

UNHCR redefines role in Greece as EU-Turkey deal comes into effect



Briefing Notes, 22 March 2016

This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Melissa Fleming – to whom quoted text may be attributed – at the press briefing, on 22 March 2016, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

This past Sunday, the provisions agreed between the EU and Turkey to stem the large-scale arrival of refugees and migrants to Greece and beyond into Europe came into effect. Starting already on Saturday, the Greek authorities accelerated the transfer to the mainland of an estimated 8,000 refugees and migrants who had arrived on the islands before the 20th of March. This was to separate them from people arriving after that date and who will be subject to the new return policy.

Arrivals on Lesvos have so far continued. As of this morning 934 people had arrived since Sunday. They are being held at a closed registration and temporary accommodation site in Moria on the east of the island. The remaining 880 people who arrived before Sunday are being hosted about a kilometre away at the Kara Tepe centre, which is run by the local municipality and remains an open facility.

UNHCR has till now been supporting the authorities in the so-called "hotspots" on the Greek islands, where refugees and migrants were received, assisted, and registered. Under the new provisions, these sites have now become detention facilities. Accordingly, and in line with our policy on opposing mandatory detention, we have suspended some of our activities at all closed centres on the islands. This includes provision of transport to and from these sites. However, UNHCR will maintain a presence to carry out protection monitoring to ensure that refugee and human rights standards are upheld, and to provide information on the rights and procedures to seek asylum.

UNHCR staff will also continue to be present at the shoreline and sea port to provide life-saving assistance (including transport to hospitals where needed). We are counselling new arrivals on asylum in Greece, including on family reunification and on access to services. And we are identifying people with specific needs.

UNHCR is concerned that the EU-Turkey deal is being implemented before the required safeguards are in place in Greece. At present, Greece does not have sufficient capacity on the islands for assessing asylum claims, nor the proper conditions to accommodate people decently and safely pending an examination of their cases.

UNHCR is not a party to the EU-Turkey deal, nor will we be involved in returns or detention. We will continue to assist the Greek authorities to develop an adequate reception capacity.

Uncertainty is making the new arrivals nervous. Many still hope that the border will open. Many have run out of money. There is also an urgent need for information. The Greek police have been distributing leaflets in Arabic and Persian informing people that the border is closed and advising them to go to camps where better conditions are provided. But the capacity of nearby camps has been reached, and more camps need to be opened including for candidates for relocation.

Under the EU's Emergency Relocation Mechanism, European countries agreed to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers, including 66,400 out of Greece and 39,600 out of Italy. As of 21 March 2016, 22 countries had made 7015 places available for asylum seekers to be relocated under the programme and a total of 953 asylum seekers had been relocated (384 out of Italy and 569 out of Greece).

Meanwhile, on the Greek mainland in Idomeni, an estimated 10,000-12,000 people, including some 4,000 children, are camping in dire conditions at an informal site near the border, close to a railway track. The majority are families, many of them with young children. Hygiene is a major concern, negatively impacting people's health. People are burning plastic and rubbish to keep warm. The general environment is very challenging. UNHCR and partners have been working to improve capacity by providing family-sized and large tents for up to 2,400 people and collecting rubbish. Mobile latrines have been put in place, but they are not enough. Tents have been

provided for vulnerable families and individuals, including 30 unaccompanied minors. UNHCR has been visiting detention centres where unaccompanied children are in protective custody. Food distribution has been arranged by several organisations (sandwich and a drink), three times a day, as well as the distribution of milk, baby food, and diapers.

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