

One year since Greece opened new “prison-like” refugee camps, NGOs call for a more humane approach

Exactly one year ago, the first EU-funded Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) for asylum seekers in Greece was inaugurated on the island of Samos. [Concerns were raised from the outset](#), given that residents were immediately subjected to disproportionate [restrictions on their movement](#) and to surveillance measures more associated with prison-type controls than with reception facilities hosting and supporting people seeking international protection.

A year later, two similar CCACs are now operational on the Greek islands of Leros and Kos, while another two additional facilities are already being built on Lesbos and Chios and are expected to open in 2023.

Located in remote areas far from local communities, with 24/7 CCTV and barbed-wire fences, these prison-like complexes illustrate some of the most punishing elements of a European asylum policy that has a disproportionate focus on deterrence, isolation and containment. Instead of being welcomed and supported to rebuild their lives and contribute to their new communities, asylum-seekers are isolated, subject to constant surveillance, and provided limited access to essential services.

Compared to the overcrowded, substandard and unsanitary camps people had been forced to reside in previously, some aspects of their living conditions may have improved in the CCACs. However, the cost to people’s rights and wellbeing has been unacceptably high. The increased securitisation and restriction of freedoms has had a devastating [impact on the mental and physical well-being of CCAC residents](#), many of whom report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts.

[The combined expected cost of building all five CCACs is 260 million euros. Meanwhile, the average distance from the closest towns is 14 kilometers](#), with no access to regular, adequate and affordable transport services. These EU funds could be used instead to host people in suitable conditions that respect their dignity, and ensure access to healthcare, employment opportunities and promote people’s ability to become part of the society in Greece. This dangerous approach is part of a broader policy in Greece – supported by the EU – to create isolated, prison-like structures on the mainland and along the borders with Turkey. There is a real danger that this model will be replicated elsewhere in Europe. It is time to reverse this harmful trend, and instead build functioning Greek and EU asylum systems that recognise the humanity of all who are forced to flee.

The use of border facilities should be limited to frontline assistance, registration and identification of asylum seekers, after which people should be transferred to suitable, dignified housing options, in conditions ensuring their freedom of movement. Community-based accommodation, when adequately supported, should be preferred as the solution most conducive to refugees becoming part of and contributing to their communities.

1. Prison-like conditions inside Samos CCAC

Surrounded by multiple barbed wire fences, isolated in a valley eight kilometers from the town of Vathy, [Samos CCAC](#) currently houses approximately [900 men, women and children](#) in one operational area of the camp. There is no safe space for single women, with or without children, or other vulnerable groups that need special reception conditions, [despite NGOs highlighting this issue in a joint statement](#) addressed to the Ministry of Asylum and Migration when the plan was announced. For its residents, the prison-like structure, combined with a heavy security presence and stringent entry/exit conditions, creates a pervasive feeling of imprisonment:

“You can only enter/exit between 8AM-8PM. When you arrive at the camp doors, one by one they let you inside, to the checkpoint where they check your phone, wallet, pockets, even the small pockets of your clothes. Then when you want to go inside you have to pass through doors with fingerprints.” Mehdi, 23-year-old man from Afghanistan, Vathy, Samos, 2022.

Closed and controlled facilities are [not a humane or dignified reception option](#) for people seeking international protection. Restrictions of people’s liberty to exit or re-enter the facility freely can amount to *de facto* [detention](#) and can lead to a violation of their right to private and family life. Without an asylum applicant card (which is necessary to access the center's security systems), people are prohibited to leave the camp. This applies to new arrivals until their asylum applicant’s card has been issued, as well as to those waiting to appeal a negative decision or to submit a subsequent asylum application.

In addition to this, asylum seekers are the only category of people who are still subjected to a mandatory COVID-19 quarantine [when they arrive in Greece](#) for at least five days. This approach creates a constant sense of containment. According to I Have Rights (IHR), an organisation that provides free legal information and legal support on Samos, asylum seekers are detained on average for 12 days after being identified by the Reception and Identification Service. In addition, in 6% of IHR’s cases, people are detained for 25 days or even more if identification procedures have not been completed. This is [due to delays](#) in the issuance of the asylum applicant card which allows them to exit the CCAC. This decision has been taken by the Asylum Service on the grounds of an increase in arrivals in Samos - even though there are currently fewer than 900 people in the facility which has capacity for 2,040.

In the Samos CCAC, asylum seekers are kept ‘out of sight and out of mind’, [with limited access to services and opportunities to interact with the local population](#). Despite this, as of the time of writing there is no appointed doctor for the residents of the camp. Although a volunteer doctor from Samos hospital visits the camp twice a week, she only identifies vulnerable people among the residents and does not provide medical care. In 2022, 42% of IHR beneficiaries met the legal category of vulnerability in Greece, with 26% being survivors of torture and 12% being survivors of human trafficking. Only 33% of those who were vulnerable were in contact with the CCAC psychologist before their full asylum interview.

[The continued use of containment](#) measures on both the islands and mainland undermines repeated calls by NGOs for Greece and the EU to focus on integration and social inclusion. The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion states that the “*successful integration of migrants depends both on early action and long-term investment. Providing support to migrants and their receiving communities at the earliest possible moment*”. It is time for Greece and the EU to align with this approach.

2. Containment policies have a devastating impact on people's mental health

Extended stays in CCACs create enormous stress and uncertainty for the asylum seekers residing there:

“Living in the camp [CCAC] on Samos is a very difficult experience. They shouldn’t even give it the name ‘camp’; in my opinion it is a prison – there is no difference... Everyone is inside their container, nobody comes outside, everyone is depressed and sick in some way – from loneliness, from their legal situation or status, and other problems they have in their lives. We refugees are not guilty criminals, we are human, we came here with hope. Somali, African, Afghan, Arab – it doesn’t make a difference, we are all in the same situation.” - Mehdi, describing conditions in the CCAC; Samos, May 2022.

IRC mental health and psychosocial support teams worked on Samos between 2019-2022 and witnessed first-hand [the detrimental effects of Greek and EU containment policies](#). The focus on walls rather than welcome has contributed to immense feelings of hopelessness and despair among asylum seekers and refugees trapped on the Greek islands. In the last year, 91% of people supported by the IRC mental health programme in Samos experienced anxiety and 87% depression-related symptoms, while an alarming 41% showed symptoms of suicidality. Containment-centered accommodation models have devastating impacts on the mental health of asylum seekers and refugees, who may already have to cope with trauma endured in their country and on their journey towards Greece.

3. It's time for answers from the Greek Government and the EU

Greek and EU authorities need to move away from short-sighted policies based on containment and deterrence. They should instead adopt specific measures to promote a sustainable, dignified reception and asylum system for all people seeking protection. **Towards this aim, we, the undersigned civil society organisations, call on the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum and the European Commission for specific answers on the following issues:**

1. As COVID-19 quarantine requirements are being waived across Europe, on what grounds are asylum seekers in Samos and Lesbos held in a quarantine section upon arrival?
2. When will the designated hosting areas for single women with their children and/or unaccompanied children inside the CCACs start operating?
3. What is the timeframe and what concrete measures have been taken towards ensuring adequate and specialised staffing of the Medical and Psychosocial Unit inside the CCACs?
4. Given that ongoing asylum trends in Greece indicate many residents of the camp(s) will be granted asylum, what measures have been taken to establish integration pathways, and how is the impact of having to reside in prison-like conditions for protracted periods assessed with respect to prospects of integration?
5. Why does the Commission fund centres that are contrary to the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion it has adopted?
6. What is the Commission's assessment with respect to Greece's approach to integration, particularly vis-à-vis the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion?
7. What is the Commission's assessment with respect to Greece's compliance with the Reception Conditions Directive and the asylum acquis more broadly?
8. Given that the EU has provided material support for the construction and running of the CCACs and oversees Greece's use of EU funds for these purposes, what steps will the Commission take to hold Greece accountable for violations of fundamental rights in these facilities?