

Fire Destroys Most of Europe's Largest Refugee Camp, on Greek Island of Lesbos

Campaigners have long warned that the overcrowded conditions at the impoverished camp might lead to catastrophe.

By [Patrick Kingsley](#) Updated 2:34 p.m. ET

Vast stretches of the camp and an adjacent site were destroyed in the fire. Panagiotis Balaskas/Associated Press

Europe's largest refugee camp, on the Greek island of Lesbos, has long been a desperate makeshift home for thousands of refugees and migrants who have risked everything to flee war and economic hardship for a better life.

They lived in cramped tents with limited access to toilets, showers and health care. For years, rights groups warned that these squalid conditions would sooner or later prompt a humanitarian disaster.

On Tuesday night, that disaster came. A fast-moving fire destroyed much of the camp, leaving most of its 12,000 residents homeless. By Wednesday, a process of soul-searching had begun among many Europeans, for whom the Moria camp, and the neglect of its residents, has long been synonymous with the continent's increasingly unsympathetic approach to refugees.

No deaths were initially reported. But vast stretches of the camp and an adjacent spillover site were destroyed in the fire, leaving only a medical facility and small clusters of tents untouched.

Since 2015, Moria has filled with an influx of migrants — now mostly Afghan refugees — seeking to reach northern Europe. It is a bleak tent

camp designed for 3,000 people that at times has swollen to more than 20,000 after Europe started blocking their paths in 2016.

Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Union's executive arm, the European Commission, said she felt "deep sorrow" about the fire, while the governor of a region in western Germany, Armin Laschet, said he was willing to admit up to 1,000 refugees from the camp as part of a wider European resettlement program that has yet to be developed.

Some residents of the camp managed to escape to the island's main town of Mytilene, while others were able to remain in their tents in small areas of the camp that were unaffected by the blaze. But many were being held nearby on Wednesday morning while the Greek authorities decided where to house them.

Aid workers said that the fire at Moria, which is named after a nearby village, began shortly after 10 p.m. on Tuesday following protests by residents over recent coronavirus restrictions, and that it spread quickly because of high winds and the explosion of gas canisters.

A fast-moving fire destroyed much of the camp, leaving most of its 12,000 residents homeless. Elias Marcou/Reuters

Aid workers, activists and officials said a series of fires were started intentionally by a group of camp residents who were furious at being forced to quarantine after at least 35 people tested positive for coronavirus at the camp.

A new, smaller fire broke out on Wednesday evening in one of the few areas that had survived the first blaze, displacing roughly 1,000 more people, aid workers said.

Notis Mitarachi, the Greek migration minister, said during a Wednesday evening news conference that those responsible for the fires would not go unpunished.

The fire quickly destroyed much of the camp's formal enclosure, including

a facility for 400 unaccompanied children and much of its water infrastructure, before spreading to a spillover site in olive groves close to the camp's fence. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said a state of emergency had been declared for all of Lesbos and noted that all unaccompanied minors would be transferred off the island.

Videos provided to The New York Times by aid workers at the camp showed residents hurrying from Moria in droves in the early hours of Wednesday morning. They carried their belongings in bags slung over their shoulders, some of them pushing infants in strollers, and others draped in blankets.

“It was absolute chaos,” said Jonathan Turner, an aid worker who been building water infrastructure in the camp on behalf of [Watershed Foundation](#) and [Choose Love](#). “There were just so many people trying to move, trying to escape.”

By sunrise, footage showed that much of the camp's formal infrastructure had collapsed, with many of the tents burned. Several metal portable cabins were blackened with soot, their walls having buckled in the heat. Trees on the nearby slopes had been charred.

Video shows a fire that broke out at a migrant camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. Alkis Konstantinidis/Reuters

Thousands of displaced residents were left with nowhere to go, with many simply sitting down a few hundred meters from the camp.

“There are thousands of people just sitting on the main road,” said Nick Powell, an Australian aid worker who witnessed the fire and its aftermath, and who was helping to provide food to the survivors on Wednesday.

It is still unclear where they will be taken. George Koumoutsakos, Greece's deputy migration minister, said during a Wednesday news conference that efforts were being made to rehouse around 3,000 people in new tents.

The priority was to rehouse the most vulnerable, with some 400 unaccompanied minors being moved to “safe zones” and hotels, he said.

Moria was started in 2015, when more than 850,000 war refugees and migrants made their way by boat from Turkey to nearby Greek islands like Lesbos, hoping to travel farther north. A further 300,000 have arrived in the years since.

At first, when Europe was more tolerant of migrants, people tended to pass through the camp quickly. But in 2016, Europe changed tack, blocking the onward movement of migrants to countries like Germany and leaving thousands stranded in squalid Greek camps like Moria, which soon became overcrowded.

Since then, [Moria has been considered an emblem of Europe's hardening approach](#) to migrants in the aftermath of the 2015 crisis.

Through the European Union, other European countries provided Greece with money to care for its refugee population. But European leaders refused to allow many of them to leave Greek camps for sanctuary elsewhere in Europe.

Stuck in Moria, migrants lined up for hours for food that was often moldy. And they became enmeshed in what for many of them seemed an interminably complex asylum application process, leading to what some doctors deemed a mental health crisis at the camp.

Refugees and migrants sleeping next to a road following the fire. Alkis Konstantinidis/Reuters

The situation has been no better in other camps on nearby Greek islands. Across the Greek islands before the fire, more than 23,000 people were crammed into camps built for just 6,000, according to recent statistics compiled by aid groups.

The dynamic has created [deep hostility](#) between migrants and Greek islanders who, once welcoming to their new neighbors, have grown increasingly resentful. It has also led the Greek government to immediately expel many new arrivals this year, [abandoning more than 1,000 immigrants in rafts at sea](#).

Given these conditions, campaigners had long predicted a catastrophe at the camp.

“This fire was expected,” said Eva Cossé, who leads research in Greece for Human Rights Watch, an independent New York-based rights organization. “It’s not surprising. It’s a testament to the European Union’s negligence and Greece’s negligence.”

Human Rights Watch has been calling for the camp to be closed or its number of residents to be significantly reduced for years.

“E.U. member states need to have a serious discussion about reducing numbers on the island, and alleviate the pressure on Greece, because Greece cannot deal with this alone,” Ms. Cossé said.

While Mr. Mitsotakis, the prime minister, condemned those who started the fire, he said the disaster could “become an opportunity to deliver better conditions and a new reality in Lesbos.”

Offers of support began on Wednesday, with the European Commission saying it would immediately help relocate the 400 unaccompanied minors to mainland Greece and onward to new homes in E.U. member states. These children are the last of 1,200 that the bloc has been helping place in other countries.

Ylva Johansson, the European commissioner for migration, said that the commission was also paying for a boat that was on its way to Lesbos on Wednesday afternoon and would serve as a makeshift hotel for the most vulnerable.

She also said that, despite recent efforts to improve the overwhelmed camp, conditions had remained very poor. Thousands of people were transferred off the island as the pandemic began, reducing numbers from more than 20,000 to 12,000, though it remained vastly overstretched.

“There are still too many people there,” she said, calling the conditions in Moria “unacceptable.”

Reporting was contributed by Niki Kitsantonis and Iliana Magra from Athens, Matina Stevis-Gridneff from Brussels, and Melissa Eddy from Berlin.

We use cookies and similar methods to recognize visitors and remember their preferences. We also use them to measure ad campaign effectiveness, target ads and analyze site traffic. To learn more about these methods,

including how to disable them, [view our Cookie Policy](#). Starting on July 20, 2020 we will show you ads we think are relevant to your interests, based on the kinds of content you access in our Services. You can [object](#). For more info, see our [privacy policy](#). By tapping ‘accept,’ you consent to the use of these methods by us and third parties. You can always change your tracker preferences by visiting our Cookie Policy.

[Manage Trackers](#)