



A new hotspot in Samos | deterrence and isolation undermining asylum seekers' rights in the Aegean

After five years of mass containment and overcrowding, with terrible consequences for the living conditions and mental health of asylum seekers' confined on the island, the Greek government has finally decided to increase the transfer of camp residents to the mainland (1). The intended purpose of this change of policy was not motivated by humanitarian concerns, but rather to **prepare for the opening of a large-scale containment facility**, located in a far-removed area in the middle of the island, entirely funded by the European Union (2).

Today, 18th September, the Multi-Purpose Reception & Identification Centre will be officially inaugurated in presence of the government authorities who invited both national and international media. According to official sources, by the end of the month, **all asylum seekers will have been transferred to this new facility** and the old Vathy RIC is set to be dismantled (3).

However, contrary to the narrative that the government wants to promote, this new camp cannot be considered a 'solution' to the 5-year-long situation on Samos as in the rest of the Aegean (4). Humanitarian actors, local solidarity groups and refugee communities have all expressed concerns as regards the **curtailment to the freedom of movement, personal liberties and integration perspectives** that this new facility will represent.

Although material living conditions are set to improve in the new facility, the large size and the isolation of the facility will certainly have a negative impact on people's mental health. Not only do mass containment and marginalisation exacerbate pre-existing psychological traumas, but they also curtail the possibility for people to **access basic services outside of the camp, access to information, legal support and overall put their right to asylum in jeopardy**.

Despite declarations from the European Commission and DG Home that the MPRIC will not be a 'closed camp' and residents' freedom of movement will be ensured, Greek government representatives and national asylum authorities have been **relentlessly stating that the camp will be 'closed and controlled'** (5). These narratives, combined with the sight of the double, barbed wire, military fence that surrounds the entire facility, leave very little hope for the hundreds of men, women and children at the prospect of being confined inside.

Moreover, deep concerns remain unanswered as to how livelihood in the new location **will affect people in situations of more severe vulnerability**.

First of all, despite the stated compliance of this accommodation scheme with fundamental rights, no concrete action has been undertaken in order to guarantee camp residents' **access to formal education for the whole duration of their containment** on the island, further undermining re-socialisation and integration perspectives, while the remote location of the facility will hinder the work of solidarity networks providing informal education support.

The same limitation will apply to the organisations providing legal assistance through the complicated asylum procedures, as well as weakening and compromising the possibility of **independent complaint pathways and monitoring of human rights compliance**.

At present, the **absence of a safe area for single women and single mothers with children inside the facility** is revealing of the widespread, systematic neglect as regards women and girls' specific exposure to harassment and violence: the safety and protection of all women and girls confined in the reception facility falls within the mandate and legal responsibility of the national and EU authorities that have signed this policy of confinement.

At the same time, the long-criticised **lack of reliable protection mechanisms for sex- and gender-based violence** will only further affect LGBTQI+ refugees, as the decision to accommodate camp residents on basis of nationalities implies that people fleeing persecution because of their sex and gender identities will have to reside among the same communities they fled from.

We need to state it clearly and beyond doubt: this system of reception is **not what international protection is supposed to look like**.

The system in place is one **designed to cause large-scale harm, to deprive of agency and autonomy, and to instill deterrence and intimidation** to people seeking asylum in Europe.

In light of this acknowledgement, Samos Volunteers is committed to **remain active on the island for as long as support is needed**, mobilising our resources, time and energies to provide for the gaps in the provision of service as witnesses of a systematic neglect in the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees.

In doing so, we demand EU and national policy-makers to ensure:

1. Reliable and believable **protection mechanisms** for the most marginalised groups of asylum seekers
2. Clear and transparent **fundamental rights monitoring and complaint mechanisms** in the new MPRIC
3. Complete **dismantlement of the mass containment approach** and establishment of small-scale, tailored projects for housing and integration support

Above all, we need a common European policy that upholds its own fundamental rights. A policy that recognises migration as a simple reality about the world we live in and not as a national and societal threat. A policy that meets the **human duty to humanely welcoming displaced people seeking international protection** in our countries and communities.