

# At the EU-Turkey Border, Human Rights Violations are No Longer Clandestine Operations

Written by Meredith Veit and Flo Strass

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MEREDITH VEIT AND FLO STRASS, JUN 3 2021

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The quaint and weathered island of Lesbos (also known as Lesbos), located in the far east of the Aegean Sea, is the third-largest of all the Greek islands. Lesbos is now home to 11 million olive trees, 86,000 Greeks, and over 14,700 asylum-seekers (Aegean Boat Report Data Studio 2020b; El-Rashidi 2019). Due to its physical proximity to Turkey, the island has a long history of transferred ownership – first the Anatolians, then the Byzantines, the Genoese, the Ottomans, and finally, the Greeks. An often-overlooked fact is that much of the current local population descends from refugees themselves, whose grandparents and great grandparents were forcibly displaced from Turkey in the aftermath of World War I.

Since 2014, more than 1.2 million migrants fleeing war, violence, and persecution have risked their lives crossing the northeast Mediterranean Sea en route to Europe, the majority of whom initially land on Lesbos (UNHCR 2020). They cross the deep and narrow strait on flimsy rubber dinghies – sometimes with duct-tape patchwork covering knife holes from previous crossings – typically carrying their lives on their backs, their children and babies, and a heavy-heart of tested faith, in utter contrast to their buoyant expectations.

Although the channel is narrow, its waves are unforgiving. Over 1,674 people have drowned in the Eastern Mediterranean (IOM 2020) in the past decade, a great deal of whom fell mercy to the sea's wrath when the humanitarian crisis first began over five years ago. Over recent years, the tides have turned for the worse as those in power have become as merciless as the sea. Since the signing of the European Union (EU)-Turkey Deal, hundreds of lives have been senselessly lost, and hundreds more have gone missing due to the steady amplification of draconian, anti-migrant immigration policies. Civil society organizations, including Mare Liberum, have been documenting and advocating against the politicization of human lives for years, regardless of the political climate, but as the situation worsens, we need more help. We are dismayed to report that 2020 has been particularly worrisome – though not for the reasons one might assume – and we urge that it is imperative that the international community take a stronger stance against the unveiled violations of human rights taking place at the EU border.

Mare Liberum is a non-profit human rights organization that monitors the Aegean Sea by boat along the EU-Turkey border. As a strong supporter of our goals, Sea-Watch e.V. donated what is now our ship at the beginning of 2018, and we have been sailing the coast of Lesbos ever since. We primarily serve as an independent observer and deterrent for violations of human rights by state authorities. Mare Liberum conducts research to document the current situation at the European border and to draw public attention back to this forgotten site of tragedies.

Greece acts as a migratory buffer-zone for the rest of the continent and has been largely abandoned by the EU. While locals, especially fishermen, have been rescuers and harborers of the weary travellers in the past, over recent years, some locals have grown highly intolerant of the situation.[1] Considering the economic effects of decreased tourism, high unemployment rates, and an increase in the rate of elderly poor, some are more vulnerable to absorbing the hate speech and false claims propagated by right-wing leaders such as Development Minister Adonis Georgiadis

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and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who make statements like, 'Afghans are not refugees' and '93 percent are illegal immigrants'. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the overwhelming majority of sea arrivals to Greece in 2019 – over 90 percent – were from conflict zones (Keep Talking Greece, 2019), and the UNHCR Representative in Greece, Philippe Leclerc, has had to appeal politicians to refrain from such speech, predicting that it would trigger hate against refugees and volunteers (Leclerc 2019). Since the start of 2020, these feelings of anguish and intolerance began to manifest into outright acts of violence.

In January 2020, we witnessed thousands of anti-migrant islanders pouring into the downtown streets of Mytilene in protest, demanding, 'We want our island back'. In February, local vigilantes began attacking the cars and homes of migrant aid workers and volunteers. In early March, the donation-based refugee school One Happy Family was burnt to the ground (Ng 2020). Right-wing groups began showing up at beaches along the east coast to threaten and insult migrants as they arrived on Lesbos' shores. Locals began distributing flyers directed at refugees that say, 'Don't come to our country, there is no money, we don't want you'. The Pikpa camp, which hosts the most vulnerable groups, including families, victims of torture, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI) people, began receiving threats. Two German photojournalists were beaten for documenting violence between locals and refugee rights activists. Cameras and phones of non-governmental organization (NGO) employees were taken and thrown to sea. The Mare Liberum ship was doused with kerosene and was nearly set ablaze with the crew still on board. The match was lit, but the crew was able to set sail and pull away from the port just in time.

The effects of the pandemic took hold of the island towards the end of March 2020, but a plague of anti-migrant sentiments had already been festering for years. Even before the virus outbreak, the Greek government had implemented 'out of sight out of mind' tactics to remove refugees from their field of vision – setting up remote, closed-off detention centers, orchestrating clandestine pushbacks at sea, and executing mass-deportations. COVID-19 has closed borders across the globe, greatly fuelling nationalist agendas and furthering their respective 'national security' projects under the guise of reacting to a public health emergency. Lesbos, however, reached its tipping point before confinement measures were enacted. As a result, COVID-19 measures are being used as a rationalization for plans that were already in place. When the world's attention had been diverted elsewhere, the far-right Greek government was less afraid to take bolder actions.

Since migratory flows have slowed, authorities are now chipping away at civil society's capacity to monitor human rights violations, advocate for equality and justice, and even save human lives when coast guard ships act negligently. The situation has been dire for years, but the pandemic has been used as a flimsy justification for limiting civil society organization (CSO) oversight, segregating communities, and more openly violating international law.

## **What is Happening at Sea?**

At least 8,697 asylum seekers have arrived on Greek shores as of 16 August 2020, which is a 66 percent decrease compared to 2019. This decrease can largely be attributed to migrants having been stuck at border closures along their journey; and fear of contracting COVID-19 may be acting as a means of self-hindrance for continuing along migration routes. As eyewitnesses on the ground, we have no doubt that this is also a result of the increasingly aggressive pushbacks<sup>[2]</sup> by the Greek authorities (Amnesty International 2020).

In February 2020, Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, declared that he had opened his country's borders for all migrants to cross into Europe. Erdoğan announced that Turkey could no longer support the estimated four million migrants that are currently residing within its borders (Stavis-Gridneff and Kingsley 2020). In response, on 1 March 2020 Greece suspended all asylum application procedures for arrivals coming from Turkey (HRW 2020a) and began further militarizing the Aegean Sea. According to reports by local media outlets, 'more than 50 Hellenic Coast Guard vessels' were deployed 'in the eastern Aegean, along with 10 Navy vessels and 24 land, air, and sea craft provided by the European Union's border monitoring agency Frontex' (Souliotis and Georgiopolou 2020). Our crew has noticed an increase in drone and helicopter presence. Many human rights organizations have been reporting a spike in violent pushbacks of migrants arriving in Greece via both land and sea (Bathke 2020; Cullum 2020; Deeb 2020; HRW 2020b). While there have been many testimonials of clandestine pushbacks in the past – even in 2013, pre-dating the media-acclaimed 'refugee crisis' (Pro Asyl 2013) – these illegal operations have now more openly become

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standard procedure, without regard to their illegality in the eyes of customary international human rights law.

As explained by one of the human rights activists currently aboard the *Mare Liberum* ship,

the fear of perishing at sea and the fear of being violated at sea increased tenfold in 2020. Before, migrants were afraid of the sea itself, but now, they are afraid of the violent human behaviour at sea.

## *Coast Guard practices of cruelty, violence, and humiliation*

The purpose of any coast guard during peacetime is to carry out the enforcement of maritime law and the protection of life and property at sea. Under maritime law, it is the responsibility of the closest able vessel to 'render assistance and rescue those in distress at sea without any regard to their nationality, status, or the circumstances in which they are found' (IMO, ICS, and UNHCR 2020), which also applies to coast guard ships. Yet, to date, migrants continually testify to the violence they endure from the authorities that are tasked with saving them. They face a great risk of having their personal belongings thrown into the water by the coast guard, being physically injured by beatings, and being intentionally humiliated. The coast guard has become even more virulent since live videos have been posted on social networks showcasing these aggressions. Testimonials from recent arrivals have told our crew about how migrants have been stripped naked for body searches and sent back to sea in their underwear with no means of communication to call for help.

## *New pushback methods and public acceptance of refoulement*

Fear of migrants bringing COVID-19 to the island has greatly facilitated the acceptance of immediate expulsion strategies. The Greek government has touted an approach of 'aggressive surveillance and deterrence' of migration without fully specifying what these methods will entail (The National Herald 2020). According to several reports from asylum-seekers over the past few years, the coast guard has been using unsafe pushback techniques, such as creating waves to further distress a migrant vessel, destroying or removing the dinghy engine to leave it floating at sea, firing bullets to deflate the dinghy itself, and even towing boats back across the unmarked 'border' line to be picked up by the Turkish Coast Guard and brought back to Turkey.

These operations, however, were always carried out in secret. The coast guard agents tried to destroy evidence by tossing migrants' cell phones into the sea, and they wore black ski masks and orchestrated the pushbacks by night. In some cases, it has been reported that the authorities confiscated all phones from the migrants. But now, it seems the virus is enough of an excuse to flagrantly exercise pushbacks using the boldest of colors. There have been numerous incidents where the Hellenic Coast Guard has forced refugees to board unsafe, orange tent-like life rafts at sea, or even after migrants have already arrived on the Greek islands, to then set them loose and leave them adrift at sea.

One of the best-documented life raft pushbacks happened on 28 April 2020. That day, people (including three children, four women, and 15 men) arrived on the Greek island of Samos, which is about 130 kilometers south of Lesbos. Instead of being brought to one of the refugee camps on the island, they were forced to board the Hellenic Coast Guard vessel, only to be taken back out to sea and stranded amongst the waves. A Turkish Coast Guard vessel was present as well, but only rescued the people in the life raft the next morning (Aegean Boat Report 2020b). Since March 2020, at least 1,336 people have been forced into life rafts by the Greek coast guard and left helplessly at sea (ABR 2020d; Kingsley and Shoumali 2020).[3] These are not isolated incidents. The Greek government denies that they are doing anything illegal (Hellenic Republic Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2020). In fact, the Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachi, has boasted about how few arrivals have arrived on Lesbos recently without mentioning their tactics of abandoning men, women, and children at sea (ABR 2020d).

Once migrants are brought back or float back to Turkey, they are then likely to be sent to unsanitary, overcrowded Turkish prisons that are mal-equipped for combating the COVID-19 outbreak. Crossing the sea has never been riskier.

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Frontex and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are present and watching these pushbacks. They neither rescue people from these floating tents nor actively push them back, but rather stand aside and observe silently. When asylum seekers are directly pushed back, they are not able to exercise their right to apply for asylum. Greece is not only in violation of the European Convention of Human Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, but also the international agreement on *non-refoulement* and the prohibition of collective deportations. Greece is actively putting refugees in perilous and inhumane situations, and the EU, as well as the United States, the United Kingdom, and other NATO member countries are acting as bystanders, and even accomplices due to the fact that they are actively not participating in human rights investigations. As governments work to further prevent human rights monitoring and watchdog NGOs, who will spearhead the investigations on the migrants' behalf?

## *Inhibiting and suspending NGO operations*

NGOs are increasingly less able to intervene and prevent these human rights violations from taking place because their physical access to the spaces where incidents are occurring has been restricted. There are a select number of organizations, including Mare Liberum, Refugee Rescue, and Lighthouse Relief, that are alert and ready to respond to the sighting of an incoming migrant boat, working to assure everyone's safety. All organizations are required to report any first sightings to the Hellenic Coast Guard, which is charged with oversight of the Greek sea. In the past, it was more likely that the Hellenic Coast Guard would safely take the migrants to shore, especially while under the watchful eye of civil society. However, it is now more likely that they will perform a pushback, no matter who is watching. The Hellenic Coast Guard continues to violate human rights with unbridled confidence and impunity; they have not been given any incentives to abide by the law.

Meanwhile, human rights NGOs are being strong-armed into halting or even suspending their operations. On 19 August 2020, Mare Liberum (2020) received yet another detention order to prevent the crew from carrying out its human rights mandate, which is the third legal battle brought against us – even after winning the past two in court. 'We are furious and won't accept the blockade of our mission for solidarity and human rights', says Hanno Bruchmann, board member of Mare Liberum. These lawsuits are meant to drain small, donation-based non-profits like Mare Liberum of their financial capacity to fulfil their missions, as well as further criminalize those that aim to protect solidarity and human dignity.

On 29 August 2020, Refugee Rescue (2020) announced that it has also been forced to suspend its operations after five years of providing lifesaving search and rescue operations for people crossing the Aegean Sea to the northern shore of Lesbos. The NGO's press release cites criminalization as the main trigger for the need to cease its aid work: 'Unacceptably, the rising criminalization of humanitarian organizations in Lesbos and growing hostilities now pose an irrefutable threat to our staff, assets, and work – and we cannot in good conscience continue to operate if we cannot guarantee the safety of our team. Additionally, the unchecked impunity with which authorities now work has created a situation where we no longer trust that they will allow us to launch our independent rescue boat, Mo Chara. Make no mistake: our decision to suspend operations for the foreseeable future does not in any way mean that search and rescue is not still imminently needed off the North Shore of Lesbos. In fact, human rights violations on the Aegean have only intensified in the past few months – from authorities leaving people stranded at sea for hours, to illegal pushbacks on Greek waters – which have all made the journey from Turkey to Greece more perilous than ever for those seeking refuge' (Refugee Rescue 2020).

If the Hellenic Coast Guard is actively putting lives in danger, if NATO and Frontex continue to remain silent, and if human rights NGOs are unable to operate, what is preventing the Aegean Sea from becoming a more populous graveyard? And even more pressing of a question, how flawed is European domestic and foreign policy that humanitarian and human rights organizations are so desperately needed in the Aegean Sea? Why are resource-strapped non-profits filling the shoes of governments in protecting the most vulnerable in order to allow for a more prosperous society for all? We all need to be demanding more of our leaders. In a democracy, we have the power to put an end to government-funded xenophobia.

## **What is Happening on Land?**

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Inhumane activity is being reported at sea, and unfortunately the same can be said for the management of asylum-seekers on land. If and when asylum-seekers do make it to Lesbos' shores, processing procedures have been greatly altered due to the pandemic. While the low number of COVID-19 cases thus far on the island have been attributed to Greece's containment attempts, it is critical to note that not all lives are being held at equal value when quarantine measures are implemented. A spokesperson for the European Commission has noted, 'Quarantine and isolation measures must be applied in a reasonable, proportionate, and non-discriminatory manner. We have provided significant financial and operational support to member states, including Greece, to fight the coronavirus, and stand ready to provide further support if needed', but it is ultimately at the discretion of the Greek government to follow through with a human rights centric emergency response plan (Macej Kaczyński 2020). Rather than protecting the health of everyone, the Greek government is acting with distinction for how migrant lives and Greek lives are prioritized through its COVID-19 containment measures.

## *Discriminatory and unsafe quarantine practices*

Beginning in late March 2020, the UNHCR and Greek police began setting up informal 'wild' beach camps at the landing sites where migrants would touch shore. These camps have no infrastructure, no access to running water, no toilets, and no showers. Since May 2020, people who have arrived in the north of Lesbos have been brought to 'Megala Therma', a temporary quarantine camp in the north, and those who arrive in the east and southeast are brought to the quarantine area of Kara Tepe. Both of these more 'formal' quarantine stations lack running water, sanitary facilities, medicine, and electricity. The loose policy has been that new-arrivals quarantine for two weeks before being transferred to Moria, however, some people have asserted, particularly from Megala Therma, that they are confined in these conditions for over a month.

While the UNHCR and Greek government may argue that they are working with limited resources to combat what could be an incredibly deadly situation, there is no justification for the reckless, indiscriminate mixing of potentially COVID-19-positive and tested-negative asylum-seekers. There is little or no separation between those who tested negative but remain in quarantine and the new arrivals that may be carrying the virus, which unnecessarily puts additional lives at extreme risk considering the quarantine camp's sordid conditions. The UNHCR protection unit added a line in the accommodation referral form for new arrivals to self-report any conditions that coincide with COVID-vulnerability, but there are no indications that this data collection is being used to improve preventative health protection for new-arrivals in practice. According to a contact we have from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the hospitals on Lesbos are equipped with a total of 11 ventilators, none of which are provisioned for the camps. Would the hospitals be prepared to care for 60–100 cases from quarantined new-arrivals at any given time?

The double standard for implementing an effective quarantine response is duly noted by Lesbos' treatment of those arriving by dinghy versus those arriving by plane. During the strictest phase of the COVID-19 lockdown, everyone who entered Greece through the airport were immediately tested and received free accommodation and food until the test results arrived (Greek City Times 2020).

## *Restricting migrants' movement: Locking down Moria*

Considering that the island's largest refugee camp, Moria, was built to hold 3,000 people, over 13,000 migrants have been forced to set up their tents in the peripheral area (referred to as the Olive Grove) in order to access what little goods and services are provided by shortlisted and government-approved NGOs. Certain travel and movement restrictions have been exclusively implemented for migrants, to the extent that those living in or around the camps have been rounded-up and herded closer together into an enclosed Moria. A team of volunteer lawyers from the organization Legal Centre Lesbos (2020a) noted that since 19 March 2020, migrants must obtain written permission from police or a security authority in order to leave the Moria or Kara Tepe refugee camps. On 30 March 2020, they posted on social media the following:

Across Greece, those leaving their place of residence must carry a paper or send an SMS that indicates – from a set of reasons, including personal exercise, visiting the bank or going to the supermarket – why they are outside the house. Yet reasons that are valid across the country are, unsurprisingly, abandoned in favour of far stricter rules for

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migrants...Only one member of each family can leave the camps per week, a measure that is strictly enforced – despite the fact that no such restriction exists for people living in towns and cities across Greece. Those without written permission will be blocked from leaving by police – either at the camps' exits, or at checkpoints on the roads that lead to the city of Mytiline – and will not be able to board public buses. An increased number of police units have been deployed around the camps to enforce these restrictions.

Locking down the camp has been posed as a necessary means of containing virus transmission rates, out of fear that new arrivals will bring COVID-19 with them, but in complete disregard for the social distancing needs of the camp's inhabitants. Most unfortunately, within the camp, not much has changed in regards to quotidian health and safety standards. Depending on the part of Moria in which one lives, refugees must share a toilet with 50–500 people. Social distancing is impossible when living in a tent with up to 12 other people, and when it is mandatory to go outside and wait in long lines in order to shower or receive daily meals. Attempting to fill the void of a properly implemented response, a group of refugees self-organized to create the 'Corona Awareness Team' to spread information about the virus and distribute masks.

From the start of the pandemic, the World Health Organization and United States Centers for Disease Control (2020) have made it clear that high concentrations of people within confined living spaces increases the likelihood of the virus spreading. According to an analysis by the International Rescue Committee (2020), the living conditions in camps such as Moria will prove to be more disastrous than the infamous Diamond Princess cruise ship case, where the transmission rate of the virus was four times faster than in Wuhan at the peak of the outbreak. Not only is the Moria camp over eight times more densely populated than the Diamond Princess, but there is little access to clean water, showers, toilets, and overall poor hygiene conditions and access to quality healthcare in displacement camps.

As many have feared, the first COVID-19 case from within Moria camp was just detected on 2 September 2020, and the entire camp will be under complete lockdown for the coming 14 days, meaning entry and exit will be prohibited (Panoutsopoulou 2020). This news comes approximately one month after MSF (2020) was forced to close their COVID-19 containment center within Moria. Local authorities imposed fines with potential criminal charges, citing urban planning regulations within an overpopulated Greek-run refugee camp that has had barely any planning in its development and maintenance. On 3 September 2020, the Greek Ministry of Immigration and Asylum announced that it will build a fence around Moria, costing €854,000, which will be immediately commissioned and completed within two months (ABR 2020c). COVID-19 has finally given Greece's far-right administration the excuse it needs to create the closed, highly-surveilled detention center for which it has been pushing since the elections.

## *Fear-mongering against the migrant populations*

The Greek government has cited COVID-19 as a rationale for further investing in closed detention centers instead of migrant camps on the islands of Lesbos and Chios, feeding the vilified narrative that asylum-seekers are spreading the virus to local communities, even though these claims lack evidence (Trilling 2020). Certain nationalist politicians have never been shy about demonizing asylum-seekers, calling them 'cockroaches', for example, and now their stigmatization is being pegged to the spread of the virus (Sunderland and Williamson 2013). The public fear of infection is bringing out the racist undertones within local communities that may have always been wary about Lesbos' transition to becoming a transitory hotspot. Residents of Moria have reported to us that they are experiencing microaggressions and racism more frequently. For example, even after being granted permission to go to the supermarket, a storeowner will prevent them from entering the store.

'They are seen and treated as pariahs who can bring the virus to the island', reports an activist from Mare Liberum. The International Organization for Migration has warned that growing discrimination against migrants only impedes efforts to tackle the pandemic, as exclusion of any group from receiving the necessary goods and services will only prolong the virus' lifespan (UN Department of Global Communications 2020). In actuality, many of the cases that arrived in Lesbos were brought by Europeans coming from mainland Greece (Macej Kaczyński 2020). It was not until mid-August 2020 that the first migrant boat containing passengers with positive cases arrived in Lesbos.

## **Short and Long Term Implications**

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The measures being enforced on land and sea are not meant to protect the most vulnerable groups and save migrant lives. Rather, Greece is more focused on opening up to Europeans and re-starting the economy as quickly as possible. Restrictions on migrants' freedom of movement, the repression of solidarity NGOs, and the quelling of social movements will be difficult to undo. Migrants continue to be constricted and confined within the camp with only 70 permissions to leave the area being granted each day for a migrant population of over 13,000 (Legal Centre Lesvos 2020b). Meanwhile, tourist travel to the island began again on 1 July 2020, and without a vaccine, the risk of someone from Moria contracting the virus remains high (GTP 2020).[4] NGOs, particularly those that conduct human rights monitoring and migrant rescue operations, have been pressured to completely shut down their operations and stop any new volunteers from arriving to the island. Solidarity organizations are shrinking in size and capabilities, leaving asylum-seekers even more exposed while aid institutions are running at less-than-full capacity due to the pandemic.

The short-term impacts have proven to be swift and harsh, evidenced by the violent pushbacks taking place at sea. We are already seeing a hardening public discourse against migrants, which is having a tangible impact on the processing of identification documents and visas. Work visas for migrants have practically come to a halt, and the resettlement of refugees and asylum-seekers in third countries is becoming more difficult (SchengenVisaInfo 2020). There are more than 40,700 people applying for refugee status on the collection of Aegean islands, and thus far the European Commission has announced that 10 member states have agreed to accept the relocation of 1,600 children and teenagers from Greece (EU Commission Spokesperson's Service 2020). Greece has relocated about 13,657 people to camps on mainland Greece (Aegean Boat Report Data Studio 2020a), which provides little solace when coupled with the announcement that it plans to expel 11,000 refugees from government housing (Cossé 2020).

An immediate concern of Greece's COVID-19 response, perhaps the most overlooked, is the immense mental and physical impact that these extreme conditions of vulnerability and uncertainty have had on asylum-seekers. Mare Liberum has conducted numerous interviews with both long-standing Moria residents, as well as new arrivals to Lesvos, and all have experienced heightened stress, fear, and dejection. Social spaces where migrants can meet, socialize, and separate themselves from the horrors of the camp are now inaccessible. Any slight hint of normalcy amidst the exceptional life of an asylum seeker has now dissipated. The street-taverna right outside the camp gates where they could buy a cup of tea is now closed. The barbershop at the NGO-run recreation center is closed. It is more difficult to escape to immerse oneself in nature and breathe the fresh air. Children who were able to secure a coveted seat in a classroom will now go another year without education, seeing as most teachers were ex-patriate volunteers. The despair of further prolonged asylum proceedings to determine one's legal status can prove dismal. They are stuck inside the camp, and inside their own minds, without proper mental health care.

It is also critical to remember the under-reported, gendered impacts of confinement in a refugee camp. When tensions are high, women may find themselves at greater risk of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; and as reported by UN Women, domestic violence helplines and shelters across the world are reporting rising calls for help during the pandemic (Mlambo-Ngcuka 2020). The current confinement measures are further isolating migrant women from the people and resources that can best help them, further enclosing them in close quarters with their assailants.

One of the long-term impacts may be that more people will be forced to take dangerous routes, such as attempting longer or more treacherous passages across the Aegean Sea. Perhaps COVID-19 will further restrict the formal means by which refugees can seek protection and prosperity, and more people will be driven to impetuosity. As Erol Yayboke, deputy director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies wrote at the start of the pandemic, 'When combined, the economic, inequality, political, and displacement-related implications [of COVID-19] will only increase desperation at a time when fewer migration pathways exist. In such a scenario, those feeling compelled to move will do so increasingly using smugglers, traffickers, and other illicit groups. Migration will be increasing in and among developing countries with weaker health systems and rule of law'.

In the aftermath of crises, governments can garner more political will to exercise greater control for the purpose of protecting national security, or in this case, public health. Lesvos uniquely sits at the crossroads of a public health crisis, a humanitarian crisis, and a highly militarized border zone. Depending on how the EU and the rest of the world

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reacts to Greece's choices on its emergency relief response, we fear the normalization of taxpayer spending on a permanently hyper-militarized border patrol, the construction of dehumanizing and degrading closed detention facilities, as well as prolonged restrictions on access to sites for watchdog organizations.

If the Greek islands are closing down legitimate operations for both humanitarian assistance and human rights monitoring efforts, a sharp decline in transparency and all of its compounding effects will likely take a large toll on migrants and EU citizens alike. Rule of law is already gravely suffering, which is heart-wrenching to see knowing that Europe has the most advanced mechanisms and institutions for human rights anywhere in the world to date. What does this mean for accountability both in Europe and around the world? To quote Albert Einstein, 'The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing'.

## Conclusion

How Greece handles the first Moria COVID-19 case today and the ongoing pandemic will determine the spirit and soul of the island for years to come. The government must act now, pooling resources, knowledge, and assistance from the local, national, regional, and international community to protect the population of Lesbos no matter what their skin color, background, or citizenship status. If we have learned anything from this pandemic, it is that the virus does not discriminate. People do. Politics does. And because of that, many more innocent lives are needlessly lost.

We are calling on the community of Lesbos, the nation of Greece, the European Union, the United Nations, and the larger international community, to step-up and embody the values that we have established in our founding documents, treaties, and charters. As Germany holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for 2020, and touts the motto, 'Together for Europe's recovery', we are calling on the institution to take their role seriously and rectify the systemic issues that are preventing the EU from coming out of this pandemic as a more prosperous and equitable union. As Angela Merkel (2020) states, 'This motto is directed at us all... For Europe can only be strong if people have good prospects for the future, if they can see how important Europe is for them personally, and if they are committed to the European idea'. Now more than ever, we need to actively work towards re-building a society in which inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and non-discrimination prevail. We have a shared responsibility for how these human lives are being treated. Let the EU know that we, as a global community, will not stand for the degradation of human dignity taking place along its borders.

## Figures

Figure 1: The scene after a boat of asylum seekers arrives on Lesbos during the COVID-19 pandemic. Non-governmental organizations are no longer able to participate in the assurance of a safe landing or clean-up efforts once the asylum seekers are transported away from the shoreline. Source: Mare Liberum (2020).

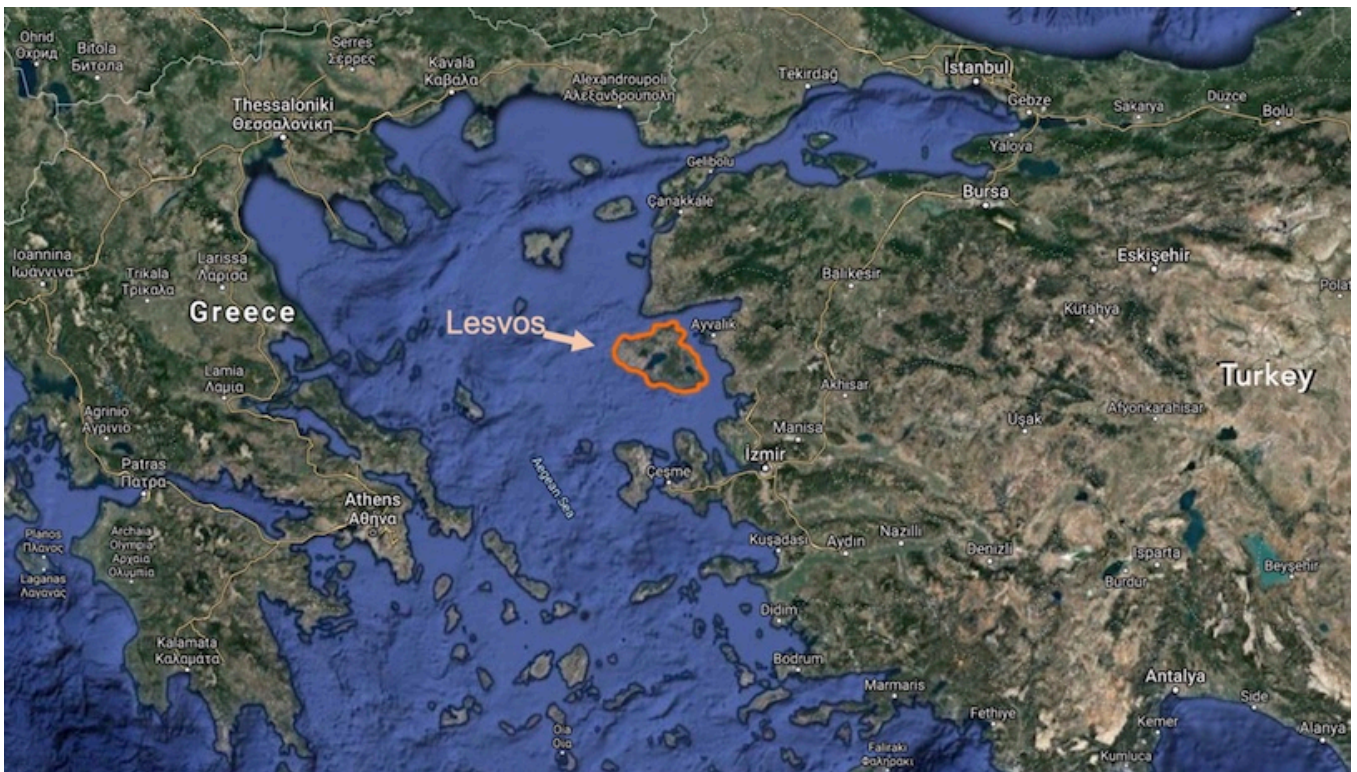


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Figure 2: Lesvos is an island located in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey. There are only about 10 kilometers between them at its closest point. Source: Mare Liberum (2020).



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Figure 3: A volunteer and activist from Mare Liberum watches the shoreline for asylum-seekers travelling to Lesbos in inflatable rafts (dinghies). Source: Mare Liberum (2020).



Figure 4: The number of asylum seeker arrivals from 1 January 2020 to 16 August 2020. Source: UNHCR Statistics Portal (2020).

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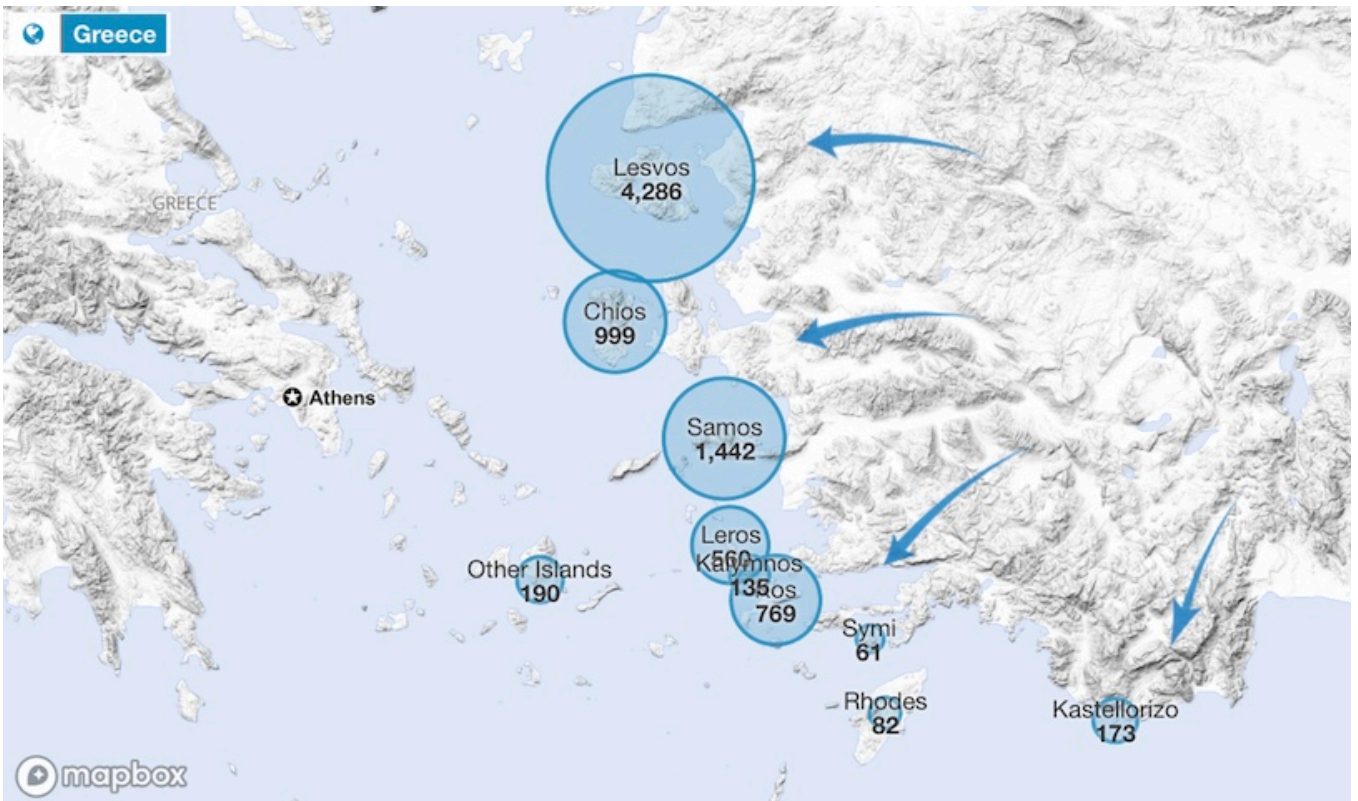


Figure 5: The number of asylum seeker arrivals from 1 July 2019 to 16 August 2020. Source: UNHCR Statistics Portal (2020).

**Sea arrivals by day**

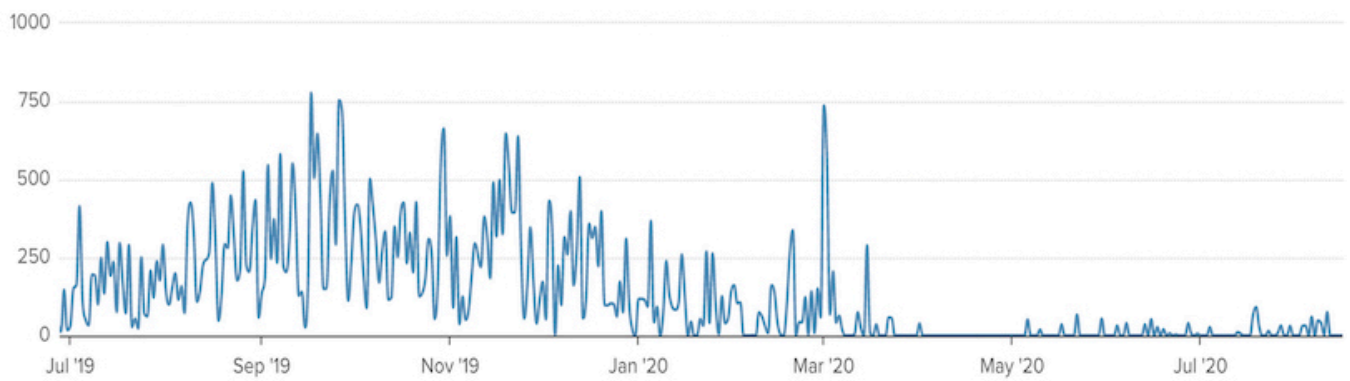


Figure 6: Flyers on the importance of hygiene in combating COVID-19 at Moria camp. Source: Mare Liberum (2020).

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Figure 7: One of the 'wild' beach camps set-up to quarantine new arrivals on Lesbos. Source: Mare Liberum (2020).

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## Notes

[1] It is important to note that some locals also report being reported by the police for trying to help or rescue asylum seekers, with threats of smuggling charges. There seems to be growing polarisation on the island.

[2] According to the European Convention of Human Rights: 'Push-backs are a set of state measures by which refugees and migrants are forced back over a border – generally immediately after they crossed it – without consideration of their individual circumstances and without any possibility to apply for asylum or to put forward arguments against the measures taken. Push-backs violate – among other laws – the prohibition of collective expulsions stipulated in the European Convention on Human Rights.' (ECCHR 2020).

[3] This number is in consideration of the *New York Times*' report from 14 August, as well as the reports from Aegean Boat Report from mid-August to September. What year?

[4] Based on European Union guidelines, Greece was allowed to open its borders again for all types of air travel coming from EU states (GTP 2020).

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