**Greece Report Summary – June 2021**

*Constructing Crisis at Europe’s Border: The EU plan to intensify its dangerous hotspots on the Greek islands.*

Over the past five years, an entirely avoidable and predictable policy-driven humanitarian crisis has been unfolding in the Greek islands of Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Leros, and Kos, with devasting consequences for the people trapped there. After fleeing their homes and surviving harrowing journeys to Europe, the indefinite containment, limbo, and systematic violence in Greece further traumatises people seeking protection. Nearly 10,000 people are currently being held in five Greek islands ‘hotspots’, also known as Reception and Identification Centres (RICs[[1]](#endnote-2)).

The ‘hotpot approach’ has been envisaged as a model of operational support by the EU agencies to the Member States such as Italy and Greece to facilitate the swift identification, registration, and fingerprinting of migrants arriving in Europe. In Greece, this approach is closely intertwined with the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement (also known as the ‘Deal’) and has proven to be a disaster. After the introduction of the Deal, the hotspots quickly transformed into mass containment sites intended to facilitate the fast-track border processing and return of people to Turkey. Many people remain confined in degrading and inhumane conditions as they wait for protection. The Deal signified a tipping point, creating a European border that was closed and fortified and embedding structural violence at the heart of EU migration policies.

As a humanitarian medical organisation providing care on the Greek islands, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been treating the physical and mental wounds these migration policies have inflicted on people for many years. In October 2016 and October 2017, MSF published several reports highlighting the health implications of containment and the significant mental health emergency emerging on the islands.[[2]](#endnote-3) Nearly four years on and, astonishingly, rather than address the situation, the EU and its member states intend to intensify and institutionalise its containment and deterrence strategy.

In September 2020, the notorious Moria RIC was burned to the ground in a destructive and symbolic moment. EU leaders promised ‘no more Morias’ while ignoring similar facilities on Samos, Kos, Chios, and Leros. From the ashes of Moria has emerged a new, temporary camp, Mavrovouni, that replicates many of the worst elements of the Moria hotspot. The Moria RIC is the blueprint for the proposed EU Migration and Asylum Pact screening and asylum regulations announced on 23 September 2020 and the new EU-funded Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centres (MPRICs) - one is already being built on Samos and may be operational by June 2021. Commonly referred to as ‘closed centres’ by the Greek authorities, MPRICs are designed as more restrictive versions of the current facilities, and reinforce the ability to contain, detain and deport people arriving in Europe.[[3]](#endnote-4)

In this report, MSF takes stock of five years of providing medical care on the Greek islands. The report's analysis is based on documentation and medical data from MSF operations on Lesvos, Samos, and Chios, as well as testimony from patients and MSF staff.

**MSF once again calls on European leaders and the Greek government to take accountability, recognise the harm caused and end this deadly and dangerous approach.**

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| “What we found in Moria was inhumanity and violence. It was an open-air prison. We are survivors of torture, but in Moria we were not even treated as human beings. We were told that our country of origin is safe and that we would be rejected and returned. We were told that it didn’t matter what we had been through. We didn’t receive any protection. We didn’t receive any support. We weren’t even told what the decision of our asylum application was. We didn’t have access to a fair asylum process. Now that we have been freed from this hell, we call on you to stop treating human beings like criminals on the Greek islands. We don’t want more lines to queue for food, people left without dignified shelter, no more people trapped in uncertainty and insecurity. We who have suffered the most degrading and insurmountable violence, cannot but refuse inhumane and degrading treatment for anyone in any way. Every person deserves to be treated with humanity with respect to their dignity and freedom.”  **Survivors2 is** agroup of survivors of torture, cruel and inhumane treatment, and EU migration policies. All Survivors2 members are either current or former patients of MSF’s rehabilitation clinic in Athens. |

**Key Findings – the Human Cost of Containment**

**People seeking protection in Europe have already been exposed to violence and hardship, and the hotspots are neither safe nor healthy places for them**. The majority of people treated by MSF have experienced one or more traumatic events in their country of origin and during their migration journey. This trauma is compounded by their containment and the everyday structural violence[[4]](#footnote-2) of life in the hotspots. As a result, MSF teams on the Greek islands respond to alarming levels of mental health suffering. Between 2019 and 2020, MSF mental health clinics on Chios, Lesvos, and Samos treated 1,369 patients.

Major stressors for patients’ mental health included navigating daily life in poor living conditions and unclear administrative procedures, exposure to violence and insecurity, unaddressed medical needs, and fear of deportation. Many require treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, moderate to severe depression, reactive psychosis, and anxiety, all of which are serious mental health conditions that demand long-term, specialised care often inaccessible on the islands. MSF has treated hundreds of survivors of violence, ill-treatment, and torture, who have not been identified by the authorities and have not received any support. Instead, they have been placed in conditions that are not only unsafe but re-traumatising.

Children seeking mental health support often display trauma- and fear-induced symptoms triggered by their environment in the hotspots. There are alarmingly high rates of self-harming and suicidal acts among children; the youngest seen by MSF was six years old. As people's sense of hopelessness intensifies, their mental health state worsens; MSF has documented this in similar contexts around the world.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The living conditions in the RICs expose children to unhealthy and unsafe environments. Between 2018 and 2020, MSF conducted over 42,000 paediatric consultations at its clinic near the Moria RIC, which included treating children for injuries and burns from accidents, hazards, and violence. The most common issues were linked to poor sanitation and exposure to cold weather.

Europe's leaders have continued to prioritise containment and deterrence above the provision of basic essential services such as water, sanitation and access to health. MSF and other NGOs have continuously stepped in to provide crucial services. From 2019 to May 2021, MSF has trucked in over 43 million litres of safe water for people in the over-capacity Vathy RIC, where the water is unsafe to drink.

Inadequate access to healthcare

**There are significant gaps in access to adequate and timely healthcare for people held on the Greek islands. This may lead to otherwise manageable medical and mental health conditions deteriorating, becoming more severe and potentially chronic.** Since the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement, the provision of primary healthcare has been heavily dependent the support of NGOs and volunteer run medical organizations, while the designated health authorities focus on vulnerability screening for the border procedure. Local health services and hospitals on the islands are not equipped to deal with the additional pressure of the asylum-seeking population and are often lacking specialists needed for complex conditions present amongst people seeking asylum, as well as cultural mediation to support access to care for asylum seekers. MSF has regularly called for the evacuation of people with medical conditions, requiring access to medical care not available on the islands.

The COVID-19 pandemic should have been the final straw to abandon cramped hotspots. Instead, the pandemic has amplified the suffering of migrants subjected to a chaotic COVID-19 outbreak response and harsh lockdowns in poor living conditions, with little to no access to water, hygiene, or essential services. Measures taken have dangerously conflated public health and migration control agendas.

**The EU Dangerous Hotspot Experiment**

**The hotspot approach harms people’s dignity, health, and well-being and is designed as a deterrent to those who dare to seek safety in Europe**. This report’s detailed analysis explains how containment, appalling reception conditions, expanding detention, violent border control and fast-track border procedures work as a system that inflicts misery and puts lives in danger.

The ‘shield’ of Europe: violence at borders

In an attempt to tightly control the number of people arriving, the European Union and its Member States have reinforced the militarisation of Europe’s land and sea borders. This has led to widespread use of violent tactics and pushbacks, including making waves around the inflatable boats, assaults by groups of masked men assaults, pointing guns, firing shots, damaging the dinghies and other forms of violence. No one is spared; pregnant women, children, and people with disabilities – have all been targeted. From March 2020, the pushback tactics were extended to the hotspots themselves. For example, when two minors reached the RIC of Samos in September 2020, rather than being registered as new arrivals they were allegedly taken from the island, put back in a boat, and left adrift at sea near the Turkey border.

The everyday violence of containment

Chronic overcrowding, security issues and a lack of access to adequate healthcare, sanitation and food have led to at least 21 deaths, including a six-month-old baby who died of dehydration. The high-security detention-like conditions in the RICs cannot provide asylum seekers with a safe environment. The highly visible police presence, the official communications delivered by loudspeaker, the fencing and razor wire, all serve to worsen the pervasive sense of fear and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. In addition, the COVID-19 lockdown measures and movement restrictions were applied discriminatorily to the Greek island hotspots and refugee facilities for a longer duration than those applied to the rest of Greece. The pandemic has amplified the suffering of asylum seekers and refugees and has exposed their structural exclusion.

Failure to identify and protect vulnerable people

MSF has regularly documented the failure of the authorities to properly identify vulnerable people. The ‘swift’ process employed as part of the hotspot model greatly reduces the chances of identifying vulnerable people or those with special needs, especially when these are not easily visible, such as people with mental health conditions or those that have been victims of violence. Disclosure of traumatic incidents is a lengthy process that should be conducted by specialised staff and requires trust-building and establishing a safe environment.

Erosion of asylum: ‘Fast track’ procedures and return

Navigating the complicated and constantly changing border and asylum procedures can be a nightmare for people seeking safety in Europe. Uncertainty, fear and confusion regarding the procedures were one of the main causes of stress for people treated by MSF. Asylum seekers are left to prepare for the complicated asylum procedure without support of a lawyer and little access to information. Only a third of MSF patients on Lesvos had access to a legal assistance during their asylum interview.

Expansion of Detention

The use of administrative detention as a precursor to deportation has increased in Greece over the last few years. The situation in pre-removal centres is deplorable; in 2014, MSF denounced conditions in Greek detention centres as posing a threat to detainees’ health and safety.[[6]](#footnote-3) The expansion of the use of detention upon arrival in the hotspot model further places people at risk, depriving them of their liberty and excluding them.

**Moving Forward: EU recycles and intensifies a dangerous approach**

MSF is extremely concerned about the human cost of the new MPRICs being built on the Greek islands and raises the following ‘red flags’ to caution against these restrictive new centres:

1. **Structural violence causing a mental health and protection crisis** - The MPRICs will hold people in shipping containers, surrounded by barbed wire fences; this cannot be sold as an improvement in people’s living conditions. The MPRICs exemplify the true face of structural violence and will cause a continued, worsened mental health and protection crisis for an already vulnerable population. It will deny them their fundamental rights to dignity and respect for physical and mental health.

**2. The right to asylum in jeopardy –** The proposed Migration Pact, with its emphasis on returns and border control (with a fast track, discriminatory asylum procedure), combined with the MPRICs, paves the way to more detention and mass deportations. This is a significant backwards step backwards on for people’s right to seek asylum, which legitimises potential increased breaches of human rights.

**3. Increased security and segregation limiting access to services –** The MPRIC in Zervou, on Samos island, has been built in a remote hillside far from the any towns on the island and completely isolated from public services. The plans include a heavy focus on security and surveillance and controlled entry and exit. The MPRIC design epitomises total control removing any agency from the individuals contained in the system, and segregating them completely from the rest of society.

**4. Increased detention and deprivation of liberty -** All the new MPRICs will have pre-removal detention centres. Combined with the proposed pre-entry border screening regulation, this will lead to widespread detention of people seeking international protection. The MPRICs risk becoming mass containment camps at the EU’s borders depriving people of their liberty.

**5. Decreased humanitarian presence and more invisible suffering -** A more restrictive environment for humanitarian assistance is already underway in Greece, with criminalisation of response at land and sea[[7]](#endnote-6) and a new discriminatory NGO registration law implicating those wishing to help asylum seekers and refugees. [[8]](#endnote-7) The detrimental consequences of shrinking humanitarian space mean a lack of solidarity, safe spaces, protection and good quality services for people. Controlling the areas where humanitarian organisations can operate prevents them from witnessing potential abuses and so limits accountability. The MPRICs will make people’s suffering more invisible and isolate the most vulnerable.

**Calls to action**

“I want Europe to notice, to take care of refugees, to see their problems. We are human beings, we are human beings, like you. As we see each other. They cannot leave us in these conditions.” Menele, 30 years old in Samos, from Democratic Republic of Congo

For European leaders, creating the illusion that migration can and must be stopped is more important than the safety of people and their potential contributions to society through consistent reception and integration programmes. Europe’s dangerous approach to migration is the cause of the medical humanitarian crisis in Greece. Demonising and degrading people seeking safety in Europe is not a solution, but the problem itself.

There is a vacuum of accountability, enabled by the EU-Turkey Statement and the hotspot model, which has blurred informal agreements, legal frameworks and responsibilities between national governments and EU institutions. The European Commission, European member states and Greek authorities must take responsibility. Rather than pursuing a brutal, inhumane system and deadly chaos, Europe must instead adopt policies that **protect human lives** and do not jeopardise people’s health and well-being.

**Key Calls**:

* **Evacuate people from the island hotspots** to safety on the Greek mainland and in other European states.
* **End the policies of containment and deterrence,** and **immediately** **halt the creation of the Greek island MPRICS.** The only purpose of centres on the Greek islands must be the provision of urgent assistance, facilitation of access to protection and relocation to safe reception.
* **Ensure access to quality, timely medical care**, tailored to the medical and mental health needs of the population, and provided sustainably within the public health system.
* **Invest in a dignified reception system and safe accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants**, such as housing within communities, as well as integration programmes for refugees.
* **Establish a fair and transparent asylum process** that upholds all necessary procedural safeguards and does not violate the rights of asylum seekers through border procedures.
* **Ensure no refoulement, violence and death at EU borders**: end the push-backs and stop criminalising humanitarian assistance. Instead provide safe passage for those seeking safety in Europe. Alongside this, invest in family reunification, refugee resettlement, humanitarian visa and other complementary protection pathways, as well pathways for work and study.

1. Ministry of Citizen Protection (6 May 2021), *National Situation Picture Regrading Eastern Aegean Sea*, <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/13156/apotyposi-tis-ethnikis-eikonas-katastasis-gia-to-prosfygiko-metanasteftiko-zitima-tin-6-5-2021/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Médecins Sans Frontières (2016), *Greece: Vulnerable People Left Behind*, <https://www.msf.org/greece-2016-vulnerable-people-left-behind>;Médecins Sans Frontières (2017), *Confronting a Mental Health Emergency on Lesvos and Samos*, <https://www.msf.org/greece-eu-border-policies-fuel-mental-health-crisis-asylum-seekers> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Ministry of National Defence (November 20 2019), *Five step plan on immigration* [Press Conference], <https://www.amna.gr/home/article/409666/Pente-sun-mia-draseis-tis-kubernisis-gia-to-metanasteutiko> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Structural violence refers to the social structures or institutions that put individuals and populations in harm's way [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Médecins Sans Frontières (2018), *Nauru : Indefinite Despair,* <https://www.msf.org/indefinite-despair-report-and-executive-summary-nauru> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. MSF invisible suffering report, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
7. Keep Talking Greece (28 September 2020) *Greece files against 33 NGO members for assisting human traffickers* <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2020/09/28/greece-ngo-members-human-traffickers-lesvos-turkey/> [accessed 21 May 2021] [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. Council of Europe (November 2020), *Expert Council on NGO Law calls Greece to revoke restrictions on the registration and certification of NGOs*, https://www.coe.int/en/web/special-representative-secretary-general-migration-refugees/newsletter-november-2020/ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)