Dear ABC,

As a resident of the United Kingdom, I wish to express my concern at the looming public health catastrophe along the Greek border. As Governments across the world enact unprecedented emergency legislation to mitigate the threat of COVID-19, it is also time to take similarly effective measures to resolve the humanitarian crisis unfolding on the Greek islands.

According to UNHCR data, there are currently 42,000 men, women and children living in Reception and Identification Centres across the Aegean Islands. Originally intended to house a total of 6,000 people, these camps are now severely overcrowded and lack adequate sanitary and medical facilities. Many of those living in the camps have undermined immune systems and suffer from pre-existing health conditions, making them particularly vulnerable to an outbreak of COVID-19.

Faced with this pandemic, directives from the British Government have emphasised the need to practice social distancing, adhere to strict hygiene measures and “cocoon” our old and medically vulnerable. In the camps of the Aegean islands, which are currently six times over capacity (and even eleven times over capacity on Samos), this is entirely unfeasible.

Although there have been recent efforts on behalf of the Greek government to prepare the camps for a potential outbreak, it is naive to believe that any measures can be effective in containing the spread of COVID-19 in such cramped and unsanitary conditions. An outbreak of the virus would have devastating consequences for the residents of the camps, but also for the local Greek communities, who have too long shouldered the burden of the European Union’s inaction - the policies of which the UK played an integral part in shaping until March 2020.

The letter signed by the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee of the European Parliament on 24 March 2020 was an encouraging indicator that Europe is waking up to the humanitarian crisis at its border. I join my voice to theirs in asking you to use your electoral mandate within the British Parliament to advocate for:

* The urgent evacuation of the 42,000 people living in the camps of the Aegean Islands to appropriate facilities of sufficient sanitary standards, starting with the prioritisation of those most at risk and in a manner that protects public health.
* The honouring of the pledge made in 2016 as part of the UNHCR Resettlement Program to relocate 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020, and the subsequent commitment made in 2016 to resettle individuals considered to be at risk, in particular, children, under the supervision of the Home Secretary, the Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, and as a matter of urgency.
* The safeguarding of the right to asylum as enshrined in the Geneva Convention, and as a close friend of the European Union, a guarantee that all those who arrived in Greece after 1 March 2020 will be given the opportunity to seek protection in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights which member states have adopted.

As the world becomes preoccupied with self-isolation, let us not forget about those who do not have that option. An exit from the European Union does not amount to an exemption of responsibility towards those suffering as a result of political inertia on the international stage. The United Kingdom must step up and assume responsibility.

Kind regards,

ABC