

REPORT SUMMARY: Living Conditions and Access to Services in Refugee Camps on the Greek Mainland



Mobile Info Team (MIT) and Refugee Legal Support (RLS) carried out research on the conditions and access to services for people living in refugee camps on the Greek mainland during 2024. The findings present strong evidence that conditions in the mainland camps fall far short of Greece's legal obligation to provide reception conditions which protect the physical and mental health of people seeking international protection. Based on the findings of this report, we call on the Greek State to reintroduce housing programmes which accommodate applicants in apartments and houses in cities.

This report is based on interviews conducted between April and June 2024 with 30 people resident in nine camps on the Greek mainland: Corinth, Katsikas, Kavala, Koutsochero, Lagkadikia, Malakasa, Oinofyta, Ritsona and Serres.

KEY FINDINGS

- **The remote location of mainland refugee camps has multiple negative impacts** - preventing asylum seekers from integrating into Greek society, obstructing access to essential services, and hindering access to legal support
- Financial and contractual mismanagement by the Greek authorities has resulted in **gaps in essential services** including interpretation and transportation, leaving people stranded and unable to connect and communicate
- **Applicants cannot survive on the monthly financial allowance**, particularly given the costs of transportation and medicine as these are not consistently provided by the state
- **The physical conditions of facilities in mainland camps are often neglected and dilapidated**, with necessary repairs not being carried out
- Mainland camps are **especially unsuitable for vulnerable people** whose needs are not met by the physical environments of camps and the critical lack of access to support
- Millions of euros have been spent on upgrading security infrastructure and surveillance systems, but **people feel unsafe in camps** and do not feel this technology is benefiting them
- The lack of integration policies means that **beneficiaries of international protection continue to reside in camps after receiving a positive decision but are not guaranteed access to basic support including food**

KEY STATISTICS FROM 30 INTERVIEWS

72% reported being housed in accommodation containers which were dilapidated, poorly maintained and in some cases requiring urgent repair works or missing basic appliances and furniture

72% reported that they did not have their basic health care needs met by medical teams operating inside camps

33% tried to access psychosocial support during their stay in the camp but were not able to

59% shared that shortages in interpretation services impacted their ability to communicate in the camp

62% reported that gaps in or lack of transportation resulted in restrictions on their ability to access basic rights, including the asylum procedure, legal support, and health care

8 reported that they had a vulnerability, however all but one shared that their needs were not properly catered for during their stay in the camp

79% reported that they experienced non-payment or delays in payment of cash assistance

76% reported that they were dissatisfied with the quality and/or quantity of food provided in the camp but did not have the financial resources to cook their own food



Photo: Accommodation containers in Koutsochero camp, where residents report suffering from dusty and noisy conditions due to the facility's proximity to a marble quarry.

LIVING CONDITIONS IN MAINLAND CAMPS



(A) Physical conditions

72% of people interviewed reported inadequate conditions in their accommodation including dilapidated structures, dysfunctional appliances and poor hygiene; 55% reported that they had to pay for spare parts or repair works due to lack of maintenance carried out by the camp administration. In order to secure an adequate standard of living - as provided for under Greek and EU law - residents in camps shared that they were burdened with undertaking repair works themselves or paying for this service.

“The room, it’s not the best. The floor is broken. We keep telling them [the camp management] to remove the wood because whoever was living in the room before us, they used to spray the floor with water. So all the things are rotten. We asked them to remove it because it has a stinky smell.”

21 year old man, Kavala camp



(B) Access to services



(i) Interpretation

59% of people interviewed shared that shortages in interpretation services impacted their ability to communicate in the camp. On 14th May 2024, the main provider of interpretation services to both the Asylum Service and the RIS, Metadrasi, announced the suspension of its services, stating that it had not received payment from the Ministry of Migration for a period of nine months. Interviews conducted for this report indicate that there was a gap in interpretation provision following the withdrawal of Metadrasi, with respondents reporting periods of time when there were no interpretation services available in specific facilities (this was mentioned by interviewees in the camps of Corinth, Koutsochero, Oinofyta, Malakasa, Serres, Lagkadikia, Kavala and Katsikas). This led to people in camps relying on fellow residents who speak English in order to communicate with the authorities, raising concerns about confidentiality and safety in communication between residents and camp administration. Additionally, for people interviewed before the withdrawal of Metadrasi, several reported that there were no translators for specific languages in camps (e.g. no Somali interpreters in Ritsona). In addition to the severe impact on access to medical services outlined below, lack of translators significantly impacted camp residents’ ability to communicate their needs to the authorities and further isolated them from support.

(ii) Transportation

62% of people interviewed reported that gaps in or lack of transportation resulted in restrictions on their ability to access basic rights, including the asylum procedure, legal support, and healthcare. Interviews evidenced a number of challenges related to the isolated position of camps and the lack of transportation organised by the camp to allow residents to access essential services. The combination of unreliable interpretation services inside facilities and lack of transportation to urban centres organised by camp authorities resulted in severe isolation for people resident in camps who struggled to access the support they needed.

“I have issues with how far the camp is from the city. My brother is in the centre of Athens and I have to travel every time to see him. It’s quite a difficult journey and we have to pay for it - even though the cash card is so little money. Sometimes there are some buses or cars coming in front of the camp and we can buy some groceries from them, but at least twice a month most of us go to Athens to see a lawyer, buy food or to meet people.”

23 year old man from Somalia, Malakasa camp

(iii) Health and psychosocial support

72% of people interviewed reported that they did not have their basic health care needs met by medical teams operating inside camps; 62% reported that they encountered significant difficulties in accessing treatment in hospitals; 33% of interviewees tried to access psychosocial support during their stay in the camp but were not able to.

Medical and psychosocial support units in mainland camps are responsible for medical screening, provision of primary health care, referral to secondary health care, identification of cases requiring immediate medical attention, recording of medical histories, and providing special medical care to children, pregnant or breastfeeding women, people with disabilities and those suffering from chronic diseases. These units are staffed by public health employees of Greece’s national health organisation (EODY). Interviews indicated that provision of primary healthcare was inadequate across all facilities due to a range of factors including lack of medical staff, lack of interpreters for medical appointments, medicine shortages and the financial burden of having to pay for prescriptions.

Despite the high proportion of interview respondents reporting that they experienced mental health challenges during their stay in a camp and required psychosocial support, only one respondent, in Kavala camp, reported that they received adequate psychosocial support from the medical unit in the camp.

“I needed a doctor many times and haven’t been able to access one. I have to take a taxi and go to the hospital, and I have to pay for it myself. There hasn’t been anyone to translate when I’ve been to the hospital.”

Resident in Serres camp



(iv) Legal information and assistance

More than half of respondents reported that they did not have access to legal assistance during their stay in a camp. Respondents reported gaps in information and support from the camp administration regarding their asylum case. Administrative services reportedly did not proactively assist camp residents in interpreting decisions written in Greek or explaining appeal processes. In Kavala, one respondent reported that the camp management delayed communicating his rejection decision by three days without any apparent reason, and did not inform the respondent of the deadline for appeal. The practice of camp administration delivering rejection decisions late was raised as a concern by CSOs in both Kavala and Polykastro camps. Despite the provisions of the law (Art. 60(2)(b), 4939/2022; Art. 18(2)(b), 2013/33/EU), camp administrations are not generally proactive in facilitating access for lawyers to visit their clients.



(C) Lack of provision for vulnerable people

Eight respondents reported that they had a vulnerability, however all but one shared that their needs were not properly catered for during their stay in the camp. Greek law states that the needs of vulnerable persons such as minors (accompanied and unaccompanied), people with disabilities, elderly people, single-parent households and pregnant women should be taken into account in the provision of reception conditions (Art. 62(1) of the Asylum Code). However, many vulnerabilities are not adequately catered for in camps, for example survivors of trafficking, gender-based violence and torture, who reside in facilities without psychosocial staff due to shortages of EODY staff in conjunction with the remoteness of camps and lack of transportation.

“I’ve been staying for four or five months in a caravan, the situation is very bad [...] it’s very old, and [there are] insects coming out from everywhere. I’m still waiting [for my asylum decision] - every time I go to the office, they say: wait, wait, wait. And now I’m having stress, besides my sickness. I wanted to stop my treatment, because I thought all those treatments were the reason for the delay.”

55 year old man suffering from cancer, Katsikas camp



(D) Cash assistance

79% of people interviewed reported that they experienced non-payment or delays in payment of cash assistance; 93% of respondents who were receiving cash assistance and were explicitly asked about this, reported that the amount provided was insufficient to cover their basic needs and living expenses. Since July 2021, cash assistance is only available to asylum seekers who can prove their continued residence in a facility under the operation of the Ministry of Migration. Cash assistance amounts to €75 per month for single people or €210 for families of four or more as applicants are provided with catered accommodation.

As evidenced in testimonies, this policy shift has led to people having to rely on state-provided support which nonetheless fails to meet their most basic needs in a dignified manner.



(E) Food provided in camps

76% of people interviewed that they were dissatisfied with the quality and/or quantity of food provided in the camp but did not have the financial resources to cook their own food. The low level of cash assistance meant that most interviewees relied on food provided in the camp. However there were recurring reports that pre-packaged meals provided to camp residents were lacking in variety, taste and nutritional value. The inability to choose what to eat - also according to respondents' own cultural norms and tastes - was a key complaint which attested to the lack of dignity afforded to people living in camps.



(F) Safety

Despite the presence of security infrastructure in all camps one third of respondents reported feelings of insecurity and fear. Moreover interviewees did not generally perceive security systems as benefiting them. In other cases people expressed that they did not have enough privacy in the camp or felt insecure in their accommodation, sometimes due to the mixing of people without a pre-existing relationship in containers.



Recommendations to the Greek State

This report provides strong evidence of Greece's failure to provide dignified accommodation to people seeking international protection. We are extremely concerned at the lack of dignity and adequate living standards afforded to people who come to Greece seeking international protection. **We call on the Greek State to accommodate asylum seekers in apartments and houses in urban settings where they can access services, social networks and wider society.** Where camp accommodation is necessary, the state should ensure it is used for **short-term stays only and residents have full and unrestricted access to basic rights** including healthcare, information and legal support. We further call for **provision of regular and free transportation from camps to urban centres** to facilitate residents' access to administrative and legal services as well as healthcare.