



**STILL
I RISE**

UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AT THE GATES OF EUROPE

VOICES FROM SAMOS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Samos Hotspot. Photo credit: Anonymous UAM



TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 04

INTRODUCTION 05

OVERVIEW OF LIVING CONDITIONS 06

**LACK OF PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE, ADEQUATE NUTRITION
AND COVID-19** 08

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS 10

WITNESSING AND EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE 12

CHILDREN WRONGLY REGISTERED AS ADULTS 13

LACK OF SPECIALISED SERVICES AND ACCOMMODATION 14

CONCERNS ABOUT THE FUTURE 15

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SINCE THE HOTSPOT APPROACH WAS INTRODUCED ON THE AEGEAN ISLANDS IN 2016, SEVERE OVERCROWDING AND DEPLORABLE LIVING CONDITIONS HAVE BECOME A DAILY REALITY.

Yet in some respects, the situation on the hotspots has changed considerably in the last year due to Covid-19 restrictions and transfers to the mainland. There has also been a drop in arrivals, by all indicators as a result of illegal pushbacks. Nonetheless, the number of people living in and around the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) in Samos remains high. The RIC, made for a population of 648, continues to be over capacity. In addition, about 2,500 people reside in the “jungle” outside the RIC in flimsy self-made shelters which are frequently damaged by wind and flooded by rain. In their visit to Greece in March 2020, the Council of Europe’s anti-torture committee (CPT) found that the conditions of detention on Samos could amount to inhuman and degrading treatment as understood by Article 3 in the European Convention in Human Rights.

WE HIGHLIGHT THE IMMENSE CHALLENGES TO SAFETY AND WELLBEING THESE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE FACING, BASED ON TESTIMONIES FROM THE MINORS THEMSELVES AND THE PERSONNEL WORKING WITH THEM ON A DAILY BASIS.

Unaccompanied minors (UAM), the most vulnerable migrating population according to the EU Directive 2011/95/EU, are exceptionally affected by these conditions. They are at risk of all forms of abuse and violence, trafficking, mental ill health and illness. In this report we highlight the immense challenges to safety and wellbeing these young people are facing, based on testimonies from the minors themselves and the personnel working with them on a daily basis.

As stated in EU Directive 2013/33/EU on reception standards, all member states must provide adequate accommodation for UAMs. Yet existing reception conditions are vastly subpar to established standards and organisations on the ground reveal ongoing and systematic failures. UAMs are meant to be accommodated in the RIC “safe space”, but the number of minors wrongly registered as adults and awaiting an official age change is bigger than the number of minors currently living in the “safe space”. During Covid-19, physical age assessments have been suspended, leaving children living with unrelated adults or alone until their case can be processed.

LOCAL ACTORS HAVE REPORTED CASES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT, ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION THAT HAVE LED TO MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND CASES OF SELF-HARM.

Safety is a key concern. There were six major fires in the hotspot during 2020, one of them destroying half of the containers in which unaccompanied children live. Local actors have furthermore reported cases of sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation that have led to

mental health problems and cases of self-harm. Despite relevant actors responding to the individual cases the child is often given limited or no support. They also spoke of numerous known cases of violence and abuse at the hands of the police and arbitrary detention in degrading conditions.

THERE IS ONLY ONE DOCTOR AVAILABLE, AND THEY CANNOT RECEIVE VISITS BY EXTERNAL MEDICAL NGOS. EVEN SIMPLE MEDICAL ISSUES, WHEN LEFT UNTREATED, CAN CAUSE MONTHS OF PREVENTABLE PAIN AND ANXIETY.

UAMs that become sick in the Samos RIC often find it difficult to access medical care. There is only one doctor available, and they cannot receive visits by external medical NGOs. Even simple medical issues, when left untreated, can cause months of preventable pain and anxiety. Cases of forced isolation due to Covid symptoms, in 4x2 metre containers by themselves, have been recorded. In one instance a child had no access to running water or a shower during the full confinement period. He had to be escorted by police to a public toilet when needed. Despite a fever, muscle aches and a sore throat he was given no medication or regular medical supervision.

Unsurprisingly in these conditions deteriorating mental health is rampant. In 2020 MSF reported that 60% of new adult patients expressed suicidal thoughts and 37% were considered to be at risk of suicide. The research for this report shows similarly that not only are rehabilitation services not provided to minors who have been victims of any form of abuse, neglect, exploitation, torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, or armed conflicts (as required by Article 23 (4) of EU Directive 2013/33/EU) but they are being further traumatised by these conditions. There are multiple recorded cases of self-harm and at least one attempted suicide by a child. During Covid-19 movement in RICs has been severely restricted, and children are currently unable to access education in town while little infrastructure has been put in place to provide online classes. This de facto detention-like state is clearly having a negative impact on mental health, and those not inside the safe area remain at risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and violence.

FAMILY REUNIFICATION DEADLINES HAVE BEEN MISSED BECAUSE OF A LACK OF LAWYERS AND/OR GUARDIANS.

Finally, the children’s legal cases are affected by a lack of sufficient information and legal support. Family reunification deadlines have been missed because of a lack of lawyers and/or guardians.

Article 24 (1) of the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that the responsible state recognises the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. It is fundamental that any child who needs protection receives it and that all children are treated as children first and foremost, regardless of their immigration status, citizenship or background.

INTRODUCTION

THE SAMOS HOTSPOT IS LOCATED IN THE ISLAND'S CAPITAL, VATHY, AND IS A NOTORIOUSLY DIFFICULT SPACE TO LIVE IN. IT IS OVERCROWDED, STEEPLY SLOPED AND SURROUNDED BY BARBED WIRE.

Outside of its perimeter is the “jungle”, a space inhabited by approximately 2500¹ people living in summer tents and self-made shelters. It is prone to flooding and high winds which rip these flimsy structures from the ground. The Greek government puts the total number of current residents both inside and outside of the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) at 3,556 (figures from December 2020)² while the official capacity remains at 648.³

SOME CHILDREN ARE SCARED TO BE PLACED IN THE SAFE AREA, OR THEY STAY WITH UNRELATED ADULTS HOPING FOR BETTER PROTECTION.

Unaccompanied children are meant to be given accommodation in the “safe zone” on level two⁴ of the official camp, which has a capacity of 60. However, children wrongly registered as adults are consequently forced to stay with the adult population, either in the camp or in the “jungle”. Some children are scared to be placed in the safe area, or they stay with unrelated adults hoping for better protection. Both of these groups are also likely to end up living in the “jungle”.⁵ There are currently 34 unaccompanied children in the safe zone at the time of writing (April 2021), with another two soon to be housed there after completing the age assessment.⁶ It was reported that a further 40 to 50 other young people who are currently registered as adults may join them after receiving their official age change.⁷

IT IS FUNDAMENTAL THAT ANY CHILD WHO NEEDS PROTECTION RECEIVES IT AND THAT, REGARDLESS OF THEIR IMMIGRATION STATUS, CITIZENSHIP OR BACKGROUND, ALL CHILDREN ARE TREATED AS CHILDREN FIRST AND FOREMOST.

Unaccompanied children (Unaccompanied Minors or UAMs) are in the most vulnerable category of people who migrate under Article 20.3 of EU Directive 2011/95/EU⁸ and at risk of suffering hardships including physical abuse, sexual abuse, trafficking, physical violence, mental

illness, physical illness and smugglers.⁹ They are all individuals under 18 years of age who arrive without a responsible adult or who are left unaccompanied after they have entered the territory of the member state,¹⁰ with the housing of those aged 16 or above with the adult population permitted only if it is in their best interest.¹¹ It is fundamental that any child who needs protection receives it and that, regardless of their immigration status, citizenship or background, all children are treated as children first and foremost.¹²

The 2010 European Commission’s “Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors” (2010–2014) states that the reasons for this particularly vulnerable category of children to travel include: to escape from wars and conflicts, poverty or natural catastrophes, discrimination or persecution; to be sent by their family in the expectation of a better life or in order to access education and welfare, including medical attention; to join family members and as victims of trafficking destined for exploitation.¹³

WHILE THE NUMBERS OF ARRIVALS ARE CURRENTLY LOWER THAN THEY HAVE BEEN IN RECENT YEARS THIS IS LIKELY AS A RESULT OF THE PUSHBACKS AT SEA AND FROM LAND IN WHICH THE GREEK GOVERNMENT AND FRONTEx ARE IMPLICATED.

The situation on the hotspot islands has changed drastically over the last year for several reasons, the most notable being Covid-19 restrictions, transfers to the mainland and a drop in arrivals. While the numbers of arrivals are currently lower than they have been in recent years¹⁴ this is likely as a result of the pushbacks at sea and from land in which the Greek Government and Frontex are implicated.¹⁵ Were pushbacks to cease the numbers would rise once again. This is a particularly concerning prospect due to the likelihood of the new ‘closed-controlled’ Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centre (MPRIC) opening this year. The MPRICs would place vulnerable people, including unaccompanied children, in a remote and unmonitored space with highly limited access to NGOs and media.¹⁶

This report examines the alarming situation facing unaccompanied children on the Greek islands and the disconcerting trends which could exacerbate an already dire situation if left unaddressed. The report’s focus is on Samos but the concerns identified are emblematic to the situation for unaccompanied children on all hotspot islands; Lesbos, Chios, Leros and Kos.

¹ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

² Hellenic Ministry of Migration and Asylum, *Annual Report 2020*, December 2020

³ General Secretariat for Information and Communication, *Government data*, National Situational picture Regarding the Islands at Eastern Aegean Sea, 11 February 2021

⁴ Grassroots groups on the ground refute the official term ‘safe zone’ as they do not see it as an accurate description on the area designated for unaccompanied children on level two of the camp thus we will use the phrase in quote marks.

⁵ Information provided by anonymous former camp worker in interview by Emma Musty on the 6 January 2021

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Directive 2011/95/EU* of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast)

⁹ Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI), *Report*, Unaccompanied minors (UAMS) in the European Union, July 2020

¹⁰ *Directive 2013/33/EU* of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast)

¹¹ Ibid., Article 24 (2)

¹² Article 24 of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, Article 3 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

¹³ European Commission, *Communication* from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010–2014), 6 May 2010

¹⁴ Hellenic Ministry of Migration and Asylum, *Annual Report 2020*, December 2020

¹⁵ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment of Punishment (CPT), *News*, Council of Europe’s anti-torture Committee calls on Greece to reform its immigration detention system and stop pushbacks, 19 November 2020

¹⁶ Europe Must Act, *Monthly Update*, No More Camps, February 2021

OVERVIEW OF LIVING CONDITIONS

“WHEN I THINK OF SAMOS CAMP NOW, I THINK HOW COULD I HAVE BEEN THERE FOR 11 MONTHS, HOW WAS IT POSSIBLE? HOW DID I EAT THE FOOD, IT MADE ME FEEL DISGUSTING. I LIVED IN A TENT WITH 10 PEOPLE, 3 UNACCOMPANIED MINORS AND 7 ADULT MEN, HOW WAS THIS POSSIBLE? I THINK WHEN I HAD THE ALLERGIC REACTION, I FELT SO BAD BUT I COULDN'T EVEN GET TO A SHOWER WITHOUT WAITING FOR HOURS, EVERYTHING WAS SO DIFFICULT. I HATE GREECE, I AM HAPPY I LEFT SAMOS BUT I KNOW ALL THE CAMPS ARE BAD, THEY AREN'T SAFE.”¹⁷

In June 2019 criminal charges were brought against the manager of Samos hotspot and several of her colleagues regarding the living conditions of unaccompanied children by Still I Rise.

At the time of writing it is still unclear if the available evidence is enough to proceed to trial.¹⁸ However, since then multiple reports have been written

on the deplorable living conditions in the camp by local and international NGOs, including Médecins Sans Frontières¹⁹ (MSF), Samos Volunteers²⁰ and the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR).²¹ Movement on the Ground, an NGO which works in the unofficial camp, described the situation up until September 2020 when there were still over 150 unaccompanied children present, half living in the “safe zone” and half in the “jungle”:

“In both places, the living conditions for them were really hard and most of them were struggling on a daily basis. For the ones living inside the camp, the iso boxes provided had most of the time broken facilities and insects crawling in, other than being overcrowded with no private spaces. For the ones outside, the makeshift structures are not at all a safe environment. They are left by themselves, and with no UNHCR cash card at their disposal, they need to find a way to survive and cover their basic needs only with the services provided by NGOs or [are forced to rely on] neighbours or acquaintances inside the refugee population, with the risk of being abused or taken advantage of.”²²

“FOR THE ONES LIVING INSIDE THE CAMP, THE ISO BOXES PROVIDED HAD MOST OF THE TIME BROKEN FACILITIES AND INSECTS CRAWLING IN, OTHER THAN BEING OVERCROWDED WITH NO PRIVATE SPACES.”

— MOVEMENT ON THE GROUND, NGO



Photo credit: Still I Rise – through our eyes

¹⁷ Testimony provided by a 14-year-old boy from Kabul, Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 9 January 2021. He is now living in a shelter in Belgium.

¹⁸ Information provided by Still I Rise in interview by Emma Musty with Giulia Cicoli on the 7 December 2020

¹⁹ Médecins sans Frontiers, [Article](#), Samos Island, Greece: “We only want a safe place for our children”; 1 October 2020

²⁰ Samos Volunteers, [Article](#), The situation on Samos, February 2021

²¹ AIDA/Greek Council for Refugees, [Country Report](#): Conditions in reception facilities, 30 November 2020

²² Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

“OVER THE WINTER MONTHS MY TENT ALSO LEAKED WHEN IT RAINED AND I DID NOT HAVE ADEQUATE BLANKETS TO KEEP WARM.”

— ANONYMOUS UAM



These descriptions of the living conditions in the camp were confirmed by the young people who have provided testimonies for this report:

“Over the winter months my tent also leaked when it rained and I did not have adequate blankets to keep warm, I wasn’t ever able to sleep well at night. Often rats and insects came into my tent making it hard for me to go to sleep. I often had nightmares.”²³

Article 24 (2) of Directive 2013/33/EU on reception standards²⁴ states that all member states must provide adequate accommodation for unaccompanied children. Yet the material reception conditions provided - which are understood to include housing, food and clothing provided in kind, or as financial allowances, and a daily expenses allowance - are either non-existent or subpar in relation to the established standards.

A child’s right to safety is clearly stipulated in the 2013 Committee on the Rights of the Children General Comment No. 14, with the onus being on the state to ensure it.²⁵ Yet despite this, and the frequent warnings given by human rights groups and NGOs, conditions in the Samos hotspot have remained incredibly dangerous, particularly in terms of overcrowding. There were six major fires in the hotspot during 2020, including one in the “safe zone” on level two, and one severe earthquake. For young people who experienced the fire it was traumatic:

“I HAVE EXPERIENCED A FIRE IN THE CAMP THAT CAUSED ME TO FLEE FROM MY TENT AND OUT OF THE CAMP TO SAFETY.”

— ANONYMOUS UAM

“I have experienced a fire in the camp that caused me to flee from my tent and out of the camp to safety. I didn’t feel safe and we were many minors and didn’t know where to go. We waited for many hours on the road. We never understood what would happen next.”²⁶

On 20 September 2020, a fire in the so-called “safe zone” destroyed half of the containers in which unaccompanied children live. That night, the children were evacuated to a hotel in Vathy. However, on 30 October 2020, when an earthquake of magnitude 7.0 struck Samos, they were returned to the camp, apparently because the caregivers’ contract was not extended on time.²⁷

²³ Testimony provided by a 14-year-old boy from Kabul, Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 9 January 2021. He is now living in a shelter in Belgium.

²⁴ Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast)

²⁵ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (art. 3, para. 1), 29 May 2013

²⁶ Testimony provided by a 14-year-old boy from Kabul, Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 9 January 2021. He is now living in a shelter in Belgium.

²⁷ Information provided by Still I Rise in interview by Emma Musty with Giulia Cicoli on 7 December 2020

LACK OF HEALTH CARE, ADEQUATE NUTRITION AND COVID-19

“MY DAILY MEAL WAS BREAD AND WATER BECAUSE IT WAS THE ONLY THING I COULD EAT, THE REST OF THE FOOD WAS ALWAYS SPOILED OR NOT MEANT FOR HUMAN BEINGS.”²⁸

Article 24 (1) of the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that the responsible state recognises the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. The state is obliged to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.²⁹ Yet, unaccompanied children on Samos find themselves living in conditions where such provisions are simply not possible.

“THE LACK OF SAFETY IS HUGE AND FORCING PEOPLE AND CHILDREN TO LIVE HERE IS ACTIVELY PUTTING THEM IN A DANGEROUS SITUATION WHERE THEIR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH IS THREATENED ON A DAILY BASIS.”

— NGO ‘MOVEMENT ON THE GROUND’

“The most important thing to highlight is that these camps (in and out) are not made to host human lives for ages, let alone vulnerable people as unaccompanied minors. Overcrowded facilities increase the stress that is already present due to the uncertainty about their own future and the lack of familiar relationships [...]. The lack of safety is huge and forcing people and children to live here is actively putting them in a dangerous situation where their physical and mental health is threatened on a daily basis.”³⁰

When unaccompanied children become sick in the Samos RIC, they often find it difficult to access medical care due to a general lack of resources. There is only one doctor in the RIC and unaccompanied children cannot be visited by external medical NGOs.³¹ Even simple medical issues such as scabies, when left untreated, can become infected and cause months of preventable pain and anxiety.

“I have had difficulty with skin infections such as scabies while living in the RIC on Samos. This medical condition was difficult to treat, due to the unhygienic living conditions and lack of adequate washing facilities. The lack of access to doing laundry and clean clothes exacerbated my physical problems. I also had allergic reactions to something but I didn't know the cause of it, my whole body came out in a rash. When I had these allergic reactions, it affected my sleep and I felt scared to go to the line for the doctor. I was very worried and even though my teachers tried to help me to get medical support my guardian wasn't helpful. I didn't know what to do and I felt bad.”³²

When one 15-year-old boy from Afghanistan reported to the camp doctor that he was feeling sick he was told to wait over the weekend to see if he felt better. He waited for 3 days and was finally taken to the hospital by two Metadrasi guardians where he was tested for Covid-19. Three or four other children from both the “safe zone” and the “jungle” had also gone with them to the hospital for other medical treatment and were not tested for Covid-19. The 15-year-old reports that he was taken from the hospital back to the police station and then escorted by police to a 4x2 metre container near the base of the camp where he was held on his own. The other children were not isolated.

“There was no bathroom inside and there was only one hospital bed. There were no blankets, there was nothing in the container except the hospital bed. There was a sink but no water - I had to use water from the bottle to wash my hands. The door was always locked. I had to knock if I needed something. I was using the plastic toilet outside the container, 10 meters close to the container. Everybody could use that toilet- it was public for everyone. Police would open the door of my container and escort me to the toilet on the way to and back every time I needed that.”³³

“ THERE WERE NO BLANKETS, THERE WAS NOTHING IN THE CONTAINER EXCEPT THE HOSPITAL BED. THERE WAS A SINK BUT NO WATER - I HAD TO USE WATER FROM THE BOTTLE TO WASH MY HANDS.”

— ANONYMOUS UAM

This young person was not able to take a shower during his quarantine and was told by the police that he had to wait until he had finished his isolation period to do so. His guardians did not provide him with a hygiene kit or any other necessities such as blankets. He was also unable to bring anything of his own from his container.

During his isolation he would not always receive breakfast. The food he did receive came from a mixture of sources – the police, the Mazi centre run by Still I Rise and his guardians – suggesting an unsystematic approach to nutritional provision. The food he was provided mainly consisted of rice and chicken but was sometimes only olives and cheese. A lack of nutritious food makes it difficult for unaccompanied children to recover from common infections, which is particularly concerning during the pandemic. Movement on the Ground reported the difficulties faced by grassroots NGOs trying to supplement camp food:

²⁸ Testimony provided by a 16-year-old boy from the Congo to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 22 January 2021. He is now living on the mainland and awaiting a possible relocation.

²⁹ United Nations [Convention](#) on the Rights of the Child

³⁰ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

³¹ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

³² Testimony provided by a 14-year-old boy from Kabul, Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 9 January 2021. He is now living in a shelter in Belgium.

³³ Testimony provided by a 15-year-old boy from Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 18 January 2021.

“When it comes to food, there’s a single food line for 3,500 persons, and although the UAMs have a dedicated line, the quantity and quality of food provided is way below the minimum standards. NGOs like Still I Rise and Project Armonia were supplying extra food, but it was not possible for them to reach the total amount of UAMs present.”³⁴

“WE WERE SLEEPING TOGETHER IN THE SAME BED BUT HE DID NOT GO TO THE DOCTOR AND DIDN’T TELL THE GUARDIANS HE WAS FEELING SICK BECAUSE HE WAS AFRAID OF BEING PUT IN QUARANTINE.”

— ANONYMOUS UAM

The young person was given a maximum of four litres of water a day for washing and drinking. He stayed in isolation for 3-4 days but was

only visited twice by his guardians. The doctor did not check on him once despite him having a fever, muscle aches and a sore throat. He was given no medication. The only people who were constantly close by were the police.

“When I finished my isolation period, the police came and told me I could leave because I didn’t have Covid, but they never showed me the results of my test. Another minor had similar symptoms but never went to the hospital. We were sleeping together in the same bed but he did not go to the doctor and didn’t tell the guardians he was feeling sick because he was afraid of being put in quarantine. I was not surprised people didn’t really help me, this is normal. The main thing is I really wanted just to wash, to have a shower and change my clothes.”³⁵

Another young person who was not put into isolation described the feeling on being in the camp at this time:

“During the Covid-19 outbreak we were scared. We were many and had no way to protect ourselves. No one explained the regulations, [or] gave us masks or alcohol for our hands. Sometimes we had many days in our container without running water or electricity. We were not able to protect ourselves.”³⁶



“DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK WE WERE SCARED. WE WERE MANY AND HAD NO WAY TO PROTECT OURSELVES. NO ONE EXPLAINED THE REGULATIONS, [OR] GAVE US MASKS OR ALCOHOL FOR OUR HANDS.”

— ANONYMOUS UAM

Photo credit: Still I Rise - through our eyes

³⁴ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

³⁵ Testimony provided by a 15-year-old boy from Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 18 January 2021.

³⁶ Testimony provided by a 16-year-old boy from the Congo to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 22 January 2021. He is now living on the mainland and awaiting possible relocation.

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

“YOU DON’T SEE THEM SMILE, YOU DON’T SEE THEM LAUGH. THIS IS NOT NORMAL.”³⁷

All EU member states are required under Article 23 (4) of EU Directive 2013/33/EU to ensure access to rehabilitation services for minors who have been victims of any form of abuse, neglect, exploitation, torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, or who have suffered from armed conflicts, and to ensure that appropriate mental health care is developed and qualified counselling is provided when needed.³⁸ Despite these obligations unaccompanied minors are instead placed in conditions which create the very symptoms and ill health they should be treated for. In 2020 MSF reported that 60% of new adult patients expressed suicidal thoughts and 37% were considered to be at risk of suicide.³⁹

Mental health was described by some respondents as a dual problem for those who both live and work in the camp. They have to deal with members of staff who are also struggling with the situation and are thus unable to work effectively, in addition to their own mental health problems. A previous camp worker who wished to remain anonymous described the feeling of loneliness and powerlessness they felt while working there, combined with the pressure they felt in their work environment and more broadly within the economic context of Greece. They stated that the majority of humanitarian workers employed in the camp are very young and don’t have much experience.

“Many started with good intentions, but in this context, with these small containers, with 1000s of people that you can’t help that much, you lose your patience, you shout sometimes.”⁴⁰

A boy, who was 15 when he reached Samos, describes this situation from the point of view of a new arrival:

“When I arrived in camp we were made to sleep in an open space for 2 days until they released us, after that was done I was told that I could leave the registration area, I had no guidance, no indication of where I supposed to stay, no information about my legal case or what was I supposed to do from there, I was directed by another refugee to a ‘safe area’ meant for unaccompanied minors.

I asked help from one of the workers from the camp in charge of unaccompanied minors and she asked me for my police paper (a document that they use to ID us) I didn’t know at the time what she was asking from me I had no knowledge of what that paper was because no one had explained it to me. She seemed irritated and pulled the paper, grabbing it from me. After she read it she told me that I would have to find someplace else where I can stay, she refused to help me knowing that I was a new arrival with zero idea of what to do in that situation. It was raining some days later and I was sick with no place to sleep still. I went to this lady the second time for help but she answered me saying “it isn’t my problem.”⁴¹



“IT WAS RAINING SOME DAYS LATER AND I WAS SICK WITH NO PLACE TO SLEEP STILL. I WENT TO THIS LADY THE SECOND TIME FOR HELP BUT SHE ANSWERED ME SAYING “IT ISN’T MY PROBLEM.”

— 15-YEAR-OLD, UAM

Photo credit: Still | Rise - through our eyes

³⁷ Information provided by anonymous former camp worker in interview by Emma Musty on 6 January 2021

³⁸ Article 23 (4) of Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast)

³⁹ Medecins sans Frontiers, [Project Update](#), Alarming mental health distress among asylum seekers on Greek islands, 17 December 2020

⁴⁰ Information provided by anonymous former camp worker in interview by Emma Musty on 6 January 2021

“MANY FRIENDS GOT TRANSFERRED, OTHER MINORS, WE LIVED TOGETHER AND WENT TO THE YOUTH CENTRE TOGETHER. WHEN THEY LEFT I FELT ALONE AND LEFT BEHIND. I DIDN'T WANT TO MAKE FRIENDS ANYMORE. I DIDN'T HAVE GOOD FEELINGS ABOUT MY SELF-WORTH.”

— ANONYMOUS UAM

Restrictions of movement due to Covid-19 have created an even unhealthier working environment. The ultimate result is that people working in the camp, even if they are employed by a humanitarian NGO, end up feeling and acting like prison guards.⁴² Though the hotspots are not officially counted as detention centres, at different points during the Covid-19 pandemic they have become de facto detention camps in a similar fashion to the plans laid out for the new MPRICs. In their most recent ad hoc visit to Greece in March 2020, the Council of Europe's anti-torture committee (CPT) found that the conditions of detention on Samos could amount to inhuman and degrading treatment as understood by Article 3 in the European Convention in Human Rights.⁴³

The most common referrals made by Movement on the Ground during 2020 were for mental health problems such as depression and feelings of hopelessness, or mental health crises as a result of sexual harassment, abuse or exploitation by other residents. Their symptoms were exacerbated by their living conditions and by the lack of guardianship and guidance.⁴⁴ One of the young people interviewed described the impact of the lockdown on his mental wellbeing:

“Many times I thought ‘I can't continue like this’ and that I missed my family a lot. But I had lost contact with them. Everyday I thought ‘I hate it here, I want to be strong but I can't anymore.’ Since the first lockdown due to Covid-19 in March 2020 I stayed in my tent most of the time, sleeping in the day, because I couldn't leave the camp. Even with the reopening of the youth centre I attended in June I felt low in mood and always withdrawn in class ‘I didn't have the energy.’ [...] Many friends got transferred, other minors. We lived together and went to the youth centre together. When they left I felt alone and left behind. I didn't want to make friends anymore. I didn't have good feelings about my self-worth.”⁴⁵

As a result of this dire situation some young people turn to addiction and substance misuse, mainly alcohol and cannabis.⁴⁶ One young person described feeling forced to partake in this behaviour: *“Sometimes others forced me to smoke or drink. There was a lot of pressure. I didn't feel comfortable. I felt threatened.”⁴⁷*

This is most likely to affect young people who remain trapped on the island and in the camps for an extended period of time due to legal issues or inaccurate age assessments. Their case workers and psychologists from IOM and Metadrası seem unequipped to deal with this situation.⁴⁸



Photo credit: Still I Rise – through our eyes

⁴¹ Testimony provided by a 16-year-old boy from the Congo to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 22 January 2021. He is now living on the mainland and awaiting a possible relocation.

⁴² A parallel drawn in interviews with both the lawyer Dimitris Choulis and the former camp worker

⁴³ European Convention on Human Rights as amended by Protocols Nos. 11 and 14, supplemented by Protocols Nos. 1, 4, 6, 7, 12, 13 and 16

⁴⁴ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

⁴⁵ Testimony provided by a 14-year-old boy from Kabul, Afghanistan, to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 9 January 2021. He is now living in a shelter in Belgium.

⁴⁶ Information provided by anonymous former camp worker in interview by Emma Musty on 6 January 2021

⁴⁷ Testimony provided by a 14-year-old boy from Kabul, Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 9 January 2021. He is now living in a shelter in Belgium.

⁴⁸ Information provided by anonymous former camp worker in interview by Emma Musty on 6 January 2021

WITNESSING AND EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

“I WAS ALWAYS ALERT IN THE CAMP BECAUSE I AM CONSTANTLY AFRAID OF PEOPLE STEALING MY POSSESSIONS. I SAW A LOT OF VIOLENCE AND MANY TIMES I WAS ATTACKED OR SOMEONE HAD STOLEN MY THINGS.”⁴⁹

Local lawyer, Dimitris Choulis, highlighted two concerning cases he had been involved in regarding the detention of children in police custody within the police station, a practice which was condemned during the latest visit by the CPT:

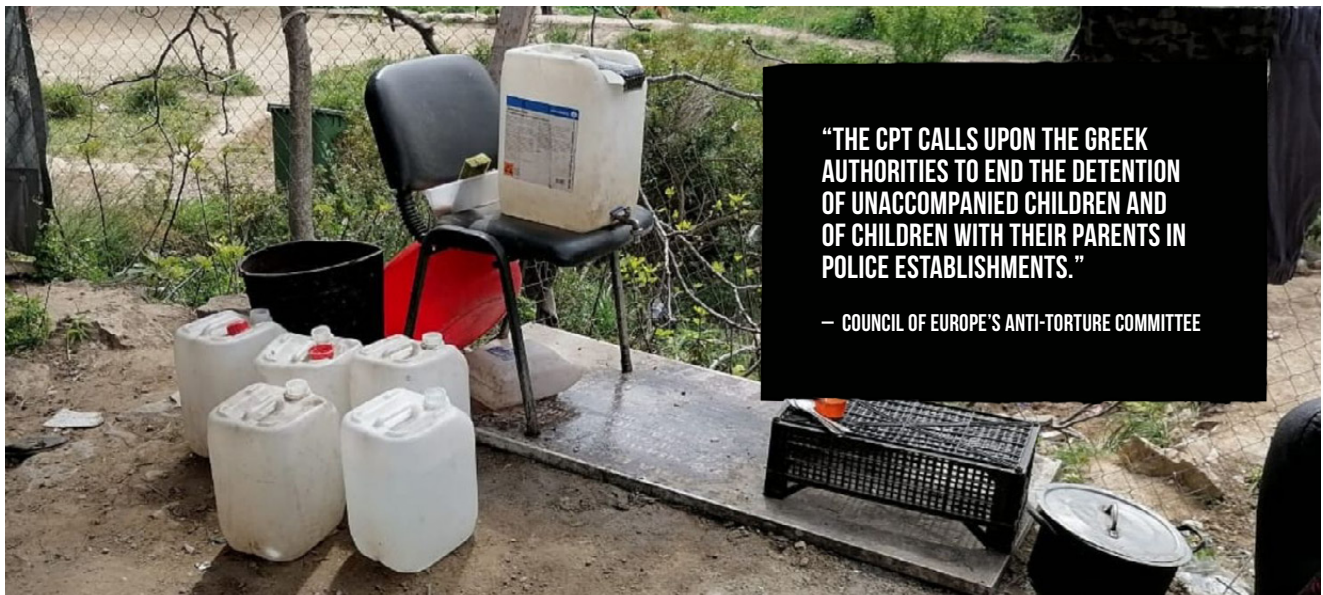
“The CPT once again found that families with children, unaccompanied and separated children and other vulnerable persons (with a physical or mental health illness, or pregnant women) were being detained in such appalling conditions with no appropriate support. The CPT calls upon the Greek authorities to end the detention of unaccompanied children and of children with their parents in police establishments. Instead, they should be transferred to suitable reception facilities catering to their specific needs.”⁵⁰

Though the Greek government has pledged to end the “protective detention” of minors in police establishments, minors do still come into regular contact with the police. In one instance the lawyer Dimitris Choulis filed a complaint regarding police officers who had beaten and stripped two children down to their underwear, without their parents being present or contacted, before releasing them without charge. In another case, a young person who was detained in the police station on a charge for arson was handcuffed in the hallway for 10 days in full view of everyone as they could not be held in a cell with adults and there was no other

available space. The 15-year-old was then held in prison for 4 months. Although it is legal to pre-detain a minor, it is highly unusual, and is illegal under these conditions.⁵¹ Unaccompanied girls and unaccompanied boys as young as 10 years old have also been held in a police area at the edge of the camp in order to keep them separate from the general population, a form of de facto detention “for their own safety.”⁵²

As previously stated, this environment is clearly unsafe, especially for children without an adult guardian or family. Movement of the Ground reported that here have been cases of sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation that have led to mental health problems, self-harm and a general lack of hope for the future. The lack of financial support they receive due to being unaccompanied minors leaves them at risk of becoming involved in drug dealing or prostitution in order to assure their basic needs are covered.⁵³

An interview with Giulia Cicoli of Still I Rise also confirmed this risk; in at least one case a female unaccompanied child was raped and despite reporting it to the appropriate authorities the victim was not given any protection until several weeks later. In another case, an underage girl reported her husband for abusive behaviour and was then kept in the police area of the camp because it was the “safest place available”. Cases of sexual assault are referred to child protection actors, but these referrals are not always acted upon. Even in cases where actors respond to the situation the child is often left with limited or no support. Many child protection actors have been without a psychologist for extended periods of time. There have also been multiple recorded instances of self-harm and at least one attempted suicide by an unaccompanied child.⁵⁴



‘Jungle In Spring 2020’. Photo credit: Anonymous UAM

49. Testimony provided by a 14-year-old boy from Kabul, Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 9 January 2021. He is now living in a shelter in Belgium.

50. European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment of Punishment (CPT), [News](#), Council of Europe's anti-torture Committee calls on Greece to reform its immigration detention system and stop pushbacks, 19 November 2020

51. Information provided in interview by Emma Musty with lawyer, Drimitris Choulis, on 3 February 2021

52. Information provided by Still I Rise interview by Emma Musty with Giulia Cicoli on 7 December 2020

53. Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

54. Information provided by Still I Rise interview by Emma Musty with Giulia Cicoli on 7 December 2020

CHILDREN WRONGLY REGISTERED AS ADULTS

“IF THEY DON’T CORRECT MY AGE I THINK IT’S BETTER TO KILL MYSELF.”⁵⁵

In September 2020, the “Improvement of migration legislation” bill was passed in Greece.⁵⁶ Article 1(4) of the bill removed any reference to the ‘benefit of the doubt’ principle⁵⁷ underlying age assessment procedures under Article 39(5)(f) IPA.

“The amendment thus removes a crucial guarantee for children’s rights enshrined in international law and expressly laid down in the Asylum Procedures Directive. RSA stresses that EASO guidance advises Member States to avoid age assessments and to broadly interpret the benefit of the doubt principle in the context of registration.”⁵⁸

Age assessments are only required if an unaccompanied child does not have an original document proving their age. If this is the case, they are referred to the local hospital which can only process four cases a month. However, in the last year no physical examinations have taken place due to Covid-19 restrictions, a lack of hospital capacity and the absence of an available specialist to complete the assessment. This leaves unaccompanied children living with unrelated adults until their case can be processed and sometimes the length of the process means that they “age out” of it by turning 18.⁵⁹

In one example a young person from Afghanistan gave his birth certificate to the Asylum Service which proves he is a child, but this was ignored, and he is still treated as an adult. The burden of proof in age assessments remains with the applicant, i.e. the child. Confusions regarding a child’s age may occur for many reasons; some young people are told to say that they are adults so that they can access UNHCR cash cards, while others, although claiming to be minors, are registered as adults on arrival by the police or Frontex (though it is unclear whether age assessment at arrival is within their mandate). Others make a mistake when they initially claim asylum because they are translating between two different calendars, this often happens with individuals from Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Children often do not realise they have been registered as an adult until someone looks at their police paper and points it out to them.

Once a child has been registered as an adult they are denied the treatment, services and accommodation options available to vulnerable groups and specifically unaccompanied children. They are also likely to miss out on family reunification deadlines and the opportunity to partake in the relocation program while trying to correct their age. The only unaccompanied children currently present in the “jungle” are those that have been wrongly registered as adults. NGOs such as Movement on the Ground do try to check on them, notify UNHCR and to link them to the legal actors so that they can be rightfully recognised and enter the process of relocation, or at least have access to accommodation inside the official camp.⁶¹ However, were the principle of ‘benefit of the doubt’ to be applied, this would be necessary in far fewer cases.

One young person currently going through this process reported that he had been largely unsupported and was told to produce official documents from his embassy, an act which in itself can damage an asylum claim as it suggests you are not at risk if returned to the country of origin.

“I don’t know what to do, I am really upset. I went alone to my interview, I don’t know if I did it right. It’s hard to talk about this, it gives me headaches. When I hear other boys gave their documents for age change four months ago and hear nothing, I cry. I don’t have good feelings. I feel almost hopeless. But every time my phone rings I think with myself it’s my lawyer, he is calling to tell me they have corrected your age.”⁶²

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO, I AM REALLY UPSET. I WENT ALONE TO MY INTERVIEW, I DON’T KNOW IF I DID IT RIGHT. IT’S HARD TO TALK ABOUT THIS, IT GIVES ME HEADACHES.”

— ANONYMOUS UAM

Photo credit: Refugee Rights Europe



⁵⁵ Testimony provided by a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 21 January 2021. The required actions were taken by Still I Rise after this disclosure.

⁵⁶ The National Herald, [News](#), Greek Parliament Passes Bill on Migration, 5 September 2020

⁵⁷ The applicant should be considered and treated as a child until he or she is found to be an adult.

⁵⁸ Refugee Support Aegean (RSA), [RSA Comment](#) on the Reform of the International Protection Act, April 2020

⁵⁹ Information provided by Still I Rise in interview by Emma Musty with Giulia Cicoli on 7 December 2020

⁶⁰ Information provided in interview by Emma Musty with lawyer, Drimitris Choulis, on 3 February 2021

⁶¹ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

⁶² Testimony provided by a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 21 January 2021.

LACK OF SPECIALISED SERVICES AND ACCOMMODATION

“THERE’S A LACK OF STRUCTURED EDUCATION (PARTIALLY COVERED BY GRASSROOTS NGOs), PREPARATION AND INTEGRATION TO EUROPE FOR THESE YOUNG PEOPLE THAT WILL HAVE TO COUNT ONLY ON THEMSELVES TO START THEIR NEW LIFE. THERE’S A LACK OF SECURITY WHEN IT COMES TO ACCOMMODATION, SINCE AS I SAID, THEY ARE NOT IN A PROTECTED ENVIRONMENT, BUT THEY ARE LEFT ALONE WITH A HIGH RISK OF EXPLOITATION FROM OTHER RESIDENTS AND LOCALS WHO CAN PROFIT FROM THEIR VULNERABLE CONDITION.”⁶³

Despite the fact that unaccompanied children should not legally be forced to live with adults, this is exactly what incorrect age assessments lead to, and even spaces designated for minors become compromised due to overcrowding:

“After a few months of staying with a stranger that helped me and let me stay with her for a while I was rescued by an African friend, also an unaccompanied minor that agreed to let me stay with him in his container. He slept on the floor and I slept with another guy in his bed. The containers belonged to Greek government with the purpose of having unaccompanied minors living there. We were 14 unaccompanied minors and three adults living in a place, a single container, meant for eight people. Some of us slept on the floor even in the wintertime when it was freezing. We shared a single bathroom with two other containers that also had at least 12 people in each container. There were no protection or security measures. We had only one policeman installed in front of the ‘safe area’ but most of the time what we really needed was someone that protected us from the police because of the constant aggression. Inside of the container part of the floor didn’t exist and the ceiling didn’t protect us from the rain because of the holes.”⁶⁴

“WE HAD ONLY ONE POLICEMAN INSTALLED IN FRONT OF THE ‘SAFE AREA’ BUT MOST OF THE TIME WHAT WE REALLY NEEDED WAS SOMEONE THAT PROTECTED US FROM THE POLICE BECAUSE OF THE CONSTANT AGGRESSION.”

— ANONYMOUS UAM

The right to alternative care for children deprived temporarily or permanently from the family environment is enshrined in Article

20(2) of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁶⁵ Before the first Covid-19 lockdown, Metadrasi, Praksis and UNHCR were the main official actors responsible for the wellbeing of unaccompanied children while grassroots NGOs provided a weekly laundry service, non-food item (NFI) distribution and legal/mental/social support. Movement on the Ground were checking on the most vulnerable cases among the young people living outside the camp while Still I Rise was providing a daily educational program. Additionally, *Advocats Sans Frontières* and *Refugee Law Clinic Berlin* supported young people with family reunification and interim measures requests.⁶⁶

All of these services should in fact fall under the responsibility of the Greek Government and the Reception and Identification Service (RIS). Yet despite the work of grassroots organisations, poor management, a general lack of resources and problems with age assessments mean that some young people fall through the cracks:

“I had no guardian or someone informing me about my legal case while I was there. Not any type of education inside of the camp.”⁶⁷

Family reunification deadlines have been missed because of a lack of lawyers and/or guardians,⁶⁸ and for those that do manage to leave the island the problems do not end. Some children have been waiting in Athens for over two months without being allowed out due to Covid-19 movement restrictions. They are placed in hotels and a former summer camp run by IOM while they wait for relocation to France and other countries. Some young people were relocated to the mainland on 24 September 2020 but are still waiting at the time of writing. This disproportionately affects children from African countries including Congo. One young person stated of the summer camp: *“it feels like a prison.”⁶⁹*

Ideally, children should never be held in camps and should be relocated as per the European Asylum Support Office’s (EASO) relocation programme which began in March 2020, in which member states voluntarily pledged to relocate 1600 unaccompanied children from Greece. This programme was originally meant to only include children in the RICs (Reception and Identification Centres) on the islands and in Evros with the intention to run until the end of 2020. However, in 2021 it was extended to also include children on the mainland. As of 31 December 2020, only 573 unaccompanied children had been relocated.⁷⁰ Each member state has their own criteria for choosing children for the program but the criteria are not transparent and there is a risk of older children being left behind. Some children go through the process but are later excluded from the relocation programme with no clear reason stated as to why. These young people are abandoned for months in relocation hotels without a clear understanding of what their future will hold.

⁶³ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

⁶⁴ Testimony provided by a 16-year-old boy from the Congo to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 22 January 2021. He is now living on the mainland and awaiting possible relocation.

⁶⁵ United Nations [Convention](#) on the Rights of the Child

⁶⁶ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

⁶⁷ Testimony provided by a 16-year-old boy from the Congo to Sarah Evans of Still I Rise on 22 January 2021. He is now living on the mainland and awaiting possible relocation.

⁶⁸ Information provided by Still I Rise in interview by Emma Musty with Giulia Cicoli on 7 December 2020

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ IOM, [Newsletter](#) IOM Greece, November-December 2020

CONCERNS ABOUT THE FUTURE

“THE HOTSPOTS SHOULD NOT REMAIN, SHOULD CLOSE, SHOULD NOT EXIST.”⁷¹

Due to Covid-19 restrictions and lockdown, unaccompanied children are currently unable to access any educational service in town and are restricted to the “safe zone”, if they have a place there. There are consistent delays in both the medical and legal procedures which will allow them to be relocated to the mainland or to other European countries.⁷² This de facto detention-like environment is clearly having a negative impact on young people’s mental health, putting them at risk of substance misuse self-harm and suicide. Those not inside the “safe zone” remain at risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and violence.

The overall material conditions for both groups still do not meet basic reception standards and are in clear contravention of Greek law, specifically Article 119 Law 4636/2019. They furthermore do not comply with required levels of physical and mental health care which respects human dignity.⁷³ If these young people, or other unaccompanied children who might arrive in the future, are transferred to the new MPRIC, their access to services and interaction with people outside the structure will become even more limited. The CPT has consistently advocated that persons detained in Greece under aliens’ legislation, including unaccompanied children, should be accommodated in centres specifically designed for that purpose and that offer material conditions and a regime appropriate to their legal situation and vulnerabilities. Accordingly:

“CARE SHOULD BE TAKEN IN THE DESIGN AND LAYOUT OF SUCH PREMISES TO AVOID, AS FAR AS POSSIBLE, ANY IMPRESSION OF A CARCERAL ENVIRONMENT.”

– COUNCIL OF EUROPE’S ANTI-TORTURE COMMITTEE

“Care should be taken in the design and layout of such premises to avoid, as far as possible, any impression of a carceral environment. The CPT has also repeatedly set out the minimum conditions under which such person should be held.”⁷⁴

Yet, before it has even opened, it has already been described as prison-like in a recent report by Europe Must Act.⁷⁵ Grassroots NGOs fear that this camp will lead to an increase in unaccompanied children’s feelings of isolation, abandonment and hopelessness, with an almost certain rise in self-harm and poor mental health.⁷⁶ Thus there is an urgent need to ensure a significant improvement in living conditions and a

commitment to unaccompanied children not being housed in the new closed structures.

“IT’S GROTESQUE THAT THERE IS BARBED WIRE ON THE OUTSIDE AND A PLAYGROUND ON THE INSIDE.”

– A LAWYER

It is currently known that the new camp on Samos has already been prepared to receive children. There are plans for a school, a special area for unaccompanied children, kitchens and a playground. In light of this, a lawyer commented as follows:

“It’s grotesque that there is barbed wire on the outside and a playground on the inside.”⁷⁷

The camp is far removed from the town of Vathy and five kilometres from the nearest village. This “ghettoisation” will only cause more problems for the future and leaves no room for integration. At the time of writing (April 2020), it is still unclear whether children will have access to local schools or informal education outside the camp. Regarding access to the new camp for grassroots NGOs, Choulis emphasised that the Greek government does not want to grant them access because they speak out about the conditions they witness.⁷⁸ Still, it is these groups which have consistently filled gaps in the provision of services for unaccompanied children, covering everything from food to legal support for asylum requests.

Refugee Rights Europe and Still I Rise reiterate that unaccompanied children are currently not safe on the hotspot islands and that their situation will only deteriorate if placed in closed and isolated MPRICs. We call on the Greek Government, the European Commission, the UNHCR and IOM to consistently apply the principle of the ‘best interest of the child’⁷⁹ and work to ensure the wellbeing of all children under their care. Unaccompanied children must be immediately transferred to the mainland and to appropriate and safe accommodation in Greece and other EU states, and the voluntary relocation programme set up as a permanent and structured mechanism.

Indeed, the European Union and the Greek government are now faced with an opportunity to change their course and to rectify an approach to asylum and migration which systematically violates the rights of children. There is now a chance to ensure that an approach deeply anchored in international child rights is enacted and enforced.

⁷¹ Information provided by anonymous former camp worker in interview by Emma Musty on 6 January 2021

⁷² Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

⁷³ AIDA/Greek Council for Refugees, [Country Report](#): Conditions in reception facilities, 30 November 2020

⁷⁴ Council of Europe, [Report](#) to the Greek Government on the visit to Greece carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), 19 November 2020, p.13

⁷⁵ Europe Must Act, [Monthly Update](#), No More Camps, February 2021

⁷⁶ Information provided by Movement on the Ground in interview by Emma Musty with Beatrice Azzani on 14 January 2021

⁷⁷ Information provided in interview by Emma Musty with lawyer, Dimitris Choulis, on 3 February 2021

⁷⁸ Information provided in interview by Emma Musty with lawyer Dimitris Choulis, on 3 February 2021

⁷⁹ Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI), [Report](#), Unaccompanied minors (UAMS) in the European Union, July 2020

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