

# PRESS RELEASE

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## **New major research study finds EU-Turkey deal has pushed Lesbos to its breaking point**

While much of the current media and policy attention is focused on the central Mediterranean route, due to the spike in deaths and the stand-off between European countries who are closing ports and hindering NGO search and rescue missions, Refugee Rights Europe releases a new report indicating that the situation on the Greek islands is more critical than ever.

The research report, published on 27 August 2018, found that the EU-Turkey Statement from March 2016 has contributed towards an increasingly urgent and tense environment on the island due to overcrowding, lack of capacity and resources, and unauthorised mobility. The situation has deteriorated at rapid pace and is now at absolute breaking point.

Declining morale and psychological conditions have led to heightened tensions and brawls, while a definitive shortage of resources leaves vulnerable populations in unacceptable conditions. Due to lack of space for new arrivals, some people are forced to live outside the camp leaving them at heightened risk of ill-health and insecurity.

The men, women and children on Lesbos – who all aspire to continue onto mainland Greece either to seek asylum there or to continue onto other countries such as Germany and Sweden – are trapped in overcrowded camps with no apparent end in sight and a constant fear of being returned to Turkey or their country of origin which they fled in the first place.

Although individuals assessed by the authorities as ‘vulnerable’ are technically exempt from the geographical restrictions and allowed to move to the mainland to claim asylum, the research found that large numbers of individuals deemed ‘vulnerable’ also face an extended waiting time until they are transferred to the mainland, contributing to increasing desperation and tensions.

### **The research findings highlight the following specific concerns:**

- Access to food and water is limited or sub-standard. The food appears to have made residents ill and the water allocation is insufficient, particularly in the high temperatures of the summer months.
- The unsanitary conditions in the camps on Lesbos risk contributing to the spread of disease, inflammation, scabies and skin infections.
- Both physical and mental health problems are rife on the island, and the treatment of health issues is particularly under-resourced. Access to services at the main hospital, as well as the transport to get there, are costly, which restricts access for the majority of displaced people.
- Violence against displaced people in Lesbos is commonplace. This violence includes police violence (experienced by 47.4% of respondents) and citizen abuse (experienced by 27.3%).

- Violent brawls and/or verbal abuse occurred between groups of displaced people – largely due to heightened desperation amongst individuals trapped on the islands in sub-par conditions.
- Instances of arbitrary detention and the detention of children are taking place on the island. The study found that 23.2% of respondents had been detained on Lesbos, with an even higher figure among children interviewed (26.1%).

**Alice Lucas, Programme Manager at Refugee Rights Europe, said:** “Most new arrivals on the island have been told they will have to wait until 2019 or 2020 for an initial vulnerability assessment in order to be considered for a move to the mainland. This reality has caused many to lose all hope, leading to deteriorating mental health, tensions and instances of violence between refugees due to the heightened despair and desperation.”

**Nahzley Anvarian, Field Researcher and Coordinator at Refugee Rights Europe, said:** “Violence against refugees is apparent – instances of racially motivated physical and verbal abuse are commonplace from both citizens and police. Many of the individuals we interviewed had been exposed to tear gas, which in some cases brought on serious health concerns and seemed to amount to the excessive use of force.”

### **About the research study**

In June 2018, Refugee Rights Europe conducted extensive field research on the island of Lesbos, interviewing and surveying 311 asylum-seekers in their native languages, or nearly 4% of the estimated 8,000 thought to be on the island at the time of the study. Among those interviewed were 23 children – or 7.4% of the research sample. This constitutes one of the largest research efforts on the Greek islands to-date.

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