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Behind the razor wire of Greece's notorious refugee camp

Moria camp mourns a woman's death, after reports wrongly blamed residents for the fire that killed her

Daniel Howden in Lesbos and Apostolis Fotiadis

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First light is greeted with what sounds like a lament, a prolonged howl that casts a pall over the olive groves that surround Moria. At first it's a disembodied cry lost among the twisted silver and green tree trunks that surround the camp on all sides. The sound is even more disconcerting when it starts to shift up and down through the registers. But it's not a grief-stricken howl, it's a singing drill. Mohammad is finishing his morning vocal warm-up and tuning his guitar.

The fearsome reputation of Moria, Greece's most notorious island refugee camp, conditions expectations and can distort reality.

Mohammad has been stuck here for 10 months, sharing a container with another 11 men, waiting to find out whether he will get asylum and the chance to see more of Europe than this island. Every morning he practises for an hour, then walks into the port city for an afternoon lesson at a local charity. A gently mannered 22-year-old from Daikundi province in Afghanistan, he says: "The guitar makes people happy and it helps me relax." From his hillside perch, he plays a medley that mashes classical Spanish guitar with a love song in Farsi.

Below him you see the sprawl of chaos this camp has become. The fences topped with razor wire surround concrete terraces stacked with containers that can no longer house even one-third of the population. More than 13,000 people are now on site - nearly four times the official capacity of 3,500 - and trails of flimsy tents spill out in every direction. Streams of people who slept in the forest scavenge for breakfast and cross paths with those heading out into the scorched tree trunks for morning ablutions or firewood. Smoke billows from the earth near the rear fence where more than a dozen Afghan tandoors, shaped from earth and stone, are baking flatbreads. Faride, an Afghan woman from Bagra, says the ovens are a response to the hours-long food queues in which some women wear nappies to avoid losing their place and going hungry.

Last week Moria was in mourning. A deadly fire last Sunday (29 September) killed a woman called Faride Tajik, described by UN officials as a widow with a teenage daughter who has now been taken into care outside the camp. Initial reports suggested a baby had been killed in the blaze that may have been started by refugees protesting over conditions. In this account, widely shared on social media, rioters attacked firemen and complicated efforts to tackle the flames, then fought running battles with the police.

However, this account has been shown to be false. There were clashes between residents and the police and fire service but they came after the blaze when people were angry at a perceived failure to help. The *Observer* has seen and verified a number of time-stamped videos from the fire showing that the first responders were camp residents who brought an emergency firehose to combat the flames engulfing a cluster of stacked containers. In another clip a small crowd can be seen begging a woman, who witnesses identify as Tajik, to jump from the container window as onlookers throw water bottles at the fire in a doomed effort to help. Clouds of black smoke engulf the window. She does not reappear. Details of Tajik's death are unclear. Witnesses claim more than one person was killed, but the claims that a baby died appear unfounded. There are several informal missing-person claims. But deaths in Moria often leave unanswered questions. An Egyptian and a Syrian man died within four days of each other in January 2017 in the same tent; the cause of death has never been established.

Eleni Velivasaki, a lawyer with Refugee Support Aegean, says that Moria exists in a grey zone where no one takes responsibility: "Days afterwards it is unclear how many people died [in the latest fire] or if there are any missing people. What stage is the investigation now at? Why have media reports about refugees starting the fire themselves not been retracted?"

Moria is the unwilling centrepiece of a bargain the EU struck with Turkey in 2016 at the height of refugee arrivals. The deal was meant to curb flows across the Aegean in return for aid money and the relocation of some Syrian refugees from Turkey to Europe. Greece let its islands be used as a buffer zone to prevent all but the most vulnerable new arrivals reaching the mainland and vowed to return the bulk of asylum seekers to Turkey. The containment centred on five "hot spots", including Moria, where asylum seekers would be registered and provided with shelter.



Children at a makeshift camp outside Moria. Around 13,000 people – more than four times the site's capacity – are currently housed there. Photograph: Petros Giannakouris/AP

In reality, Turkey curbed the sea crossings, the EU handed over aid money, and the other provisions were forgotten. When tensions rise between the EU and Ankara, refugee flows increase.

Moria relies on maintaining a balance between arrivals and departures - enough to avoid chaos, but not too many to threaten the political deal. In the last three months arrivals to the Aegean islands spiked and 23,000 people came while only 9,400 were evacuated. The balance was lost and nowhere more so than on Moria. As the population spiralled over the summer, the camp director Yiannis Balbakakis resigned, saying he was exhausted. Nobody has yet been appointed to replace him.

Greece's newly elected conservative government seized on last weekend's fire to blame the mess on their leftist predecessors. The cabinet met the day after Tajik died and spent the week talking up new legislation to restrict asylum and sort refugees from economic migrants. They have barred asylum seekers from the public health system, even excluding unaccompanied refugee children. The signature promise was to deport 10,000 people before the end of 2020. Plans are also being floated to turn open camps like Moria into detention centres.

Greece's prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, ended the week saying the "real data" showed the problem was one of "migrants not refugees". But the three leading nationalities seeking asylum on the Greek islands are from Afghanistan, Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, all of which have active conflicts. UN Refugee Agency data shows, of the nearly 36,000 arrivals so far in 2019, three-quarters are from countries with high asylum recognition rates.

The threat of 10,000 expulsions has reverberated around Moria itself, which may have been its intended effect. News of deportations and death travels fast. The more horrific the conditions, the more effective the hot spots are as a

deterrent to other would-be asylum seekers waiting in Turkey.

Lais, an Afghan who worked as a reporter in Kabul before leaving in the wake of threats from the Taliban, was one of the first to raise the alarm when Sunday's fire broke out. He recorded what he saw on his phone.

When he reached Moria he slept rough outside the main gates for 22 days, waiting for a tent. When it started to rain he clubbed together with 12 friends to buy a four-bunk hut built out of scrap wood from another Afghan man who was leaving. It cost €300 and they paid an extra €100 for electricity. There is one of thousands of cables that over the last two months have festooned the tents and lean-tos around the fenced camp.



An aerial view of Moria refugee camp. Photograph: Michael Varaklas/AP

Giorgos Pallis, who was an MP for Mytilene until he lost his seat in July's election, says there are reasons to fear a much bigger inferno: "Wires have been stretched everywhere, and if the wind had been blowing last weekend the whole camp would have burned."

The mayor of Lesbos, Stratos Kytelis, fed fears around the camp two days after the fire when he told Greek media that the camp had a "war-like atmosphere", and he had feared for his life during the incident.

Despite the inhuman conditions, most residents confront the daily indignities of Moria with considerable humanity. At the site of the fire on a steep road that cuts through the middle of the camp, life goes on around the charred containers. The area is not taped off and children sift the wreckage for anything salvageable. An awning has been hung a few feet away and group of Congolese men play draughts on homemade boards.

The dinner queue starts to form from 5pm. The men wait separately from women and children in an open-sided cage that stretches for some 200 metres. Men are packed in like cattle, given numbered tickets and must be prepared to wait for up to four hours.

The wait for food begins a few metres away from the burned and blackened containers. During the day wooden pallets are laid and two tents pitched where the smell of melted plastic lingers most strongly. A young mother sits inside one of them, wrestling with a half-naked baby determined to crawl into the wreckage outside.

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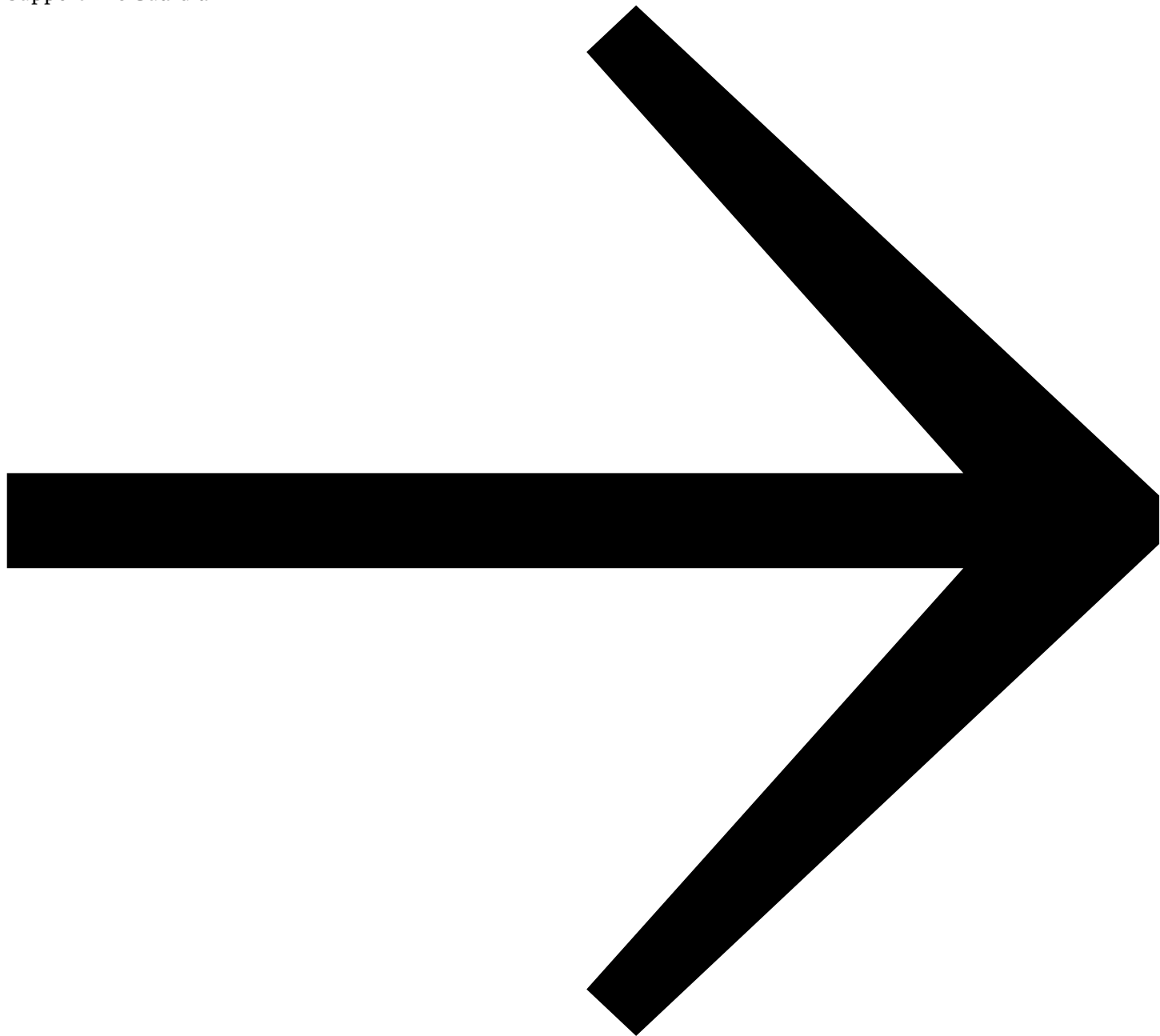
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