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Greek Government Under Fire as Asylum Crisis Again Spins Out of Control

- Advocates ask the UN for community workers to defuse tension in the camps

Athens, Greece: Human rights advocates are questioning the willingness of the Greek government to protect asylum seekers after a month of violence in refugee sites, growing tension between refugees and locals, indifference towards the special needs of refugee children, and reports that the conditions in sites are deteriorating dangerously.



Police have been accused of abuse while dismantling makeshift shelters in the port of Piraeus

makeshift refugee settlement was being dismantled in the port of Piraeus, Athens. Lawyers are investigating charges that he was seriously abused in detention.

The crisis began on July 9, when fighting broke out between inhabitants and asylum-seekers on the Greek island of Leros. Tensions then spilled over to the mainland, where a 16-year old Afghan refugee was stabbed to death on July 14 in the camp of Elliniko, near Athens. Two community workers from the [Greek Forum of Refugees](#), a Greek advocacy group, tried to intervene and were beaten up, forcing the Forum to withdraw.

Recently, a 14 year old Afghan boy was arrested by the police while a

Meanwhile, there is growing concern over conditions at refugee sites. A [leading health agency](#) has urged that all sites in Greece should be closed because they pose a threat to public health. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), which maintains [a map of 40 sites](#), has told NGOs that only 29 are fit for use - a number that is disputed by the government.



Health threat: The agency KEELPNO has called for sites like Skaramangas (above) to be closed

Many of these developments have been exposed in a series of hard-hitting posts by the Forum and the [blogs of Mattea Cumoletti](#), a Peace Fellow from The Advocacy Project who is working at the Forum this summer.

In a recent visit with the Forum to the Agia Sofia Children's Hospital in Athens, Ms Cumoletti found healthy refugee children who are being effectively detained while their parents were in jail or missing. They included Yalda, 3, whose father is in jail for trying to cross from Greece into Serbia and whose mother has disappeared; two Iranian toddlers, whose mother was detained for the same reason; and Zainab, 2, who was

separated from her mother while the latter recovered from an operation.

The Forum team also found one seriously ill refugee boy, Zabi, 14, who was unable to communicate with doctors because of a lack of translators. Zabi (photo below) weighed just sixty pounds and suffered from a severe respiratory condition after crossing the mountains from Afghanistan, but Ms Cumoletti saw visitors openly smoking in his presence. At least three refugee children have died since Ms Cumoletti arrived in June.



Zabi, 14, is seriously ill after leaving Afghanistan. His chances of recovery are jeopardized by the lack of translators at the Agia Sofia Hospital for Children.

As [she explained in a blog](#), the one bright spot at Agia Sofia was the presence of volunteers from the Orthodox Church, who care for the refugee children. But the Forum also insists [in a recent opinion piece](#) that volunteers cannot substitute for a clear government policy to provide language services in hospitals: "It is beyond the capacity and resources of local non-profits and volunteers to wholly address this problem."

For many, the crisis shows that the Greek government is failing to build

on the [March 18 deal](#) between the EU and Turkey, which authorized the interception and return of asylum-seekers back to Turkey. New arrivals in Greece have slowed to a trickle and Greece now hosts an estimated 57,000 asylum-seekers. UNHCR is preregistering those without proper documents so that they can stay for a year while they apply for asylum.

But at the same time, life for many of the asylum seekers is clearly worsening. Those on islands like Leros are forbidden to leave, creating tension between locals and asylum-seekers. Elsewhere in Greece, asylum-seekers from other nations feel deep resentment towards Syrians, many of whom are viewed as having a fast track to resettlement outside Greece.

Conditions in the camps have also deteriorated. Only 5 camps around Athens are deemed "long-term" by the government, creating uncertainty and making it more likely that the rest will be poorly maintained. Elliniko, where the 16 year old Afghan was murdered, was scheduled for closure in July but remains open. Asylum-seekers at Malakasa, another site, have complained about the searing heat, the absence of lighting at night and "bullying" by an untrained camp manager. The International Organization of Migration has promised relief supplies, but little has reached the camp so far.



Zeinab, 2, is separated from her mother, who is recovering from surgery in another hospital.



For Greek advocates like the Forum, these many challenges underscore the value of mediators who can translate for asylum seekers and reduce tensions in the camps. The Forum has deployed 35 community workers to three camps, including Elliniko, with funding from UNHCR, but the contract ends this month.

Given Greece's inability to deal with its current asylum-seekers, many are asking what will happen to those who are eventually granted refugee status. A [new documentary from the Forum](#), "Integration Now" is pessimistic. The film presents a scathing picture of government indifference and concludes that to the extent refugees are being integrated in Greece, it is at a "personal level" and through the efforts of nongovernmental organizations.

- Read [this moving article](#) by Yonous Mohammed, president of the Greek Forum of Refugees, after meeting Zabi and other refugee children at the Agia Sofia hospital.
- Listen to Mattea Cumoletti's [podcast interview with Alice](#), a legal expert at the Forum.
- View the Forum's [new documentary](#) about integrating refugees into Greek society.

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