

**Greece: As Winter Nears, Asylum Seekers Stuck in Tents on Islands
Groups Press Greek Officials, EU States for Mainland Transfers, Improved Conditions**

22 November 2017, Athens

The Greek government, with the support of EU member states, should act now to end Greece's "containment policy," 20 human rights and aid groups said today. The policy forces asylum seekers arriving on the Greek islands to remain in overcrowded, unsafe facilities, an urgent concern with winter approaching.

Conditions on the Greek islands have continued to deteriorate in the month since 19 nongovernmental groups wrote an open letter to Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, calling on him to move asylum seekers to the mainland, where better conditions and services are available.

"This remains a matter of life and death," said Jana Frey, the International Rescue Committee's country director in Greece. "There is absolutely no excuse for the conditions on the islands right now – thousands of people crammed into overcrowded and desperately under-resourced facilities. We are in a race against time. Lives will be lost – again – this winter – unless people are allowed to move, in an organised and voluntary fashion, to the mainland."

Members of the group recently asked to meet with Tsipras to discuss the most urgent needs on the islands and provide recommendations for addressing this increasingly dire situation. They have received no response.

Over the past month, the Greek government has transferred 2,000 people from Samos and Lesbos to the mainland as a one-time emergency measure. When the government announced this initiative in October, these islands were already 5,000 people over capacity. It was clear then that this measure, while helpful, would not suffice.

"Nothing can justify trapping people in these terrible conditions on the islands for another winter," said Eva Cosse, Greece researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Greece and other European Union member states should act urgently to remove the obstacles to people getting the care and assistance they need on the Greek mainland."

As of November 20, 2017, the hotspots on Lesbos, Samos, and Chios are hosting 7,000 over capacity: 10,925 people are staying in facilities with a capacity of just 3,924. Thousands, including single women, female heads of households, and very young children, are being forced to live in summer tents, essentially sleeping on the ground, as the weather worsens. Some women are forced to share tents with unrelated men, putting their privacy and safety at risk. This will be the second winter asylum seekers have had to spend in unsuitable facilities on the islands since the EU-Turkey Deal went into effect.

“The EU-Turkey Deal is condemning refugees and migrants to a second winter in squalor on the Greek islands. Instead of trying to maintain the deal at all cost, European countries and Greece should urgently work together and move asylum seekers off the islands,” said Gabriel Sakellaridis, director of Amnesty International in Greece.

EU and Greek officials have cited the EU-Turkey Deal as a justification for the containment policy. However, forcing asylum seekers to remain in conditions that violate their rights and are harmful to their well-being, health, and dignity cannot be justified, the organisations said. As such, the groups have also written to EU member state ambassadors to Greece urging them to immediately call on the Greek government to suspend, the containment policy.

The groups urged Prime Minister Tsipras to protect the human rights of asylum seekers trapped on the islands by ending the containment policy, immediately transferring people to improved conditions on the mainland, and making a commitment to ensure that no one is forced to sleep in a tent.

Because the “containment policy” is being implemented in response to the EU-Turkey deal, the organizations highlighted the responsibility of the European Commission and the EU member states to address the situation on the Greek islands and to press the Greek government to reverse the policy. EU member states should support the Greek government’s efforts to ensure the safety and dignity of asylum seekers in EU territory, including by expanding safe accommodation and access to services on the mainland.

“In an effort to make the EU-Turkey deal work, the Greek islands have been transformed into places of indefinite confinement for asylum seekers who have risked their lives in search of safety and a better life in Europe,” said Nicola Bay, head of mission for Oxfam in Greece. “The EU and the Greek government need to start putting people’s lives ahead of politics and uphold Europe’s commitment to human rights.”

To read the joint letter to Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, please visit:

[LINK](#)

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