



Urgent action needed on European Refugee Crisis

IRC Situational Briefing – 12 April 2016

More than 53,000 asylum seekers are now in need of urgent humanitarian and protection support in Greece.¹ The illogical and unethical EU-Turkey deal has resulted in a European response to the refugee crisis that has detention and return at its heart. This deal only promotes further disorder and smuggling, and is resulting in inhumane treatment of thousands of refugees fleeing violence and persecution. Addressing this situation is not beyond reach, but European states must take urgent action now.

Urgent action is needed in three areas:

- 1. Accelerate the provision of essential services to meet the humanitarian and protection needs of 53,000 people in Greece**
- 2. Dramatically increase relocation and capacity for effective asylum processing in Greece**
- 3. Replace the EU-Turkey ‘one-in, one-out’ deal with an expanded resettlement programme that does not hinge on returns**

1. Accelerate the provision of essential services to meet the humanitarian and protection needs of 53,000 people in Greece

- (a) In mainland Greece, and particularly in new camps in northern Greece, refugees are living in overcrowded, isolated camps with very limited access to essential health, water and sanitation services and information. There must be a coordinated approach between the Greek government, UN agencies and NGOs to ensure essential services are provided. In light of the current situation, EU/ECHO and bilateral funding must be swiftly disbursed to meet immediate humanitarian needs.
- (b) Closure of Greece’s northern border continues to have severe humanitarian implications as tensions grow amongst thousands gathered at the informal refugee site in Idomeni. In particular, increased tensions are resulting in rising levels of violence toward women and girls. Currently there is a lack of approaches to mitigate risk of gender-based violence, and provide vital services – such as safe spaces, designated shelters, and case management – for women and girl refugees. For example, the IRC is the only agency running a much-needed safe space for women in Idomeni.
- (c) In Lesbos there are currently more than 2,900 people² living in the overcrowded and closed facility at Moria, a centre designed for only 2,000. Until recently, vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied children, pregnant women, and those with disabilities, were being held together with all other refugees, without access to critical specialised services.
- (d) UNHCR now considers all “hotspots”, such as Moria, to be “detention facilities”.³ In line with the EU Reception Conditions Directive⁴, no person should be detained for the sole reason that he or she is seeking international protection. Any restriction to freedom of movement should be limited to registration and identification, and then people transferred to an open accommodation space. Throughout, there must be specific provisions for vulnerable groups.

2. Dramatically increase relocation and capacity for effective asylum processing in Greece

- (a) The Greek asylum office recently stated they are able to process 45 asylum applications per week. At this rate processing asylum applications for the tens of thousands currently in Greece will take more than 20 years. Capacity must be provided to increase the speed of processing, but not at the expense of a fair and thorough process based on an applicant’s individual circumstances. Both human and logistical capacity gaps

¹ UNHCR, 11 April 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1031>

² As of 8 April 2016

³ UNHCR, 22 March 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/56f10d049.html>

⁴ Directive 2013/33/ EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32013L0033>

exist - currently Skype is being used to initiate asylum processing, which can be unreliable and difficult to access.

- (b) Despite EU Member State commitments in 2015 to relocate 160,000 refugees from Italy and Greece to other countries across Europe, only 1,111 refugees have been relocated to date, including only 581 from Greece.⁵ In light of the acute humanitarian needs in Greece, this is grossly inadequate. European states should show solidarity with Greece by increasing pledges, and resources must be provided to accelerate fair and rapid processing. The Greek authorities, EU Member States and EU Agencies should heed targets set by the European Commission on 19 March to achieve 6,000 relocations per month.
- (c) All asylum seekers must have access to independent information and advice on asylum and relocation processes. High-quality translation and legal representation should be made available and all claims processed by trained and professional staff. Thousands of refugees currently amassing around Idomeni at Greece's northern border still do not have the information to enable them to make informed decisions.

3. Replace the EU-Turkey 'one-in, one-out' deal with an expanded resettlement programme that does not hinge on returns

- (a) Recent EU policy decisions have been fuelled by the inadvisable and unattainable desire to close borders and reduce refugee flows to zero. Yet people, not borders, are in urgent need of protection. Making pathways to protection in Europe contingent on zero migration, such as the EU has outlined for the Turkey Voluntary Admission Scheme⁶, will clearly only fuel smuggling. Without effective pathways to safety first being provided, desperate refugees fleeing from violence and persecution will continue to seek out even more dangerous smuggler routes to Europe. Along the Balkans route our teams in Serbia are noticing increased numbers of arrivals via smuggling routes.
- (b) While resettlement could be a vital part of the solution to the refugee crisis, making this conditional upon people being returned to Turkey is both unethical and illogical. A meaningful, unconditional, and long term resettlement scheme, in which Europe takes in 108,000 refugees per year for five years as the IRC has proposed, is what is needed.⁷ In the context of a global displacement crisis, European leaders are missing the opportunity to take resettlement in the right direction, in tandem with alternative pathways to safety, such as humanitarian visas and expanded family reunification.
- (c) The EU-Turkey deal ignores non-Syrians. By limiting options for resettlement and voluntary admission to Syrians, thousands of asylum seekers from refugee-producing countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan are being denied safe alternative pathways into Europe.

The IRC's humanitarian work in Europe

In addition to providing urgent humanitarian assistance to refugees in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the IRC has emergency staff working in Greece and Serbia. The IRC is working on the island of Lesbos and mainland Greece to provide clean water and sanitation, information to refugees, and specialised protection services to the most vulnerable. In Serbia, we are supporting local organisations to provide basic aid and recently we began a partnership with a local organisation to provide gender-based violence response services for women and girls.

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⁵ Member States' Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism, as of 4 April 2016. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf

⁶ European Commission, 19 March 2016 http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm

⁷ IRC, Pathways to Protection - Resettlement and Europe's response to a global refugee crisis http://rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/uploads/Pathways%20to%20protection%20-%20IRC_0.pdf