

REFUGEE WOMEN ON GREEK ISLANDS IN CONSTANT FEAR

By Giorgos Kosmopoulos

LESVOS, GREECE – Shirin, an Afghan journalist, was once shot at by the Taliban. After fleeing near-fatal attacks in her country in the hope of finding safety in Europe, she now lives in constant fear in a transit refugee camp in Greece. She is, in fact, just one of many women who have fled harm and persecution, only to face new fears of sexual harassment and violence in the camps on the Greek islands.

“We are treated like animals. I’d rather be shot again than endure these conditions,” Shirin, not her real name, told Amnesty International at the Kara Tepe camp on the island of Lesbos.

It was 18 months ago that the Taliban shot at Shirin’s car. Initially, she fled to Kabul, where she found another journalism job, this time behind the camera. “It’s very dangerous for a woman journalist in Afghanistan,” she said. She continued to receive threats over the phone, and eventually it became too much. She left Afghanistan for Europe.

“But I don’t feel safe here either. I’m so scared, I never leave my room at night,” she said, adding that many of her friends and fellow travelers had described incidents of verbal and sexual harassment in Lesbos. Her “room” is a container in which dozens of women sleep, often on hard floors.

Despite the difficult conditions, Kara Tepe is considered the “good” camp on Lesbos. Refugees are allowed to come and go as they choose, and it has gender-segregated toilets and showers with doors – simple measures that increase the security of female refugees and help prevent sexual violence.

Vulnerable Amid Cramped Conditions

Conditions are markedly worse in the Moria camp, also on Lesbos, a former Greek military compound with a maximum capacity of 400 people. Moria currently houses over 3,000 people in extremely cramped conditions.

Jumana, a psychologist working for Humanity Crew, an NGO supporting refugees in Lesbos, told Amnesty International about the particular dangers that women refugees face in the camp. “Women staying in refugee camps are under a lot of pressure and continue to raise their fear of not feeling safe due to the mixed populations in the camps and the mixing, in some cases, of men and women even inside the tents, and lack of proper lighting at night,” she explained.

A 23-year-old woman who was traveling alone told Jumana how she awoke one night in Moria, terrified to discover that an unknown man had entered her tent. Such stories have become common over the past several months.

This year, more than a fifth of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Greece are female and well over a third are children, according to the latest U.N. reports. None of them can leave until they are given appointments by the asylum application services in Athens, a process that can be painfully long due to insufficient staff and a backlog of applications.

While the camps on the Greek islands were initially set up as refugee processing facilities, they were turned into prison-like detention centers without freedom of movement following the E.U.-Turkey deal. While the authorities recently relaxed restrictions on the movement of people, thousands are crammed together in tents and containers. Basics such as food, including baby milk, are often scarce, and shower and toilet facilities extremely unhygienic.

The E.U.'s "refugee-swap" deal with Turkey meant refugees who arrived in Greece after March 20 risked being sent back to Turkey without proper assessment of their asylum claims in adherence with international refugee conventions. Amnesty International strongly opposes the deal as Turkey does not offer refugees full rights and protections.

But safety is a concern on both sides of the border. Both Greece and Turkey, which are at the heart of the E.U.-Turkey deal, are struggling to meet the basic E.U. standards of protection. The Greek holding facilities in particular are overwhelmed and under-resourced. The scarcity of food and increase in tensions due to poor conditions and continued lack of information have led to outbreaks of violence.

During one such incident on June 1, a serious fight broke out overnight among some of those detained in Moria and a large area of the camp was set alight. Women and men, including families with young children, fled and spent the night in nearby fields or the town of Mytilene, several kilometers away. Many returned to find that the fire had destroyed their tents and their few belongings.

Unprotected Caretakers

Women and men alike told Amnesty International that they often don't feel safe in the camps. Fights break out in the food queues, and the police do little to protect the vulnerable. Amnesty International has urged Greek authorities to make more stringent efforts to ensure safety in the camps.

"Men get drunk and there is no safety. Police will never protect us or intervene. We are also scared that something may happen to our children," a 23-year-old Syrian woman with three children said. "The other night a man simply opened the door and tried to come into our room," added a 29-year-old Iraqi woman, who is stuck in the Kara Tepe camp with her three children, and has been trying to reach her husband, who made it to Germany. Another woman with a six-month-old baby said they were too scared even to use the toilet at night. "We stay in groups and only go to sleep when we are really tired. In the night, we don't leave our tents and our children are forced to go to the toilet inside," she said.

Many women are reluctant to come forward with formal complaints due to social stigma and because they want to eventually move on from the camp without getting stuck in a bureaucratic maze.

But even Moria's decrepit conditions are no match for one of the most notorious camps in Greece, known as VIAL, located on the island of Chios. There, too, fights often break out. "Men fight and we run and hide. The police just laugh and refuse to help," a woman there told Amnesty International.

Life in the camps has become yet another round of misery for those who have already suffered violence and torture. Some still carry fragments of bullets or shelling in their body – painful, visual reminders of their pasts. Nearly everyone here has lost someone they loved to conflict. It is often the women and girls who take up the responsibility of caring for others. A teenage Afghan girl approached Amnesty in the VIAL camp, and said: "I am 16 and I'm here with my younger brother and my mother, who is blind. How I am supposed to look after them here?"

The unnatural cohabitation of strangers inside cramped tents has created high levels of tension and real risks for thousands of women, men and children trapped on the Greek islands following the E.U.-Turkey agreement. Amnesty International calls upon the Greek government and its E.U. partners to assume their responsibilities towards those suffering neglect and exposed to risk. Instead of dehumanizing people desperately seeking safety and a better life, Europe must offer protection as a first step.