

**For Immediate Release**

## **Greece: Move Asylum Seekers, Migrants to Safety**

*Immediate Hotspot Decongestion Needed to Address COVID-19*

(Athens, March 24, 2020) – Greece’s government should immediately reduce congestion in the islands’ Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) for asylum seekers and migrants to avert a public health crisis amid the coronavirus pandemic, 21 human rights and humanitarian organizations said today.

Thousands of people, including older people, those with chronic diseases, children – including very young and unaccompanied children –, pregnant women, new mothers, and people with disabilities, are trapped in dangerously overcrowded, deplorable conditions on the islands amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Forcing asylum seekers to remain in conditions that violate their rights and are harmful to their well-being, health, and dignity cannot be justified on grounds of public health, the organizations said.

International human rights law requires that the health needs of asylum seekers and migrants be addressed and, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, any restrictions on rights for reasons of public health or national emergency be [lawful, necessary, and proportionate](#) as well as [nondiscriminatory](#).

On March 17, 2020, Greece’s government [announced measures](#) to prevent a coronavirus outbreak in RICs on the islands, the so-called “hotspots,” that essentially put the camps on lockdown, trapping thousands of asylum seekers and migrants. The measures include suspending all special activities and facilities in the camps, including non-formal schools, while no visitors, including members of aid organizations and agencies providing essential services, will be allowed into the RICs for at least two weeks, the Migration and Asylum Ministry said. Camp residents will be prevented through strict controls from venturing outside the facilities, even to get supplies, but also from circulating within them without good reason.

On March 22, Greece’s prime minister [announced a nationwide lockdown](#) banning “all unnecessary movement by citizens.”

As of March 22, the [population of the hotspots](#) on Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos, and Leros was almost 31,400 over capacity, with 37,427 people in facilities with a total capacity of just 6,095. Conditions in the centers cannot be characterized as suitable for dignified, humane living, the groups said. Extremely limited access to running water, toilets, and showers, as well as hours-long lines for food distribution and insufficient medical and nursing personnel, make it impossible to abide by the guidelines for protection from the coronavirus, putting people at significantly heightened risk in the face of the growing threat of widespread COVID-19 transmission.

Greece's government should adopt measures to prevent an outbreak and prepare a response plan to be enacted immediately once the first case of COVID-19 in a reception center is detected. In the event of an outbreak, a quarantine that would trap tens of thousands of healthy people together with people infected by COVID-19 in the overcrowded camps, accompanied by a lack of adequate and appropriate medical preparedness and response, would almost certainly lead to preventable deaths of numerous people, the organizations said.

Greece's government should take the measures outlined below, which will reduce the risk of COVID-19 infections among the population living in these centers and generally help protect public health:

- Move people out of the reception centers to appropriate, small-scale centers on the mainland, such as hotels and apartments, taking necessary precautions for safe transport. This will enable the government to carry out the guidelines against the spread of the coronavirus. Priority should be given to older people, people with chronic diseases and serious underlying medical conditions, people with disabilities, pregnant women, new mothers and their children, and children, including those who are unaccompanied. Accommodation for people with disabilities should be reasonably adapted as needed, taking individual needs into account. Suitable shelters for unaccompanied children should be established immediately.
- Adopt special measures to guarantee universal and unhampered free access to healthcare in the public system for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants alike without discrimination, including testing and treatment for COVID-19. These groups should also have access to any preventive measures put in place in Greece in response to COVID-19, as do people in the rest of Greece. Asylum seekers should receive without delay their Provisional Insurance and Health Care Number (PAAYPA), as mandated by Common Ministerial Decision 717.2020.
- Supply the reception centers with adequate sanitary and hygiene products and ensure continuous running water so that residents can follow the guidelines of the National Public Health Organization and the World Health Organization (WHO) regarding protection from COVID-19. Ensure frequent disinfection of common areas, bathrooms, and toilets, as well as timely collection and removal of waste.
- Provide information to all residents of the reception centers about (a) how to prevent COVID-19 and (b) what to do and how to get help if they experience symptoms of COVID-19 in a wide range of languages, including ones that are less frequently used. People with disabilities should be provided with information in accessible formats, such as sign language, captioning, text, and easy-to-read messages. Ensure necessary responsive measures are available such as self-isolation and quarantine areas, and medical personnel with adequate training and protective gear.
- Urgently address the situation and special needs of people living in the informal settlements adjacent to the camps, as these groups may face additional challenges due to inadequate access to water and sanitation, hygiene products, and garbage collection.

- Ensure, until the reception centers are decongested, that they have adequate numbers of medical and nursing personnel, as well as mental health support services. Where possible, these services could be provided remotely.

**The following quotes may be attributed to members of the groups involved:**

“Restricting thousands of women, men, and children in severely overcrowded camps, where living conditions are unacceptable, makes it impossible to isolate people exposed to COVID-19 or to comply with minimum preventive and protective measures, even hand washing and social-distancing,” said [Eva Cossé](#), Greece researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The Greek government urgently needs to move people to mainland Greece.”

“The government must take the necessary steps in order to ensure that the thousands of asylum seekers and migrants living in claustrophobically congested RICs are protected,” said Vassilis Kerasiotis, HIAS Greece country director. “They should be relocated to otherwise empty hotels and apartments where they can practice social distancing. In these hard times, no one should be left behind. It is not only a moral but also a prudent thing to do, since the fates of asylum seekers as well as those of the locals are inevitably bound together in the face of the pandemic.”

“Asylum seekers and migrants residing in RICs should have equal access to protection and medical assistance as the rest of the Greek population,” said Dimitra Kalogeropoulou, head of IRC Greece. “The most effective way to curb the spread of COVID-19 is by ensuring that everyone can take meaningful measures to protect themselves, including adequate access to sanitation, space, and healthcare.”

“Given current conditions in the hotspots, containing any outbreak would be impossible and could potentially put thousands of lives in danger,” said Antigone Lyberaki, general manager at SolidarityNow. “There is a window of opportunity to address this issue while the situation is still manageable, but we fear this window may be closing fast.”

“When the virus hits overcrowded camps in Greece, the consequences will be devastating,” said Fotini Kokkinaki with HumanRights360. “That will be a nightmare within an existing nightmare since the public health system has collapsed during the previous years of economic depression. We must act now before it is too late.”

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