



Urgent Action Needed on Refugee Crisis in Europe

IRC Situational Briefing – 18 January 2017

More than 10 months since the closure of borders across the Balkans and introduction of the European Union (EU) – Turkey deal, refugees continue to take increasingly dangerous sea and land journeys, putting their lives in the hands of smugglers, in order to reach safety in Europe. Once stranded in Greece or along the Balkan route, many endure life in substandard conditions, in winter, without adequate information about their rights or available services and support, waiting to complete their asylum, family reunification or relocation procedures, with an increasingly uncertain future. Already this year, five refugees have died as a result of the winter conditions and dangerous routes within Europe.

Greece

According to government estimates, there are currently 62,907 people stranded in Greece – 47,506 on the mainland and 15,401 on the islands.¹ At least 2,300 are unaccompanied children – 1,443 of whom are on a waiting list for safe accommodation (including 15 in detention) and access to services and support with the asylum, family reunification or relocation processes.² While some substandard sites on the mainland were closed for refurbishment, and their residents moved to more appropriate facilities, **over 2,700 people³ remain in former warehouses and industrial buildings which are unsafe, inappropriate for human habitation**, and which the Greek Center for Disease Control, UNHCR and non-governmental organisations (NGO) have been urging the Greek Government to close for months without success, despite the fact that some capacity exists in better sites.⁴

On the islands, where the EU–Turkey deal is being implemented, the situation has become increasingly dire with the arrival of winter. Long overcrowded facilities⁵ accommodating asylum seekers in tents without heating, have been covered in snow, leaving refugees completely exposed to the increasingly harsh weather elements. Since the heavy snow fall in the first weeks of January, the authorities have taken temporary steps to move some of those in tents to safer, warmer accommodation, but much more must be done to identify long-term solutions, as people continue to arrive each day (698 in the first half of January alone)⁶ and will also need appropriate winterised accommodation.

The failure of EU member states to provide the additional human resources necessary to ensure an efficient process has contributed to families being stranded for nearly a year on the mainland, children left without formal education for extended periods of time, and island facilities growing increasingly overcrowded as asylum, family reunification and relocation procedures progress slowly. To date, EU member states have failed to fulfil their commitments and therefore the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) has not been able to deploy the minimal 400 staff initially determined necessary to appropriately implement the EU's plans on the mainland and islands.

Western Balkan Route

Without access to safe and legal routes through Europe, desperate people continue to turn to smugglers, facing tightened border security and arctic temperatures. There have been five confirmed refugee deaths since the start of the New Year alone related to exposure to the extreme cold and the

¹ Government of Greece, Ministry of Migration Policy, "Summary of Refugee Flows to the Eastern Aegean Islands," 16 January 2017.

<http://mindigital.gr/index.php/%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%83%CF%86%CF%85%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8C-%CE%B6%CE%AE%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%B1-refugee-crisis/851-summary-statement-of-refugee-flows-to-eastern-aegean-islands-16-01-2017>

² Greek National Center for Social Solidarity, "Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children in Greece," 28 December 2016.

³ Government of Greece, Ministry of Migration Policy, "Summary Statement of Refugee Flows," 11 January 2017

<http://mindigital.gr/index.php/%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%83%CF%86%CF%85%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8C-%CE%B6%CE%AE%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%B1-refugee-crisis/236-summary-statement-of-refugee-flows-11-01-2017>

⁴ Kathimerini, "Health Agency Says Migrant Centers Must Be Closed," 26 July 2016. <http://www.ekathimerini.com/210759/article/ekathimerini/news/health-agency-says-migrant-centers-must-be-closed>

⁵ Facilities that had 7,450 accommodation spaces, and now have 8,375, have at times accommodated over 16,000. There are currently 15,401 on the islands.

⁶ UNHCR, "Data Portal: Refugees/Migrants Response – Greece," 16 January 2017. <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

increasingly dangerous smuggling routes in use. In the first half of January, 38 people have travelled from Turkey to Bulgaria. In another key stop along the route, around 7,300 people are currently stranded in Serbia determining their next move forward, with dozens continuing to arrive daily.⁷ While 82 per cent are residing in 16 government-managed reception centres around the country that some report are full or even overcrowded, **over 1,200 refugees, including up to 300 unaccompanied children, continue to sleep rough in abandoned warehouses in Belgrade city centre, without access to aid and exposed to what is expected to be a long, harsh Balkan winter.**⁸ On the northern border with Hungary, roughly 40 people are braving the weather and camping outside in hope of soon beginning Hungarian asylum procedures—a practice that many have taken up, regardless of when they will actually be able to cross. Hungary allows just 20 people per weekday across the border, prioritising families, and there are continued reports of unlawful, and at times violent, pushbacks from Hungary to Serbia, and from Serbia to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.⁹

Without safe, legal pathways to seek protection in the EU, it is clear that many will continue the dangerous journey with smugglers, and endure unnecessary conditions and risks as they wait to complete their asylum, family reunification or relocation procedures. With the winter weather now upon us, it is critical that urgent steps be taken to avoid further loss of life and to protect the rights of those most vulnerable, the men, women and children who are stranded and continue to arrive to Europe in search of sanctuary.

Recommendations for urgent action in five key areas:

- Governments hosting stranded populations must **ensure safe, warm accommodation for all**. In Greece, the government should immediately close the warehouse sites on the mainland,¹⁰ and move those in these sites to the other existing sites which have both capacity and better conditions. On the Greek islands, vulnerable refugees and those with legitimate family reunification and asylum claims must be moved out of the dangerously overcrowded camps to appropriate sites on the mainland. In Serbia, the government should urgently move children from the improvised shelters in Belgrade to safe, heated facilities.
- All governments along the migration route should **commit to ensuring all unaccompanied children are assigned a trained and vetted guardian, safe age and gender-appropriate accommodation, and an end to the detention of children**.
- The EU should urgently **establish an asylum task force consisting of 1,250 surge staff – 500 asylum experts, 500 interpreters, and 250 lawyers – to ensure an efficient, timely asylum process** for refugees on the Greek islands and across the mainland.
- The EU should **encourage the Greek government to move away from a policy of encampment towards urban integration**. Tents and containers cannot be the housing solution beyond the short-term.
- The EU should **establish safe, legal pathways to protection**.

To find further information of IRC's work on the winter conditions in Europe, please follow these links:

- 12 January 2017: *Extreme weather conditions across Europe expose shortcomings in EU migration policies. Europe is not living up to its values.* <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-extreme-weather-conditions-across-europe-expose-shortcomings-eu-migration-policies>

- 14 December 2016: *EU leaders need to take immediate action to save lives in Greece this winter.* <https://www.rescue-uk.org/press-release/eu-leaders-need-to-take-immediate-action-save-lives-greece-winter>

- 22 November 2016: *Europe is failing refugees in Greece and the Balkans this winter; immediate action needed.* <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-europe-failing-refugees-greece-and-balkans-winter-immediate-action-needed>

⁷ UNHCR, "Serbia Update 12-15 January 2017".

⁸ UNHCR, "Briefing Notes," Geneva, 13 January 2017.

⁹ UNHCR, "Serbia Update 12-15 January 2017".

¹⁰ Warehouse sites include: Oreokastro, Sindos/Karamanlis Building, Sindos/Frakaport, SK Market-Kalohori, Derveni, Softex, Sinatex/Kavaları and Kordogiannis Farm.