



Urgent action needed on European Refugee Crisis

IRC Situational Briefing – 9 May 2016

More than 53,000 desperate men, women and children in search of protection remain in Greece. The vast majority on the mainland are Syrian (45 percent), Iraqi (22 percent), and Afghan (21 percent).¹ Unless European states take action now, a long-term refugee crisis, with thousands stranded living in camps, will unfold on European soil. Greece is receiving insufficient support to step up ineffectual asylum processing that currently hinges on registration via Skype. With the hot summer months approaching, difficult living conditions and an inadequate asylum system is a deeply concerning combination for thousands fleeing violence and persecution. Meanwhile, the illogical and unethical EU-Turkey deal is denying sufficient safe alternative pathways into Europe, and serving to promote dangerous journeys and smuggling.

Urgent action is needed in four areas:

- 1. Dramatically increase capacity for fair and effective asylum processing in Greece**
- 2. Accelerate relocation and family reunification transfers from Greece to other EU countries**
- 3. Urgently address inadequate reception and living conditions for 53,000 in Greece**
- 4. Commit to expanded resettlement and safe alternative pathways into Europe**

1. Dramatically increase capacity for fair and effective asylum processing in Greece

- (a) At current rates, processing asylum applications for the tens of thousands currently in Greece could take more than 20 years. Indeed, Greece's asylum and reception system was already struggling prior to the current crisis. As a result, tens of thousands in Greece - over 70 percent of whom are women and children² and many having experienced horrific violence - are now living in detention, or in tents in warehouses and car parks, with no clarity as to their futures.
- (b) There is a significant lack of consistent and continuous information on asylum options and time frames for asylum applications. In order to remedy this information gap, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) must support the Greek authorities to urgently deploy information officers to accommodation sites, and establish effective channels for information, including use of mobile phone technologies and websites.
- (c) EU and Member State assistance to Greece – coordinated by EU Coordinator Maarten Verwey – must prioritise the establishment of an effective asylum processing system in Greece. The current system of applying for asylum and relocation requires calling a Skype user ID available for as little as an hour a week to book an appointment, or going in person to an asylum office in one of ten locations³, many based hundreds of miles from refugee sites.⁴ This is clearly unworkable. EASO should support the Greek asylum service to immediately deploy interpreters and case workers to mainland accommodation sites to register and process asylum applications, with a focus on identifying and processing vulnerable cases.

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 staff working in Greece and Serbia. The IRC is working on mainland Greece and the island of Lesbos 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.

¹ UNHCR, Operations Cell Daily Report, 6 May 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1154>. Nationalities are approximate percentages drawn from UNHCR site profiles. UNHCR, Site Profiles – Greece, 20 April 2016, <http://rrse-smi.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=dc0cf99f05f44858b886c824f3a5633d>

² Gender and age breakdowns are approximate percentages drawn from UNHCR site profiles. We estimate 38 percent on the Greek mainland are children and 35 percent women. UNHCR, Site Profiles – Greece, 20 April 2016, <http://rrse-smi.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=dc0cf99f05f44858b886c824f3a5633d>

³ Regional asylum offices are located in Athens, Thessaloniki, South Evros, North Evros, Rhodes, Lesbos, Samos. In addition there are asylum offices in Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos.

⁴ EASO, Relocation of applicants for international protection, Informational leaflets for Greece, <https://easo.europa.eu/download/122692/>

- (d) Increases to the speed of processing must not be at the expense of a fair and thorough process based on an applicant's individual circumstances. High-quality translation and legal representation should be made available and all claims processed by trained and professional staff.

2. Accelerate relocation and family reunification transfers from Greece to other EU countries

- (a) Despite EU Member State commitments in 2015 to relocate 160,000 refugees from Italy and Greece to other countries across Europe only 1,441 refugees have been relocated to date, including only 876 from Greece.⁵ In light of the current acute humanitarian needs in Greece, this is inadequate. 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.⁶ Currently, 3,870 have applied for relocation in Greece, of which only 40 percent have been accepted by EU Member States.⁷
- (b) Our teams in Greece indicate that thousands of refugees stranded in Greece are attempting to reach family elsewhere in Europe, including vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied children and female-headed households. EU Member States should rapidly increase the transfer of asylum applicants to states where they already have family, thereby making full use of the family reunification provisions of the Dublin III Regulation.
- (a) EASO, the agency responsible for supporting implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, relocation, and transfers under the Dublin III Regulation, is desperately overstretched and must realign its priorities. EASO has called for 470 asylum experts and 400 interpreters from EU Member States, of which 67 and 63 have been deployed respectively, and primarily to the Greek islands.⁸ More resources must be deployed, but rather than dedicating capacity to facilitating returns under the unethical EU-Turkey deal, EASO should prioritise relocation and transfers under the family reunification clauses of the Dublin III Regulation.
- (b) EASO should create fast-track pathways to protection for the most vulnerable groups, including fast-track processing streams for relocation, family reunification transfers, and unaccompanied children. Over 1,400 unaccompanied children have already arrived into a Greece that is too under-equipped to offer adequate support. Around 400 children are currently waiting for assistance and accommodation in shelters.⁹
- (c) In addition to committing additional resources to accelerate fair and rapid relocation processing, EU Member States must also remove barriers to rapid processing, such as long lists of preferences for those accepted for relocation and the layering of security checks, which while of course required, are presently unnecessarily repetitive and time consuming. EU Member States must also increase relocation pledges and commit additional national resources to the rapid acceptance of 'take charge' requests from Greece under the Dublin III Regulation for family reunification. This may also involve dedicated direct support in Greece from Member States with high numbers of relevant Dublin III transfer requests.

3. Urgently address inadequate reception and living conditions for 53,000 in Greece

- (a) While Greece has, with EU assistance, opened 31 temporary accommodation sites on the mainland, many of the sites continue to be overcrowded¹⁰, with very limited access to essential health, sanitation and protection services and information. There must be a coordinated approach between the Greek Government, UN agencies and NGOs to ensure essential services are provided quickly.
- (b) Lack of access to asylum services and substandard living conditions are leading to rising levels of frustration and anxiety among refugees; as is reflected in recent tensions and protests at the Moria facility on Lesbos.¹¹ At the informal site of Idomeni site on Greece's northern border, increased tensions are resulting in rising levels of violence toward women and girls. Currently, there 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.
- (c) On the Greek islands, thousands continue to be held at former hotspot facilities. Many have been held for over a month. In line with the EU Reception Conditions Directive¹², no person should be detained for the sole

⁵ European Commission, Member States' Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism, as of 3 May 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, EU-Turkey Agreement Questions and Answers, 19 March 2016 http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm

⁷ As of 20 April 2016

⁸ European Commission, Implementation of the EU-Turkey Deal, as of 3 May 2016 http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_eu-turkey_en.pdf

⁹ The National Centre for Social Solidarity (E.K.K.A), Greece

¹⁰ UNHCR, Operations Cell Daily Report, 6 May 2016 <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1149>

¹¹ UNHCR, Operations Cell Daily Report, 26 April 2016 <https://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1099>

¹² EUR-Lex, 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>

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.

4. Commit to expanded resettlement and safe alternative pathways into Europe

- (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 Scheme¹³, 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. Our teams in Serbia are reporting increased numbers of people moving via smuggling routes across the Balkans.
- (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.¹⁴ 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.

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¹³ European Commission, EU-Turkey Agreement Questions and Answers, 19 March 2016 [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release MEMO-16-963_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm)

¹⁴ IRC, Pathways to Protection - Resettlement and Europe's response to a global refugee crisis, March 2016, http://rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/uploads/Pathways%20to%20protection%20-%20IRC_0.pdf