

MSF Briefing Note: Greece Migration Update, September 2021

Opening of new prison-like centre on Samos

“Europe is a country of freedom, but why are you taking our freedom from us? You want us to be in prison. Being in that new camp, we will not be considered as refugees but as someone who committed a crime. If I did a crime I go to prison, but I did not commit any crime I am just a refugee” Ali, 32 years old from Syria

Summary

- A new **EU-funded and co-managed multi-purpose reception and identification centre (MPRIC) opens on Samos island** on 18 September 2021, intended to house up to 3000 people, including an in-house detention facility for 900.
- This new camp is being sold as an ‘improvement’ in living conditions; but in reality will **further segregate and detain people seeking safety**. The camp is ringed by multiple layers of military-grade barbed wire fencing, with heavy security and surveillance structures and controlled entry and exit. It is located in an exposed rural site, far from any town or easy access to services. This isolated, prison-like centre represents an escalated EU migration strategy of deterrence, exclusion and containment, as detailed in MSF’s recent report [‘Constructing Crisis at Europe’s Borders’](#).
- **MSF medical teams continue to provide adults and children with mental health care in Samos, Lesvos and Athens**, as well as medical support for particularly vulnerable people, such as victims of torture, violence and sexual violence.
- Since April 2021, a shocking **64% of new MSF patients on Samos had thoughts of suicide or death and 14% were at active risk of suicide**. Currently **MSF has a cohort of 66 patients under mental health treatment**.
- **Moving people with serious mental disorders into an isolated, prison-like environment, is dangerous and medically unadvised**. MSF is concerned that the additional traumatic stress of being moved into the new camp will trigger deterioration in our existing patients, as well as in others who have not yet sought mental health care.
- MSF patients in Samos and Lesvos share how the prolonged uncertainty, arbitrary fast track asylum processes and fear of deportation, in addition to awful living conditions and exposure to violence contribute to their worsening health and mental health. In Samos fear of the new camp is driving people to leave the island illegally despite the consequences.
- MSF calls once again on the **European Commission, Greece and European States to implement policies that protect and assist refugees and migrants** instead of investing in ever-more extreme and harmful ways to deter and detain people.

What are ‘MPRICs’?

- Since 2020, €276 million has been granted by the European Commission to the Greek Government for the construction of new MPRICs on Samos, Lesvos, Chios and ‘upgrade’ of existing sites on Evros, Kos and Leros.
- Using the infamous Moria camp as the blueprint; the MPRICs intensify destructive migration policies that are unnecessary, damaging to peoples’ health and an abuse of human rights.
- Marketed as an improvement in living conditions, these camps all follow the same logic: remote locations, aggressive security measures and services provided in-house, segregating people from wider society and rendering the refugee issue invisible.
- The MPRICs are presented by the EU as ‘open’, with only those held inside separate pre-removal detention centres prevented from leaving. Yet the Greek Government has described the centres as ‘closed controlled’. In practice, the Samos facility has heavy security and surveillance, controlled entry and exit, and the location is so remote that it is impossible to reach any nearby towns without transport.
- Published plans for the MPRICs detail sophisticated security and surveillance systems costing over €6.1 million – including military-grade barbed wire fencing, controlled entry and exit using biometric data, and monitoring of all aspects of daily life.

Key concerns

1. Worsening mental health crisis

- The devastating consequences of the hotspot approach on people’s mental health has been well documented by MSF and others. From April until August 2021, a shocking 64% of new MSF patients on Samos had thoughts of suicide or death and 14% were at active risk of suicide.¹ For months now, MSF patients come to their appointments with the fear of being locked-up in the new camp, feeling abandoned and helpless.

¹ April – August 2021, MSF in Samos accepted 84 new patients, of which 54 had thoughts of suicide and 12 were an active risk of suicide.

- Currently MSF has a cohort of 66 patients under mental health treatment, who we expect will be moved to the new camp. Moving people with serious mental disorders into an isolated, prison-like environment, is dangerous and medically unadvised. MSF is concerned that this additional traumatic stress will trigger deterioration in our existing patients, as well as in others who have not yet sought mental health care.
- In the new camp, people will be segregated; they will face dystopian surveillance and security measures and be deprived of the basic freedom to walk outside and interact with normal society. Stripping people of any remaining agency and semblance of a regular life will worsen their mental health, whilst making their suffering invisible.
- The population in Vathy camp has dropped significantly, with around 600 people now remaining. In preparation for the transfer to the new camp, hundreds of people have been moved to camps on the mainland. Many others, fearful of what might happen to them in the new camp, are taking the risk to leave the island illegally and compromise their asylum process rather than move into prison-like conditions.

2. Normalised detention

- Detention is now the norm rather than a measure of last resort; the MPRICs will include built-in pre-removal detention centres run by the Greek police, in which people are unable to leave.
- Geographic restrictions forcing asylum seekers to remain on the Greek islands during their asylum process will continue.
- The camp on Samos will operate a controlled entry and exit system, with both residents and NGOs required to have individual ID cards to enter or exit the camp during specified hours. How this will work in practice is yet to be seen, but is clearly a system vulnerable to abuse, with access easily denied for arbitrary reasons. Restrictions of movement have been imposed on refugee and migrant populations trapped in the camps under the pretext of public health, since the beginning of the pandemic.
- MSF understands that basic services will be mostly provided inside the Samos MPRIC, including primary healthcare. Although MSF welcomes access to services, this approach further underlines the logic of segregation: rather than granting people access to public services, they are kept isolated in a separate facility.
- Combined with the proposed pre-entry border screening regulation and the designation of Turkey as a safe third country, the pre-removal centres enable the normalised detention of people seeking international protection.

3. Erosion of people's rights

- Navigating the complicated and constantly changing border and asylum procedures is a nightmare and a major driver of mental health stress for people treated by MSF.
- Fast-track procedures implemented on the Greek Islands are intended to speedily assess asylum applications without prior proper assessment of vulnerability, or access to procedural safeguards and mean more vulnerable people are overlooked.
- Since 7 June 2021, Greek legislation designated Turkey as a safe third country for asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Somalia. This is essentially a suspension of the right to asylum and with the inauguration of MPRICS, will mean de-facto detention for many of those seeking safety in Europe.
- To date, readmissions to Turkey have been suspended since March 2020, effectively placing all those identified for return in administrative limbo, without access to the public health system and infinite precarity or detention.

MSF Recommendations

- End the policies of containment and deterrence and abandon the MPRIC plans: the only purpose of centres on the Greek islands must be the provision of urgent assistance, facilitation of access to protection and relocation to safe reception.
- Ensure access to quality, timely medical care, tailored to the needs of the population and provided sustainably within the public health system.
- Invest in dignified reception and safe accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, such as housing within communities and integration programmes.
- Establish a fair and transparent asylum process that upholds all necessary procedural safeguards and does not violate the rights of asylum seekers through border procedures.
- Provide safe passage for those seeking safety in Europe, including investment in family reunion, refugee resettlement, humanitarian visas and other complementary protection pathways as well as routes for work and study.

"We do not know what to expect anymore. When they take us to the new camp in Samos, we will be far away from the supermarket, the pharmacy, the lawyer. It is very far away and we will not be able to walk in the city anymore for some peace time outside the camp. We are just stuck here. My only wish is for my asylum application to proceed, so that we can get our papers and to find a safe place in Greece or elsewhere." Qasem, 37-year-old father from Afghanistan