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In Greece, Every Day is World Refugee Day

- The Greek Forum of Refugees Responds to Death and Desperation

By Mattea Cumoletti, 2016 Peace Fellow

Athens, Greece: Monday (June 20, 2016) was World Refugee Day. News outlets and social media were filled with proclamations of solidarity through campaigns like UNHCR's [#WithRefugees petition](#). New warnings were issued about the scale of the crisis: [65.3 million forcibly displaced worldwide](#) - or one in every 113 people on the planet.

But here in Athens, June 20 was just another day of suffering. Yonous Muhammadi, the president of the Greek Forum of Refugees (GFR), woke up to a desperate 4:00 am phone call from someone on a boat full of men, women, and children, struggling to reach an unknown Greek island. Yonous advised them to call the emergency number 112, and then listened on the news until he heard that they had been rescued by the Greek coast guard. Yonous had just helped 40 more people to join nearly 60,000 asylum seekers [waiting in limbo in Greece](#).



Yonous Muhammadi, himself a refugee from Afghanistan, heads the Greek Forum of Refugees

"Dr. Yonous" (photo left) has become a well-known community leader and activist since he arrived in Athens seeking asylum from Afghanistan 15 years ago. He and his GFR team are increasingly considered the go-to first responder by refugees, authorities, media, and NGOs alike.

Monday June 20 was no different. Yonous went into the GFR office, despite it being a Greek national holiday, and received a desperate call from the weeping father of a 10-year-old boy who had just died in the Elliniko Camp. The man asked how he could transport his son's body back to Afghanistan. As the boy's mother explained in an interview:

"We left our homeland to save my children from the explosions and attacks, but I lost him here in Europe. There is no reason for us to stay here anymore. At least in my homeland we have a mosque and graveyard to bury my child." There are no Muslim cemeteries in Athens.

Later in the morning, the phone rang again. This time it was from a doctor seeking help to translate for a 25-year-old woman who had attempted suicide in the Eleonas Camp. She had been in the hospital for a couple of days, and told Dr. Yonous that she still wanted to harm herself: "I hate everything. I hate myself. I can't suffer any more. I wish to die." The lack of translators is a big problem for refugees seeking local medical care.



Tending to the vulnerable

In the afternoon, Dr. Yonous phoned to check on Petrini Apothiki, a large warehouse in the Piraeus Port that has turned into an informal camp. Dr. Yonous visited the camp last week and found over 150 tents squeezed into a building with no windows, much less air-conditioning.

The weather this week in Athens has already peaked at an insufferable 43 degrees Celsius (109 Fahrenheit) and the GFR is especially worried about children and pregnant women living in this "hell."

The phone call was punctuated by the sounds of children crying. Yonous learned that 5 children had been taken to the hospital suffering from the heat.

The bad news didn't just come by phone. Three Syrian families came to the GFR office, hoping to make the mandatory [Skype call to the Greek Asylum Service](#) and begin the process of applying for relocation. Yonous was forced to turn them away, because such calls can only be made during scheduled hours controlled by the Asylum Service.

No sooner had they left than two more Afghan families arrived, looking for somewhere to stay. They had been refused entry to the camps at Piraeus Port, Schisto, and Elliniko because the camps were already full to capacity. Yonous advised them to try the Eleonas camp, although they would probably have to sleep outside the official camp fence.

By five o'clock the day was still not over. Yonous left for another visit to the Eleonas Camp in his capacity as a "Cultural Mediator." Under this program, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) uses the expertise, language skills, and connections of Yonous and his GFR team to liaise between camp inhabitants, camp management, and aid agencies.

This time Yonous also brought along several other GFR Board members, proudly wearing new vests emblazoned with the GFR logo. They stayed in Eleonas until it was time to break fast for Ramadan, listening patiently, taking notes, and discussing possible solutions with the camp authorities.

One woman with a vacant expression and blackened fingers and toes followed them around for most of the visit, and Yonous spent a significant amount of time with her. He explained later that she had suffered from frostbite on her journey through the mountains between Iran and Turkey, fleeing a lifetime of domestic violence in Afghanistan. She was still deeply upset.



Dr. Yonous during a recent visit to Eleonas Camp

This was World Refugee Day for the GFR in Athens. What mattered were not the [celebratory official speeches](#) or the [emotional celebrity videos](#), but the tragic routine. It is certainly important to raise awareness and honor forcibly displaced people worldwide. But for asylum-seekers in Athens, every day is World Refugee Day and it is nothing to celebrate.

Author [Mattea Cumoletti](#), from the Fletcher School at Tufts University, is volunteering at the Greek Forum of Refugees as a 2016 Peace Fellow

- [Click here for the UNHCR's profiles of the Greek camps where GFR works](#)
- [Click here for more on the Greek Forum of Refugees](#)
- [Click here to read the blogs of Peace Fellow Mattea Cumoletti](#)
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