

Europe's refugee crisis Traumatized children fight to survive in hellish Lesbos camp

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The drawings tell of trauma. Stormy seas dotted with terrified faces. Lifeless bodies of children floating in the waves. And planes dropping bombs, on to homes and people. Eyes that weep blood.



The pencil scrawls were made by children who are part of a growing phenomenon in the Moria refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece. All have attempted suicide or serious selfharm since they came to this place.

Approximately 3,000 minors live in the Moria camp, which Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) calls a giant open-air “mental asylum” owing to the overcrowding and dire sanitary conditions. Last week an adolescent attempted to hang himself from a pole. In August, a 10-year-old boy only just failed to take his own life.

The camp, among hills dotted with olive trees a few miles from the island's capital town of Mytilene, is home to 9,000 asylum seekers living in a centre designed to hold one third of that number. Migrants live in groups of up to 30, crammed into tents or metal containers situated just inches apart. Rubbish, scattered everywhere, makes the air almost unbreathable.

Most come from war-torn countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. They arrive in dinghies from the Turkish towns of Ayvalık or Çanakkale. According to aid agencies, the

controversial deal brokered between Brussels and Ankara aimed at stopping the flow of migrants to Europe via Turkey, combined with the refusal on the part of European countries to take in asylum seekers arriving in Greece, have transformed Lesbos into an Alcatraz, leaving people imprisoned on the island with no way out.

“Although the vast majority of migrants who arrive in Moria are traumatised, after having fled from violent conflicts in their home countries, conditions in the camp have exacerbated their trauma,” says Luca Fontana, MSF’s field coordinator. “After two years, some are still awaiting transfer, even if they know they could be deported to Turkey at a moment’s notice. I’ve worked in camps infested with Ebola in Sierra Leone and Guinea, but I guarantee you that this is the worst situation I’ve ever seen.”

About 84 people share a single shower, and 72 people share a toilet, according to a report by the New York-based International Rescue Committee (IRC): “The sewage system is so strained that raw sewage has been known to reach the mattresses where children sleep.” Life in Moria is a daily battle for survival, with altercations common between ethnic groups over something as simple as a meal. Not to mention, according to aid groups, the gang rapes of women, attacked in the camp’s toilets. Doctors and psychologists say that minors are also targeted in the sexual violence.

To defend herself, 13-year-old Fatima sleeps with a knife under her pillow. Rape isn’t the only threat she faces: the other is depression. On 2 September, Fatima swallowed tablets that her mother used to alleviate the pain of the beatings her husband would unleash on her in Iraq. Fatima was saved by her three sisters, who found her convulsing in the middle of the shelter that the family shared with 25 other people.

“It’s not the first time this has happened,” says Shamsa, Fatima’s mother. “Since we arrived in Moria, she has tried several times to take her life. My daughters have transformed since we’ve been here. They’ve become aggressive. We fled Iraq last May in search of peace, but here in Moria we found hell.”

As a result of the stress and the conditions in the camp, MSF’s operation on Lesbos experiences the highest level of burnout among its staff in clinics around the world. It is difficult to work when there is a shortage of doctors: the Greek health ministry provides only one for the 9,000 migrants in Moria.

MSF, which rejected EU funding to protest at the Brussels-Turkey deal, organised a therapy session last June for six- to 12-year-olds who had attempted suicide, had depression or were self-harming. Part of the therapy involved creating stories in drawings and words. The children, mainly Afghan and Syrian, drew war scenes, shipwrecks and eyes that dripped blood.

According to the IRC report, “up to 60% of asylum seekers attending the mental health centre in Moria this year said they had contemplated suicide, and almost 30% had tried to take their own lives”. Aid groups say they can only deal with the most severe cases and fear the number of suicidal children is much higher. Some refuse to go to the clinic out of shame or fear – like Nadir, 14, who travelled alone to Lesbos, and who cut himself with a glass shard. People living near his tent saved his life and cared for him. The wounds on his arms, wrists, and chest have never been stitched. “I’m afraid of stitches and even doc-

tors,” he says. He hasn’t had news of his parents in Afghanistan for years and spends his days roaming the camp or queuing for hours at the canteen.

The regional authority has given Greece’s ministry of migration a 30-day ultimatum to clean up the camp. The first transfers of people to Athens have already begun. But with Syria ready to launch an offensive against the last rebel stronghold in Idlib, if more Syrians flee the country, the population of Moria could exceed 10,000 by winter.

The only moments of normality Moria’s children get come at a small play area 200 metres from the camp, built by Salam Aldeen, the founder of an aid group, Team Humanity.

Thanks to a private donation, Aldeen has purchased inflatable castles and built a football pitch. The children arrive en masse around 4pm to watch a cartoon on a large screen.

“It’s the only place where they can be kids,” says Aldeen. “In here there are no fights, no altercations between Arabs and Kurds, no violence and no rape. In here they can feel at ease with the world and abandon themselves, at least for a few hours, in the thought that they are not prisoners in Moria.”

Names have been changed to protect identities. Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org

‘Since we arrived in Moria, my daughter has tried several times to take her life’ Shamsa Refugee from Iraq