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Greek Syriza government steps up brutal repression of refugees and asylum seekers

There are currently more than 15,000 refugees stranded in the Greek islands of Rhodes, Kos, Samos, Chios and Lesbos on the border with Turkey, most of them in facilities designed for half that amount of people. In the refugee camp of Moria in Lesbos alone, there are 7,000 people, nearly three times the actual capacity of the camp.

The situation is a direct consequence of the rotten deal cut between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016, which stipulates that all refugees crossing into Greece from Turkey will be interned there until their case is processed and they are ultimately deported back to Turkey.

As part of this deal, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and the Syriza-led government—in alliance with its coalition partners, the xenophobic Independent Greeks—have become the EU's jailor as they preside over what are essentially concentration camps.

Speaking before a Greek parliamentary committee last month, Dimitra Spatharidou, coordinator of the Greek office of Amnesty International, painted a devastating picture of life for migrants and refugees interned in Greece: “We have seen hundreds of people sleeping in makeshift tents. In Samos the area is full of rats. We saw dozens of men with anxiety disorders, depression and other psychological problems due to their geographic restriction. The living conditions are an open wound for human rights.”

Spatharidou also read out a letter from Amal, a lone female Syrian refugee interned at the Moria camp. In her letter Amal states: “If you want to see what fear and anxiety is don't stay in Syria, come to Moria.”

An equally devastating picture was painted by Declan Barry, medical coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières, who highlighted the health hazards faced by Moria inmates: “Moria camp is both unsafe and unsanitary, especially for children. Every day we treat many hygiene-related conditions such as vomiting, diarrhoea, skin infections and other infectious diseases, and we must then return these people to the same risky living conditions. It’s an unbearable vicious circle. The mix of unhygienic and dangerous living conditions which increase the rate of childhood illnesses, the obstacles to providing appropriate recovery conditions for sick children, and the inadequate access to healthcare services, represent a perfect storm for the health and well-being of children.”

The situation is only set to worsen. According to figures released by the International Organisation for Migration last month, 7,300 migrants and refugees crossed the Eastern Mediterranean Sea from Turkey into Greece between January 1 and April 21 this year. This is a 53 percent increase compared with the same period last year. According to reports the majority of refugees are from Syria, Iraq and Iran.

As the islands are heaving under the influx, new arrivals have also started to take the old land route into Greece via the Evros River, which runs along the land border between Greece and Turkey. According to a report released last month by the UN Refugee Agency (UNRA), 2,900 people crossed the land border in April alone, which is half the number of the people who made the crossing in all of 2017.

The surge in refugees coincides with the bombing campaign by US, UK and French forces against Syrian government targets. This underscores the direct culpability that Western imperialist powers have in instigating the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War as they seek to topple Syrian President Bashar Al Assad, Russia’s only strategic ally in the Middle East, risking a direct confrontation with Russia.

The situation has also increased tensions with layers of the local population due to the increase in petty crime fuelled by the poverty and desperation of migrants and refugees as well as the negative impact the refugee crisis has had on the tourist industry—the main source of revenue on Greece’s islands. This is compounded by the hike in VAT rates on Greek islands, which has increased the cost of living for locals.

This accounts for the widespread protests Tsipras faced when he visited Lesbos on May 3, which included a general strike that virtually shut down the island. According to reports, around 2,500 protesters gathered at the island’s main port to protest and were attacked by riot police with tear gas.

The hostile reception for Tsipras underscores the deep hatred for the Syriza-led government among the working class. Exactly four years previously, in May 2014, Tsipras made a speech in the central square of Mytilene, Lesbos' main city, where he declared, "Go back, Mrs. Merkel, go back Mr. Schäuble, go back ladies and gentlemen of Europe's conservative nomenclature, go back gentlemen of the troika, Greece is not a guinea pig."

A few months later, in January 2015, Tsipras was swept into power on an anti-austerity ticket, which he betrayed only a few months later when he signed a new bailout package with Greece's creditors. This took place just weeks after an overwhelming rejection of austerity at a referendum called by the Syriza government in July 2015.

Now, far-right groups such as the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn are exploiting the crisis facilitated by Syriza's actions.

Just two weeks before Tsipras' visit, on April 22, a group of around 200 fascist thugs attacked a peaceful protest by refugees in Mytilene's main square on Lesbos against their internment on the island. According to reports, the mob broke through a police cordon and threw stones, bottles and flares at the asylum seekers of mainly Afghan origin, which included women and children. Thirty-five people were injured.

Eyewitnesses say the attacks took place under the nose of riot police units that were stationed between the two groups. One pro-refugee activist speaking anonymously to Greek daily *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton* stated, "[Police] had orders not to move against the fascists to arrest them, but only to disperse them (this was heard on many instances on their CB radios)."

The facilitation by police of such attacks is a common occurrence in Greece. Golden Dawn enjoys widespread support amongst police, especially in the riot squads.

On April 20, just two days prior to the fascist attacks, the Tsipras government overturned an April 17 binding court ruling by Greece's Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, ordering it to end its abusive policy of detaining asylum seekers on Greece's islands. The government will instead pass legislation providing a legal basis for its "containment" policy. This was condemned by 21 human rights and humanitarian organizations.

The overturning of the Court decision took place on the same day as the trial began of the "Moria 35," who were arrested by police after peaceful protests on July 18, 2017 by hundreds of people who were held inside the camp. The trial is ongoing and if found guilty, the protesters face possible 10-year prison sentences and probable deportation.

The protesters were demanding that Greece and the EU comply with their own laws when they were violently attacked by riot police with tear gas, which according to the Lesbos Legal Centre “made it painful to breathe, even from outside the camp.” The camp was put on lockdown, with humanitarian personnel kicked out. The centre said that the “African section” of the camp was targeted an hour after the initial attacks, with “police forcibly dragging people out, shooting tear gas at close range, and brutally assaulting people, including a pregnant woman.” The 35 were arrested in the raid, with Amnesty International concluding that the arrests could have amounted to torture.

As for the EU, its response to the refugee crisis is more repression. At the beginning of May, the EU unveiled new plans to triple Frontex’s budget from the current level of €12.4 billion to €33 billion and to increase Frontex personnel from the current 1,000 to 10,000 by 2027. According to *Handelsblatt*, “The increased funds will enable more help, particularly for Greece and Italy, which bear the brunt of the inflow on their external borders.”

The Syriza-led government is entirely in line with this policy. In an interview with pro-Syriza daily *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton*, Minister for Immigration Policy Thodoris Vitsas boasted that in the previous government under the conservative New Democracy and social democratic PASOK “there were no organised camps or major reception centres.”