



HIAS – Islamic Relief USA Continue to Defend the Rights of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Greece Amid the Possibility of a Catastrophic COVID-19 Outbreak in the Aegean Reception Centers

In March 2020, two important events contributed to further deterioration of the harsh and inhumane conditions facing asylum seekers in Greece.

On March 1, 2020, after hundreds of people gathered at the Greek-Turkish borders to cross over to Greece, the Greek government defied the 1951 Refugee Convention, as well as other international, European and national legislation, conventions and directives, by suspending the submission of new asylum applications for one month. As a result of the suspension, at least 3,000 asylum seekers who entered Greece in March did not have the opportunity to seek asylum and were treated as illegal migrants. More than 200 were charged with illegal entry and eventually sentenced to up to four years in prison. The remainder were administratively detained and now face deportation.

On April 1, the Emergency Legislative Decree that temporarily barred new asylum applications expired. As a result, asylum seekers entering Greece after April 1, along with those who entered in March and were denied access to asylum because of the legislative decree, will be able to claim asylum. The government is also gradually lifting detention orders for asylum seekers administratively detained on the mainland for illegal entry in March. Nevertheless, those who were criminally charged are still incarcerated or awaiting trial in the coming weeks. Moreover, the arbitrary and inhumane detention of new arrivals, among them people with urgent medical needs related to pregnancy and kidney failure, cannot be remedied by allowing them to claim asylum or freeing them from detention. Access to asylum is not a reparation for the abuse and degradation the Greek government inflicted upon these individuals — it is an obligation it holds under international humanitarian law.

As the decree took effect in early March, the number of positive COVID-19 cases in Greece began to rise, necessitating special preventative measures for asylum seekers and refugees living in dire conditions in overcrowded camps. This includes the Moria Reception and Identification Center on the island of Lesbos, where, as of April 13, 18,619 persons are living in a camp designed for only 2,757. Instead of taking action to avert a foreseeable humanitarian disaster, the Greek government has confined residents to their camps, where it is impossible for them to abide by the guidelines for protection against COVID-19. In addition to the lack of preventive measures, camps offer little access to basic medical services. Given the overcrowded nature of the camps, the lack of adherence to Sphere Standards and COVID-19 guidelines and a dearth of adequate lifesaving services, it is anticipated that a single COVID-19 case could lead to hundreds, if not thousands of otherwise preventable deaths.

“Within the framework set by the state-mandated violations of refugee rights, as well as by the COVID-19 pandemic, HIAS Greece in partnership with Islamic Relief USA, is doing everything in its mandate to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees can access the rights they are entitled to. This includes the right to seek asylum, as well as the right to dignified living conditions,” said Vassilis Kerasiotis, HIAS’ country director in Greece. “We do this through frontline legal aid and strategic litigation, as well as through advocacy work, while maintaining regular contact with our clients and others residing in Moria and elsewhere, in an effort to strengthen our efforts at protection monitoring, albeit remotely, due to

containment measures against the pandemic, but also to prepare those whose cases are exempt from the containment measures and thus are facing criminal trials in the end of May.”

"In the context of the current pandemic, it is vitally important to recognize the proper balance between public welfare and authoritarian action. Unfortunately, we are often witnessing repressive action undertaken under the guise of public safety," said Ashar Akhtar, deputy general counsel for Islamic Relief USA. "The situation at the Moria Reception and Identification Center on Lesbos is becoming a prime example of refugee rights – and lives -- being gambled in the pursuit of ostensible protective measures that conveniently fit with certain political agendas. Having seen first-hand the overcrowded and unhygienic living conditions of refugees at the Moria Center, it is crucial that we as society appropriately hold our democratic institutions to account for the decisions that jeopardize the lives of the innocent and persecuted. IRUSA's partnership with HIAS, focusing on legal aid and strategic litigation, is a critical component in demanding an end to the deplorable living conditions of asylum seekers detained at Moria."

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The Greece Refugee Rights Initiative was created by HIAS and Islamic Relief USA in 2018 to ensure that the most vulnerable refugees benefit from legal assistance, strategic litigation, and advocacy to advance refugee rights. In Athens and the island of Lesbos, this unique interfaith partnership has worked to help refugees navigate constantly changing asylum procedures, increasing limitations on movement and employment opportunities, lack of police protection, and inadequate medical and mental health services that are available to them.

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