

# Moria (Lesvos): Greek refugee camp blaze highlights EU's migration failure

Sunday 13 September 2020, by [BARIGAZZI Jacopo](#), [HENSZENHORN David M.](#), [STAMOULI Nektaria](#) (Date first published: 9 September 2020).

**Brussels faces demands for quick action to help thousands displaced from Moria refugee camp – and a Continent-wide solution to the migration issue.**

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The flames that destroyed Greece's Moria refugee camp in the early hours of Wednesday morning threw a harsh light on the EU's migration policy failure.

NGOs working with migrants on the island of Lesvos where the overcrowded camp is situated say [the blaze – which displaced more than 12,000 people](#) – was the inevitable consequence of an abdication of EU policymaking that goes back to the height of the migration crisis in 2015.

National capitals have been deadlocked over how to distribute people who arrive at the Continent's southern borders, with positions diverging rather than coming together over time. A proposed Commission solution that was promised months ago has yet to materialize and there are few signs that Germany, which holds the Council of the EU's rotating presidency, has the political bandwidth to break the worsening deadlock.

Fires broke out shortly after midnight in several places in the camp, with Greek authorities accusing migrants of deliberately starting the blaze as a protest against COVID-19 isolation measures designed to contain an outbreak with 35 confirmed cases. By Wednesday morning, most of the tents and other structures had been burned to the ground. There were no official reports of deaths or injuries.

“It is a fact that the fire was started by asylum seekers protesting for the imposed quarantine,” said Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi at a press conference in Lesvos. “Moria cannot continue as it is now. A closed controlled center is needed,” he added.

## Overcrowding

There have been concerns about poor conditions and overcrowding at Moria for years — despite a reduction in numbers in the last six months, the camp was still housing four times the number of people it was designed for. That has prompted accusations of a deliberate policy to deter future arrivals on the island, which is just 10 kilometers from the Turkish coast.

“The fire in Moria is being put in place by the European policies,” said Apostolos Veizis, director of Doctors Without Borders' Medical Operational Support Unit in Greece. “It was predictable and could have been prevented.”

“It was a political choice by the EU, followed by the Greek state,” he added. “It is a deliberate policy, put in place clearly as a deterrent and punishment to these people. The coronavirus was, is and is going to be used to increase containment policy and fear and justify inhumane policies.”

Dimitra Kalogeropoulou, the International Rescue Committee’s country director for Greece, [described the fire](#) as “unthinkable but, tragically, predictable as the dire situation on the islands has gone on for far too long,”

“While there have been no official reports of injuries, we are hearing reports that say otherwise,” Kalogeropoulou said. “Those who were living in Moria are now left with nothing; already traumatized people have now lost what few belongings they had.”

Greek officials said the government was mobilizing the military to provide an emergency response, including a cargo plane dispatched to the island with tents, food, water and medical supplies. Around 1,000 vulnerable people will sleep on a ferry that will arrive tonight, while two barges will arrive tomorrow.

In a [video address](#) Wednesday, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis acknowledged the poor conditions in the camp. “I express my regret for yesterday’s events in Moria,” he said. “I understand how difficult the conditions are. However, nothing can become an alibi for violent reactions to health checks. And, much more, for riots of this magnitude. The situation in Moria cannot continue because it is an issue of public health, humanity and national security at the same time.”

Brussels too said it would help with the immediate relief effort. European Council President Charles Michel [said his “thoughts go out to all those who have been put in danger”](#) while Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas is due to travel to Greece on Thursday. Ylva Johansson, the EU’s commissioner for home affairs, [stressed on Twitter](#) that she had already agreed to finance the relocation of 400 unaccompanied children and teenagers from the Moria camp. Speaking to reporters, she pointed out that Greece, with help from the EU, had cut the number of people living in Moria by half in the last six months, from 25,000, and had already evacuated other unaccompanied young people.

But Iratxe García, a Spanish MEP and leader of the socialist group in Parliament, called on the EU to do more. “Stop looking the other way!” she [wrote on Twitter](#). “The lives of 13,000 people are in danger.”

Even as officials responded to the immediate crisis, there was an acknowledgment that a longer-term solution must extend beyond Greece. “This is a European issue because the migrants don’t want to stay in Lesbos. They don’t want to stay in Greece,” an EU diplomat said. “They want to go to Germany. It’s a European issue, Greece can’t handle this on its own. This needs a European solution across the board.”

## **‘Solidarity’**

In her own comments, Johansson seemed to hint that the blaze might concentrate minds. “I’m convinced that when I present my new proposals, of course there is going to be a discussion between member states,” she said. “But I think we’ll also see their willingness to show solidarity towards member states under pressure.”

But even before the fire, there were fears that plans to roll out a new Commission proposal on September 30 could be delayed yet again. In the spring, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised a new migration pact proposal [“right after Easter.”](#) It never came.

A core obstacle has stood in the way of a deal. Greece, Italy and other southern countries have long sought a mandatory system to redistribute asylum seekers across the EU (which could help empty camps like Moria) while Central and Eastern countries like Hungary and Poland are implacably opposed to such compulsory relocations.

There were hopes that the might of Germany's Council presidency could bridge the gap — even with the crowded backdrop of Brexit, ratification of the EU's multiyear budget and ongoing political upheaval in Belarus. But diplomats point out that between now and the presidency's end come December, there are only two scheduled meetings of interior ministers where any Commission proposal could be discussed.

"Not even for the Germans, it seems," can the EU manage to reach an accord, said another EU diplomat from Central Europe.

All of this has left officials who work on migration and asylum issues pessimistic.

"If the risk is of having a reform just for the sake of having it — without some key political gains — then some countries could be tempted to stick to the current system," said a third EU diplomat. "And COVID can also be a fantastic excuse ... for those who are not really interested in a reform."

**David M. Herszenhorn, Jacopo Barigazzi and Nektaria Stamouli**

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**P.S.**

• 9/9/20, 9:40 PM CET. Updated 9/11/20, 12:17 PM CET:

<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-migration-failure-lit-up-by-greek-moria-lesvos-refugee-camp-fire/>