

# Challenges posed by COVID-19 to refugee camps on the Greek islands: We are all humans after all

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Dear Editor

Only recently, Greece exited a 10-year financial rescue program which, among other consequences, had a negative impact on its national health system<sup>1</sup>. In addition, since 2011 and the “Arab Spring”, the country faces a migrant and refugee crisis, which has led to overcrowded camps and hotspots on the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Leros and Samos<sup>2</sup>. As of the end of April, 2020, there were approximately 40,000 migrants and refugees in these facilities, whose capacity marginally exceeds 6,000<sup>3</sup>.

Greece now, in a short period of time, must address a new crisis: the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic<sup>4</sup>, for which there is still no effective vaccine<sup>5</sup>. Admittedly, the Greek government effectively launched strict suppression measures early on, controlling successfully the first wave of COVID-19 in the country<sup>6</sup>. However, the problem is even more complex. Greek authorities are called to prevent a second wave and to control the spread of the virus among thousands of migrants and refugees who live in close proximity into camps and hotspots, many of which lack basic infrastructure<sup>7</sup>. For public health reasons, their movement has been restricted by law, with an enforced lockdown between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m., and only one person is allowed out per family<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, the Greek government has implemented intensive cleaning of communal areas, compulsory temperature measurement of new arrivals, and setting up quarantine areas<sup>9</sup>, while supporting with additional medical staff.

These measures can undoubtedly contribute in preventing the occurrence of a single COVID-19 case into these facilities. However, there is an important risk for an overwhelming spread of the infection after a single case, since social distancing or prompt isolation is practically impossible into these densely packed settings<sup>3</sup>. Local outbreaks have already occurred in refugee camps on the Greek mainland<sup>6</sup>. In a similar scenario in refugee facilities on the above-mentioned Greek islands, the healthcare capacity of the 5 local hospitals, 1 on each island<sup>10</sup>, with a total of up to 20 intensive care beds, may be severely exceeded. Even more so given the fact that naval or air transportation are laborious due to infection control requirements.

It is easily understood that, despite the Greek government's efforts and interventions, Greece will need all the help it can get from the European Union and the United Nations for an effective and prompt management of the COVID-19 pandemic problem in the islands that host refugee camps and hotspots. It is a global humanitarian duty to prevent a catastrophic COVID-19 spread in this vulnerable population.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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