

## LETTERS FROM LESVOS 24 Feb-08 Mar 2020

Last week of February

On Monday night 24th February the Greek government sent a large riot police force to Mytilene and Chios (10 squads with about 20 policemen per squad) in order to safeguard the construction of the new hotspot at the requisitioned fields in the Northern part of the island. The local communities declared their opposition to this policy and the local authorities supported them despite the fact that they belong to the party in government (New Democracy). The arrival of the riot police was described as an 'invasion' and was strongly resisted. On Monday night the local authorities blocked the entrance and the exit of the central port of Mytilene as well as the port of Sigri in Western Lesvos with municipal machinery mostly garbage trucks.

When finally, the ship arrived at around 3 a.m., clashes started between local citizens and the police. The riot police used tear gas and pepper spray and eventually managed to disperse the protesters and proceed to the requisitioned fields. Local people were already there waiting, and for three days there were continuous fights against the riot police in two areas of the hill. Tear gas and other repellents were widely used, and there were widespread acts of violence against local people.

On Wednesday night 26th February the government decided to withdraw the riot police and started negotiations with the local authorities. On Wednesday and Thursday, a general strike was announced with almost 100% participation. There was literally nothing open in the city of Mytilene and the demonstrations in the city center were very large, gathering around 1000 people; a big number for the city, considering also that at the same time hundreds of people were up in the hills where the riots against the police took place.

The political agenda of all those who resisted the plans of the government and the authoritarian way of pursuing these plans was quite diverse. While there was a common protest against any new camps on the island, whether closed or open, the political justification for this demand varied among protesters.

The demonstration on Thursday was strong but didn't last long, as differences among the protesters came to the fore. Slogans, such as "after the cops it's the turn of the NGOs and the refugees", were often heard. And so, just as the demonstration ended, Far- Right groups smashed two cars that were supposed to belong to NGO workers and beat up two master's students at a tavern as they were thought to be NGO workers.

On this same day, Thursday 27th February, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that he is "opening" the borders to Europe thus letting the refugees and migrants who temporarily reside in Turkey to move into Greece and Europe.

The Greek government responded by declaring that the refugees and migrants who wanted to cross the Greek Turkish border were an 'asymmetrical threat' to the security of the country. On this ground the government closed the border, sent extra police and armed forces to the Evros border and marine forces to the islands, and suspended people's right to apply for asylum in Greece. All those who crossed the border were to be detained in order to be deported.

At the same time, attacks continued the following days. Far-Right groups together with some local people blocked the streets, harassed people who looked "European" and were thus

believed to be in solidarity with the refugees or NGO workers, smashed cars and blocked traffic. Requests for police intervention remained unanswered and filing complaints was discouraged.

A lot of NGOs and grassroots groups were forced to suspend their operation and even leave the island as they were targeted and physically attacked. This caused further lack of services and the deterioration of conditions in Moria camp, as well as fear and insecurity among some of the residents of the island.

On Friday 28th February, clashes started at the land border between Greece and Turkey and strong images of people on the move being dispersed violently at the "grey zone" were reported in Greek and Turkish media.

In Lesvos the consequences of the above developments were not visible yet. Only one boat arrived early on Saturday morning 29th February, near Skala Sykamnias, in really bad weather, carrying 27 people mostly from sub-Saharan Africa.

A rumor, misinterpreting Erdogan's announcement, spread among the residents of Moria RIC that the borders to Europe are opening. Some hundreds of people from Moria started walking to the port of Mytilene, where there was supposed to be a ship waiting to transfer them to the mainland. The police stopped them and fights erupted. At the end of the night 10 injured people were admitted to the hospital.

Sunday 01.03.2020

It is Sunday noon and a video from a local news website goes viral. It is a video of a group of local people, mostly residents of the village of Thermi and of the Port in Skala Thermis, trying to deter a boat full of refugees from disembarking in the small port. Local people were pushing back the boat whenever it approached the land and the tension was high as they were yelling and swearing to the people on board. They verbally harassed and shoved both the UNHCR representative and the councilwoman of the Greek Communist Party (KKE), who were trying to diffuse the situation and convince locals to allow the newly arrived refugees to disembark. They also physically harassed a journalist who was on the spot and threw his camera in the sea.

At the same time hundreds of people from the villages of Moria and Panagiouda, under the auspices of the local authorities, were blocking the road to coast guard buses transferring the newly arrived refugees from the Northeast shores of Lesvos to Moria RIC. Instead, they were transferred and detained at the port of Mytilene.

Later in the evening the "Stage 2" transit camp in Skala Sykamnias was put on fire. It was arson by a group of local xenophobes. The police received calls but did not intervene. Far right groups were determined to spend the night guarding the shores of Northeast Lesvos deterring, by any means, any boat attempting to disembark on the island and "protecting the borders".

Monday 02.03.2020

On Monday morning, a bank holiday, the government announced the launch of an army exercise at the land borders with Turkey in Evros and at the sea borders of the Aegean islands.

Soldiers patrolled the shores and heavy army machinery was placed in shooting position facing Turkey. Access to those places was prohibited.

At the same time, an Emergency Legislative Decree was passed, valid for one month and applicable to those arriving after 1st of March, suspending the submission of asylum applications(GG A' 45/02.03.20).

In the following days, local citizens, who opposed the Far-Right groups as well as the policies of both government and of local authorities, started to organize. Assemblies and protests took place, a team of lawyers reported cases of harassment directly to the D.A., a case of intimidation against a member of "Lesvos Solidarity" was taken to court and charges were pressed against the perpetrators. Local community unions, workers' unions, left wing parties and members of the academic community published announcements condemning acts of violence and in support of refugees and of targeted people, a local municipal party organized a discussion on social rights and liberties at a central café full of people.

Announcements and letters of solidarity and support started coming from all over Greece and other European countries. It was a week of solidarity actions in multiple countries and cities.

Saturday 07.03.2020

At 11 am a big demonstration took place at the central square of Mytilene- Sapho Square. It was organized by the Lesvos Antifascist Initiative "Against detention centers". The event was crowded and peaceful and the local intercultural choir "CANTAlaloun" gave a concert with antiwar songs. Banners in solidarity with the refugees and pickets against fascism were all over the place. The concert ended with the people shouting the slogan "Lesvos is an antifascist land".

Later in the afternoon though, around 8pm, local media started reporting that the building of One Happy Family, specifically the sector of "School of Peace", was on fire. The fire department declared it was arson, against a very active and lively place of solidarity and schooling.

The suspension by the government of the right to apply for asylum, a decision strongly criticized by the UNHCR and many NGOs (including the HRW), has put the newly arrived refugees and migrants in a particularly precarious situation.

Amid the above situation, 42 newly arrived people have sought shelter in a church in Skala Sykamnias and 508 people remain detained (under the new Emergency Legislative Decree prohibiting asylum claims) at the Port of Mytilene, deprived of basic goods.

To be continued...

The Refugee Observatory team

<http://refugeeobservatory.aegean.gr>