

# GREECE UPDATE No.16

## LESVOS

17 February - 7 March 2021



Recognized refugees in Lesvos, Greece, before their relocation to Germany in February 2021.  
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UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, **is supporting the Government-led response** after a series of fires destroyed the Reception and Identification Centre in Moria (Lesvos) in September 2020.

UNHCR has scaled up its support for all asylum-seekers affected and **urges for comprehensive and humane solutions** to address difficult living conditions on Greek islands.

### BACKGROUND



**12,000**

asylum-seekers were left homeless overnight

nearly **6,900**

asylum-seekers are hosted in the new emergency site

In September 2020, a series of fires ravaged the Moria Reception and Identification Centre (RIC), leaving 12,000 people homeless. The authorities have set up the Mavrovouni site to host those affected and nearly 6,900 asylum-seekers and refugees, the majority women and children, are currently sheltered in the site. Many others, including unaccompanied children, were in the meantime transferred to alternative accommodation.

The Greek authorities lead the response with the support of UN agencies, including UNHCR, as well as international and national NGOs and volunteer groups.

### IN BRIEF

According to the authorities, there have been no new confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Mavrovouni site since 25 December, and there are no people quarantined there as of 7 March.

Thousands of refugees and asylum-seekers living in tents or makeshift shelters on the

islands of Samos, Chios and Lesvos had to endure freezing temperatures and winds, as another cold spell swept across Greece from 14 to 18 February. Humanitarian organizations helped the Greek authorities to prepare for the cold weather, but more support is needed to address the overall difficult conditions faced by site residents, such as appropriate shelter for all, transfers to the mainland where conditions are overall better and relocation to other European Union (EU) States.

The first direct relocation from Lesvos to another EU Member State without transfers via mainland took place as part of the [EU relocation programme](#), with 116 refugees arriving in Germany on 17 February. In addition, on 3 March, 35 vulnerable asylum-seekers arrived from Greece in Norway, in the first relocation to that country as part of the programme, which is led by the Government of Greece with participating EU Member States and is coordinated by the European Commission. UNHCR is working with UN partners IOM and UNICEF to support all aspects of the relocation process in cooperation with the European



**600**  
tents (470 provided  
by UNHCR)  
were set up

The **470** UNHCR  
tents have insulation  
and wood flooring



Gaps remain in  
water, sanitation,  
hygiene and  
health services

Asylum Support Office and other partners. As of 3 March, 2,968 refugees and vulnerable asylum-seekers had been relocated from Greece, including 634 unaccompanied children.

On 21 February, a 26-year-old pregnant woman and mother of three set her tent on fire at the Mavrovouni site in what seems to have been an act of despair after hearing rumours that her family's relocation from the camp was being postponed. The fire was swiftly put out and the woman was hospitalized with light burns. She faces [charges](#) of arson and destruction of public property and is receiving legal aid from NGOs. UNHCR is monitoring the case. A few days earlier, on 19 February, another small fire destroyed four tents. The cause of that fire is yet unknown. UNHCR replaced all affected tents.

## UNHCR'S RESPONSE

### Site planning and shelter

While Lesvos was not impacted by the heavy snow in the mainland in mid-February, asylum-seekers and refugees in the Mavrovouni site struggled to keep their tents standing against strong winds. UNHCR replaced four tents that were damaged.

After the Government's announcement on 23 January of lead contamination findings outside the site's residential area, the authorities have fenced off the contaminated zone, while works to raise soil levels and gravel in the adjacent areas are nearing completion at the time of writing. Other works, such as installing a cement cap at ground level in the administrative, reception and registration zones are yet to be completed (as of 7 March). UNHCR notes the reassurances made by the authorities at the time of the announcement and reiterates the need for swift implementation of all necessary measures to ensure the safety of site residents and workers alike.

### Basic assistance

UNHCR has made available to the Greek authorities 950 heaters to cover the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees in the Mavrovouni site and in the quarantine area for new arrivals in Western Lesvos Municipality. However, in Mavrovouni, the heaters can only be operational once the authorities

upgrade the electrical network. While the site is connected to the national grid, the site network requires enhancements to be able to power all accommodation and administration areas. As of 7 March, UNHCR was able to distribute 138 portable heaters in zones currently powered by a generator, pending a longer-term solution. UNHCR also provided an information session to those receiving portable heaters on their safe use.

### COVID-19 prevention and response

To prevent and mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, asylum-seekers have undergone rapid testing by national health authorities before entering the Mavrovouni site. Based on health protocols, all persons testing positive were directed to the isolation area, alongside family members. According to the authorities, there have been no new confirmed COVID-19 cases since 25 December. There are no people quarantined in the site as of 7 March.

At the quarantine area for new arrivals in Western Lesvos Municipality, strong winds caused three unoccupied UNHCR accommodation tents to collapse. No injuries were reported, and the tents were repaired and re-erected shortly after.

### Education

In focus group discussions with UNHCR, site residents regularly express their wish for more educational and recreational activities for their children. Given the limited opportunities available, refugees often gather in small groups for impromptu classes. In a positive development, some 60 boys and girls have been able to pursue their lessons in a safe and calm learning environment, following the resumption of classes by UNHCR's partner METAdrasi on 12 February, which take place in a learning centre in the town of Mytilene. Another 50 children in Mavrovouni continue to receive daily homework packages with self-learning material. With some 2,200 children in the camp, 1,500 of which are between 5 and 17 years old, educational demands are great and concerted efforts are necessary to ensure quality education for all.

UNHCR will continue its response and welcomes much-needed support through flexible funding that would allow it to address the needs of all asylum-seekers impacted by the fires in Moria. Please visit UNHCR's [donation page](#) to learn more about how you can support those most affected.

UNHCR is grateful to donors who provide generous and timely support that enables a swift response to the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees in Greece.

#### Donors who contributed to support UNHCR's activities in Greece in 2021

European Union | Austria | Private sector Germany | Private sector United Kingdom | Education Cannot Wait | Norway

#### Unearmarked contributions to UNHCR's 2021 global programme

Norway | Sweden | Netherlands | Denmark | Germany | Switzerland | Private sector Spain | Ireland | Belgium



**119,300**  
Population in Greece

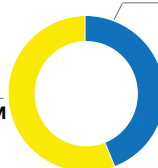
**101,200** in the mainland and **18,100** in the islands

#### Financial requirements 2021\*

**USD 150.5 M**

requested for the Greece operation

**Unfunded 82.5M**  
55%



**Funded 68 M**  
45%

\*The financial requirements for Greece include requirements for the operation's regular programme and the Central Mediterranean Route Situation

### Situation in Greece

Arrivals of refugees have dropped dramatically since the 2015–2016 emergency, when close to a million people reached Greece. However, with a steady number of people arriving across Greece's sea and land borders, and with limited legal pathways out of the country, the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees remain pressing.

There were approximately 119,300 asylum-seekers in Greece as of end January 2021. While the situation on mainland Greece is better overall, most of the roughly 14,000 asylum-seekers at the reception and identification centres on the Greek Aegean Islands are exposed to various risks, including gender-based violence.

UNHCR will continue to assist Greek authorities in responding to both short-term and long-term challenges. More support is also needed from European countries and European Union institutions in providing immediate protection to those most at-risk through continued resources, ensuring capacity in the country and responsibility-sharing through expedited relocations of unaccompanied children and other vulnerable people.

For more information on the refugee situation and UNHCR interventions in Greece, you may refer to UNHCR's [Operational Portal](#).

### Press release



#### UNHCR warns asylum under attack at Europe's borders, urges end to pushbacks and violence against refugees

Alarmed at the increasing frequency of expulsions and pushbacks of refugees and asylum-seekers at Europe's land and sea borders, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is calling for states to investigate and halt these practices.

Shoes, a ball and a hat caught on a three layered barbed-wire fence at the Fylakio reception and identification centre near the Greek-Turkish border. © UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

[Link to the PR](#)

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