



Urgent action needed on European Refugee Crisis

IRC Situational Briefing – 10 June 2016

A long-term refugee crisis, with thousands stranded in substandard camps, is unfolding on European soil. As nearly 8,500 men, women and children on Greek islands await possible return to Turkey, around 48,000 remain contained in mainland Greece while they attempt to negotiate an ineffectual asylum system.¹ The EU-Turkey deal has not dampened the desperation of people to reach sanctuary in Europe. Denied safe alternative pathways into Europe, significantly more Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans are risking their lives by travelling via smuggling routes through the Balkans. Meanwhile, elsewhere in Europe at least 880 are believed to have drowned last week attempting to make the treacherous sea crossing from Libya to Italy.²

Urgent action is needed in four areas:

- 1. Immediately address substandard living conditions for thousands in search of protection**
- 2. Dramatically increase capacity for fair and effective asylum processing in Greece**
- 3. Accelerate relocation, family reunification, and transfer of the most vulnerable from Greece to EU countries**
- 4. Expand resettlement to Europe to prevent smuggling and the need for dangerous journeys**

1. Immediately address substandard living conditions for thousands in search of protection

- (a) European policy has created a situation in which thousands in Greece – around two thirds of which are women and children³ - are living in substandard refugee camps on European soil. Unless European states take action now, this will become a long-term refugee crisis, with thousands living in camps for months, and perhaps years. With the hot summer months approaching, insufficient living conditions and an inadequate asylum system constitute a deeply concerning combination for thousands fleeing violence and persecution, which is leading to rising levels of frustration and anxiety among refugees.
- (a) IRC and other agencies, including UNHCR⁴, have raised concerns regarding the substandard conditions of several accommodation sites in northern Greece. Sites are located in isolated industrial zones, in warehouses in which tents are placed too close together. The sites are overcrowded, with very limited access to essential health, sanitation and protection services and information.⁵ On the Greek islands, thousands continue to be held at former hotspot facilities, their future uncertain.
- (b) There must be a coordinated approach between the Greek Government, NGOs, and EU and UN agencies to ensure living conditions are improved and essential services are provided quickly. Minimum humanitarian standards must be adhered to, including standards across all sectors to mitigate gender-based violence and reduce women and girls' risk of abuse and exploitation. Humanitarian funding which has already been agreed must rapidly be released for use, and different approaches to tackling this new and sustained humanitarian crisis adopted, such as a coordinated approach to ensure that people have enough money to meet their basic needs.

2. 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 many years. Indeed, Greece's asylum and reception system was already struggling prior to the current crisis.
- (b) Following months negotiating an unworkable asylum process that hinges on registration via Skype, the Greek Asylum Service, UNHCR and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) have announced that

¹ UNHCR, Site locations in Greece, 31 May 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1416>

² UNHCR, 31 May 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/5/574db9d94/mediterranean-death-toll-soars-first-5-months-2016.html>

³ 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://trse-smi.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=dc0cf99f05f44858b886c824f3a5633d>

⁴ UNHCR, 27 May 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2016/5/57480cb89/greece-unhcr-concerned-conditions-new-refugee-sites-urges-alternatives.html>

⁵ UNHCR, Operations Cell Daily Report, 6 May 2016 <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1149>

thousands seeking international protection on the Greek mainland will now have the opportunity to ask for asylum via a pre-registration process. In order to be completed by an end of July deadline, pre-registration should be strongly supported by EU and Member States.

- (c) Pre-registration is just the first step in the asylum process. Without an effective asylum system and strong mechanisms for relocation and family reunification transfers, pre-registered men, women and children will continue to face extensive and frustrating delays. EASO should support the Greek asylum service to deploy interpreters and case workers to mainland accommodation sites to process asylum applications, with a focus on identifying and processing vulnerable cases.
- (a) EU, EASO and European state assistance to Greece must prioritise the establishment of an effective asylum processing system in Greece, rather than facilitating returns under the EU-Turkey deal. EASO should prioritise relocation and transfers under the family reunification clauses of the Dublin III Regulation. In addition, EU states should commit to significantly increasing legal support and lawyers available in Greece to support the asylum and appeals process.

The IRC's humanitarian work in Europe

In addition to providing urgent humanitarian assistance to people in need and 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, up-to-date information, financial assistance to meet basic needs, and specialised protection services to the most vulnerable. In Serbia, we are supporting local organisations to provide basic humanitarian aid and information to refugees, psychosocial support, and specialised protection services to the most vulnerable, including women and children.

3. Accelerate relocation, family reunification, and transfer of the most vulnerable from Greece to other EU countries

- (a) European states must lessen the disproportionate humanitarian responsibility placed on Greece by rapidly increasing the transfer of refugees from Greece to other European countries. There are currently two main options for doing so; accelerated relocation, and family reunification. EU states should also facilitate the transfer of the most vulnerable.
- (b) Despite EU Member State commitments in 2015 to **relocate** 160,000 refugees from Italy and Greece to other countries across Europe, only 2,031 refugees have been relocated to date, including only 1,281 from Greece.⁶ In light of the current acute humanitarian needs in Greece, this is severely 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.⁷
- (c) In view of pre-registration increasing the number of relocation applications, EU Member States must increase the number of relocation places available, and commit additional resources to relocation processing. EU states should also remove barriers to rapid processing, such as long lists of preferences for those accepted for relocation and the layering of security checks, which are presently unnecessarily repetitive and time consuming.
- (d) In Greece, IRC teams indicate that thousands are attempting to reach family elsewhere in Europe. UNHCR assessments of arrivals into Greece in early 2016 indicated that approximately 44 percent of Syrians and nearly one in five Afghans were aiming for a particular destination country in order to reunite with family.⁸ **Family unity** transfers under the Dublin III Regulation must therefore be made to work effectively.
- (e) Human resource capacity and resources are inadequate for the identification and processing of Dublin III transfers, both in Member States and Greece. For example, the UK has deployed just two UK experts to EASO to support the Greek Dublin Unit. Conversely, the UK has deployed 75 expert personnel to Greece to support implementation of the EU-Turkey Migration Agreement.⁹
- (f) Finally, thousands of those currently in Greece are considered particularly **vulnerable**. In 2016 alone, over 1,400 unaccompanied children have arrived in a country under-equipped to offer adequate support.

⁶ European Commission, Member States' Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism, as of 7 June 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf

⁷ European Commission, EU-Turkey Agreement Questions and Answers, 19 March 2016 http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm

⁸ Syrian <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=874> AND <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=725> Afghan

<http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=875> AND <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=726>

⁹ <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2016-05-03.36277.h&s=speaker%3A11573#g36277.q0>

Furthermore, UNHCR assessments of arrivals into Greece in early 2016 indicated nearly one in five Syrians, and five percent of Afghan respondents, were part of a single female-headed household.¹⁰ European states should therefore also create fast-track pathways to protection for the most vulnerable groups. This could include EU states establishing bilateral agreements with Greece for transfer of those with extreme vulnerabilities, immediately after pre-registration.

4. Expand resettlement to Europe to prevent smuggling and the need for dangerous journeys

- (a) The EU-Turkey deal has not dampened the desperation of men, women and children to reach sanctuary in Europe. Since the deal, the IRC has seen a sharp increase in the number of men, women and children moving via smuggling routes across the Balkans. Hundreds of people, including many families, are now amassing daily in parks in Belgrade and at Serbia's northern border with Hungary. Meanwhile, the numbers of people risking their lives attempting to reach Italy has sharply increased over the past month; 19,884 arrived in May. Sea crossings remain dangerous; 2,814 people have tragically lost their lives this year.¹¹
- (b) EU policy decisions have been fuelled by the inadvisable and unattainable desire to close borders and reduce refugee flows to zero. Yet the challenge facing Europe must be viewed in the context of a global displacement crisis. In order to begin to tackle this crisis, Europe must step up and provide expanded safe and legal pathways for refugees. A robust resettlement programme with ambitious yearly commitments, in which Europe takes in 108,000 refugees per year for five years (as the IRC has proposed), is what is needed.¹² A new draft EU resettlement scheme was due to be released last week, but has yet again been delayed.
- (c) On September 19, the UN General Assembly will convene a high-level plenary meeting on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants. The following day, governments attending US President Barack Obama's leader-level refugee summit will be expected to make significant commitments to expanded resettlement and other forms of humanitarian admission. These Summits represent an opportunity for Europe to make a realistic, long-term commitment to resettlement, securing sustainable solutions to a global refugee crisis that has so far revealed Europe's inability to respond humanely and collectively.

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¹⁰ UNHCR, Profiling of arrivals on Greek islands January 2016 <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=874>; <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=875>; <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=726>

¹¹ UNHCR, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=105>

¹² 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