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EUROPE

Hell on earth — Greece's Moria refugee camp and its tortured history

The Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos has burned to the ground. The situation is serious but it was already grave before fire swept through Europe's largest — and most overcrowded — refugee camp.



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The night it all burned down

Fire broke out in a number of spots around the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos late on the night of Tuesday, September 8. That has led authorities to suspect arson. Some in the camp have suggested

locals set the fires but there are other reports that point to migrants themselves.



Into the darkness

All of the inhabitants of the hopelessly overcrowded camp managed to get to safety. According to media reports, many migrants fled into the hills and forests nearby. Some are said to have begun walking to Mytilene, the island's capital. There have been no reports of death or injury.



Life threatening

Moria was originally designed to hold up to 2,800 people. At the time the fires broke out it held some 12,600. Living conditions in the camp were catastrophic before the fire. Looking at this photo taken in its aftermath, it is glaringly apparent that no one will be able to live there again any time soon — at least not under humane conditions.



Pixelated camp

Anyone hoping to see satellite images on Google Maps of the camp, located on the eastern shore of Lesbos, just 15 kilometers from the Turkish coast, is out of luck. The site has been pixilated. "Google itself does not pixelate satellite images," the company told DW, referring to third-party entities that supply the satellite imagery. It is unknown why the camp has been digitally altered.



A clear image

This aerial view of the same area shows that the camp has been greatly expanded. In the earlier Google Maps image, the house with the red roof stands alone but in the more recent photo it seems to have been swallowed up by the camp.



Looking into the past

The camp is not pixelated on Google Street View. Whereas the pixelated satellite images on Google Maps are from 2020, those on Street View are from December 2011 — before there was even a camp. At the time, the only thing there was an old military barracks. It was not until October 2015 that Greece began registering asylum-seekers at the site before taking them to the mainland.



From stopover to longterm stays

When this photo was taken in October 2015, refugees only stayed at the camp for a short time. That changed drastically in March 2016, when the EU signed its so-called refugee deal with Turkey. Since then, refugees have had to endure long stays before being sent to other EU countries or being deported.



Waiting and waiting and waiting

As a result of the EU-Turkey deal, refugees are no longer allowed to travel to the Greek mainland because Turkey would then no longer be obliged to take them. But as EU states disagree over who should take how many refugees, people remain in the camp for longer and longer periods of time. The overcrowded camp is populated by many people from a wide range of nations — no wonder there are tensions.



When tensions boil over

Those tensions first erupted in September 2016, in the form of violent conflicts during which fires were set and much of the camp was destroyed. At the time, there were only 3,000 migrants in the camp. A few months later, several hundred migrants set fire to EU asylum agency containers in the camp in protest to the slow pace of asylum application processing.



Fire and death

There was another major fire at Moria in September 2019. What started as a blaze in an adjacent olive orchard quickly spread to the camp itself. Less than half an hour later, another fire broke out in the camp, killing a mother and her infant child. At the time, Moria housed some 12,000 people.



Too dangerous to visit

In August, North Rhine-Westphalia State Premiere Armin Laschet visited the camp. His state is the most populous in Germany and the politician expressed a desire to see the so-called wild section of the camp located outside its enclosed boundaries. However, that part of the visit was quickly cancelled for safety reasons as the overall mood was again tense, with many migrants chanting "Free Moria."



Now what?

A overcrowded camp with appalling sanitation and medical conditions as well as ethnic tensions — and then the first coronavirus infections — life at the Moria refugee camp was dire before this week's blaze. But what will happen now? Is this the end of Moria, or perhaps the moment to create new, more humane living conditions? It is devastating that no one can answer this question.