was directed at the aid organizations. "All of the sudden, we were seen as the reason that refugees came to the island after all."

Right-wing activists erected road blocks, attacked facilities and houses of helping hands. "It was extremely chaotic and very frightening," states Sandrone, "You could never imagine that happening in a European country." Many support organizations sent their helpers away.

But that meant that the already completely insufficient supplies were further thinned out. "Many children live in the camp with chronic diseases, they do not even have enough access to sanitary facilities," warns Sandrone. We do have international minimum standards on how refugees

must be accommodated and supplied in war zones. “These standards are not even applied in Moria.”

Unrests with the islanders

The atmosphere remained explosive. Refugees protested against the curfew on April 23rd. A carpenter from Afalonas, north of the camp, shot with a sporting gun at the group. Two refugees had to be treated at the hospital. When the police arrested the man, neighbors wanted to effect his release, even when he had to go to court.

On August 20th, President of Greece Katerina Sakellaropoulou visited Moria. Almost 100 right-wing extremists used her visit for a demonstration. They attacked police officers with stones, and they answered with tear gas. “Then, the protestors attacked our clinic,” said Sandrone. Hundreds of patients were inside the ward at that time. “First, they insulted my colleagues and threw stones at them. Fires started, we had to extinguish them ourselves.” This went on for four hours, before they retreated in the early afternoon.

Not only the right uses violence, the state does too. Greece had been sending loads of refugees illegally and forcefully back to Turkey for a long time. And it had been covered up for quite some time. But after Erdoğan’s actions in February, the Greek government had no reason to conceal this anymore.

Since March only 600 refugees have officially arrived on Greek islands, at the moment hardly any. The *New York Times* has analyzed data from human rights organizations, scientists and Turkish coast guards. According to their results, the Greek coast guards have caught off about 1,072 refugees on sea and released them again in the open waters from mid-March to mid-August. Some of them were left behind on boats without a motor. The officers want the drift to bring the migrants back to Turkish territories. Videos of these actions were published, because the coast guards did not collect the refugees’ mobiles during their visitations.

The refugees’ cemetery

The cemetery Saint Panteleimon is located at a mountainside, high above the harbor of Mytilene. Behind the entrance are pine trees, in their shadows impressive tombstones. Widows are mourning in silence; others lay down flowers or sit in the afternoon next to graves and chatter as if the cemetery was their garden.

In the back, where the garbage is collected, are the dead that do not belong to the Greek Orthodox Church. Many graves are enclosed with bare concrete, there are no tombstones, no names mentioned. Behind a small wall, the blue color of the Aegean Sea sparkles, from which the mountains of the Turkish coast emerge at the horizon. Whoever is buried on this side of the cemetery, came from over there. The city council of Mytilene ordered to have all dead refugees buried here at first. First, the ones that drowned in the Aegean Sea, then the first victims from Moria. But there was no room anymore. The community’s budget for the burials of destitutes was exhausted.

The Muslim dead, who make up the majority of the migrants, have since been buried in a makeshift cemetery outside the city. Len Meachim takes care of the others. The 65-year-old Irishman is a representative of the tiny Catholic community on Lesbos. Since January 2019, he has organized about a dozen burials for people, who had to spend their last days in Moria: a

baby that died of dehydration; a Congolese woman, a man from South Sudan, they suffered from diseases; victims of stabbings.

Meachim looks for relatives, brings a priest to the island, collects 500 euros, the cost of a burial. “Many families would like to have their relatives buried at home,” says Meachim, who came to Lesbos 35 years ago and works as a teacher here. But the transfer of the body costs up to 7,000 euros. The majority of relatives cannot even make it to Lesbos for the funeral.

There is not much space left in this part of the cemetery. It is not unusual in Greece to exhume the dead after two years. “Their remains are collected in an urn and brought to a smaller place of grief,” tells Meachim. “It is quite affordable to have urns sent to African families.” Maybe this can be an option to make some space in the cemetery.

The outbreak of the pandemic

It is the 149th day of the curfew, August 12th, the midst of the tourist season. Covid-19 arrives on Lesbos: the authorities have registered 112 cases until September 1st on an island with barely 100,000 people. Proportionally, this is more than anywhere else in Greece. Eight people have since died of Covid-19 on the island. The pathological department of the small island hospital has been turned into a corona ward. At the beginning of September, it has treated two dozens of patients, three more are on the intensive care unit. The capacities are exhausted, severe cases are flown to Athens.

On the 169th day of the curfew, a 40-year-old Somali reports a fever to the doctors in Moria. He is tested positive for corona, the first case in the camp. It has been clear for months that a corona outbreak in the camp can lead to a humanitarian crisis. In May, Doctors Without Borders opened an isolation center next to the camp for suspected Covid-19 cases. Greek authorities did not tolerate that. They imposed fees for supposedly having violated urban development and planning policies. Therefore, the doctors closed the center at the end of July.

Now, the healthy and sick are to be treated in isolation: The government had the entire camp complex locked down. Nobody leaves, nobody enters. Supplies are restricted. Transportation of migrants to the mainland stopped entirely.

„Nobody is safe here anymore,” emphasizes Mohammad Alizadah on the phone on the 175th day of the curfew. “The virus enters the camp, there will be hundreds of cases in no time. The people are afraid, they sense upcoming changes. Everybody knows that the government has signed a contract with a construction company to fence off the camp.”

On the 177th day, camp Moria was no more.

Research on Moria

The coverage by Christian Jakob was created during a trip of the EU Russia Civil Society Forum from the 24th to 28th of August and financed by EU funds. The portrayal of events that happened later on, as the destruction of the camp Moria during the night before Wednesday, are based on telephone calls.