* **Invisible violence**
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* [Marianna Karakoulaki](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/marianna-karakoulaki)

Earlier this month, hundreds of asylum seekers protested against conditions at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos after a woman was killed in a fire there.

The fire was the third fatal incident in the camp in the last two months. An unaccompanied minor was stabbed to death in a fight there in August and a five-year-old boy was accidentally run over by a truck while playing outside the camp in September.

These incidents, however devastating they may be, did not come as a surprise to anyone who is vaguely familiar with the conditions in the camp. Moria has, for all intents and purposes, become a death trap for the thousands of desperate refugees who are currently being forced to live there.

In 2016, the EU signed a controversial refugee deal with Turkey, known as the EU-Turkey Statement, to stop the refugee flow from Turkey’s western coast to Greece. Under the agreement, Ankara agreed to take back all refugees and migrants who cross to Greece from its territories in return for aid money and the relocation of some Syrian refugees from Turkey to Europe. As part of the deal, Greece agreed to its islands being used as “holding areas” to stop new arrivals from reaching mainland Europe, on the condition that most of the people held there would be swiftly returned to Turkey.

The plan for the containment of refugees on the Greek islands relied heavily on five “hot spots”, including Moria, where asylum seekers would be registered and provided with temporary shelter.

On paper, the plan seemed promising. Turkey was going to curb the deadly sea crossings and Greece was going to temporarily house on its islands the few who manage to escape Turkey’s nets. In the end, all but the most vulnerable refugees were going to end up in Turkey.

In reality, however, things did not work out that way. While Turkey initially succeeded in stopping a high percentage of refugees from embarking on a dangerous journey across the Aegean Sea, this did not last long. As the relations between Ankara and Brussels took a downturn, the refugee flows to Greece began to increase again. Moreover, Greek authorities proved inefficient in processing asylum applications and Turkey kept stalling over the readmissions. As a result, the population in Moria and the other Greek “hot spot” refugee camps started to increase rapidly.

Consequently, just three and a half years after the signing of the refugee deal, these camps have become symbols of Europe’s failure to protect those who knocked on its door for help. These camps, with Moria chief among them, are now places where already traumatised people are stripped off their dignity.

Moria is within a former military base surrounded by olive groves. The beauty and tranquillity of the tree-lined road that leads up to the camp stands in stark contrast to its barbed wire and cement walls. The camp itself is a sea of run-down tents spiralling across small hills. A small road separates the main camp area from its unofficial annex, known as the “olive grove”, where even more tents are lined up.

More than 14,000 people are currently living in Moria, even though the camp was originally designed to host about 3,000. The official site includes a holding area for those who are in the process of being sent back, there is a safe zone for unaccompanied minors and then there is the site where people “live”. While the conditions in the main camp are grim, things are much worse in the “olive grove”. There, it is possible to find families of 10 living in a single cloth tent placed on a makeshift wooden floor.

It is a dangerous, overcrowded, depressing labyrinth that slowly suffocates its inhabitants. Most of the thousands of refugees who are “trapped” there have no idea when they will be able to leave or where they will be going next. The hope many of them had when they made it to the Greek shores in tiny dinghies appears to have been replaced with feelings of desolation.

Doctors without Borders calls Moria a place of medical and psychological emergency. Refugees have described their time there as a “psychological war”.

Many of the camp’s residents suffer from some form of PTSD. Some are suicidal. Children are suffering from what psychologists call “resignation syndrome”, a rare psychiatric condition that presents as progressive social withdrawal and reluctance to engage in normal activities, such as school and play, in response to an intolerable reality. The most severe cases can result in a state of hibernation and even death. Mental health specialists working in the camp say they came across children as young as two who appear to have suicidal thoughts. They may be too young to understand the meaning of life or death, but they know that they do not want to continue living in their current conditions. Some older children in the camp self harm.

Many believe refugees in Moria are better off than thousands of others stuck in conflict-ridden border areas without papers. The conditions in the camps may not be ideal, they reason, but the refugees are safe there.

But while they may be safe from mortars and missiles, they are still living with violence.

Violence can take many forms – psychological as well as physical. Camps like Moria perpetrate a form of violence that is largely invisible. But it is severe. And the pain refugees feel in this camp is no less real because they are feeling it in the “safety” of Europe.

The authorities should view the recent protests in Moria as a warning sign. The EU must act quickly to improve conditions there; to give people back their dignity and their hope. Because when people have nothing left to lose, violence often follows – against themselves and others.

This article was originally published as: ‘The invisible violence of Europe’s refugee camps’.

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