

Letters from Lesvos 2

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On Monday 9th March, the first positive test result to Covid-19 was detected on Lesvos. People started getting anxious and discussions sprung up regarding the capacity of the hospital and the inadequate sanitation conditions in Moria. At the same time, while still in the covid-19 uncertainty phase, announcements by the Minister of Migration on establishing closed camps, possibly in the deserted islands named Tokmakia, were presented in terms of a necessity against the hygiene crisis that could occur.

The political scene on the island was still tense from the incidents of the previous two weeks. At the same time, members of Neo-Nazi organizations were travelling to Evros and Lesvos to support the far-right actions of local people. The information on the ground was that around 40 people landed in Lesvos from Germany, Austria, France and other E.U. countries. In parallel, antifascist initiatives were organizing a day of solidarity actions and invited people from Europe and Greece to support these actions with their physical presence. Two demonstrations were about to take place on Saturday 14th March at the central Sapho square.

On Tuesday 10th March, the Minister of Health announced the closure of all schools, universities, kindergartens and any other facility providing educational or recreational activities. These measures also affected all of the activities taking place inside and outside Moria and Kara Tepe camps, as well as schooling places in Mytilene, like Mosaic. In compliance with the governmental directions, the NGOs responsible for such activities suspended their actions in the field.

On Thursday 12th of March, an Italian member of a Neo-Nazi organization was attacked in the city center of Mytilene. Also, Moria RIS (Registration and Identification Service) informed all NGOs active in Moria that, in compliance with the directions of the Ministry RIS, they need to cease all activities taking place indoors, not only the educational ones.

The next day, Friday 13th March, the Greek government announced the closure of stores, cafes and restaurants effective Saturday morning, as a response to multiple positive Covid -19 diagnoses in the country. At the same time, the Asylum Service and the RIS suspended all services requiring human interaction, including administrative procedures, until the 10th of April. Only safety personnel working online was allowed inside the offices of Moria and they responded only to emergency calls.

On Friday night, a group of far-right local people reported a journalist of a local online newspaper to the police for allegedly exposing their identities without consent in a video he recorded. The police arrested him, but he was later released after an intervention by the D.A. Several statements against the intimidation of independent journalism and in support of the local web newspaper, and of the journalist himself, followed.

On Saturday 14th March, the Army vessel sailed from the port of Mytilene, carrying 450 people to be transferred to the closed camps in northern Greece, where they would be detained, as they arrived in Greece after March 1st and did not have the right to apply for asylum. On the same day, two boats with 70 newcomers arrived and temporarily “settled” on the shores of northern Lesvos.

Two very crowded demonstrations took place with participants from the town of Mytilene and other Greek cities, as well as other European countries. Harsh criticism followed these actions on the grounds that they ignored the situation of covid-19 and violated the new measures. The organizers

of the events replied that they proceeded following all the existing precautions, bearing in mind that public open-air gatherings were not prohibited at the time.

On Monday 16th March, a fire broke out in Moria. A 5-year-old child burned to death.

On Tuesday 17th March, press releases revealed that charges had been pressed against 10 unaccompanied minors for “illegally” crossing the borders of Evros after March 1st. Nothing similar has occurred yet for people entering from the Aegean borders, as far as we know.

On Wednesday 18th March, following E.C. directives, the entry of non-EU citizens into Greece was prohibited, while movement restrictions were set up in Moria and other over-crowded camps. According to the new measures, residents of the camps are allowed to move from 7am until 7 pm, by bus only, with a maximum of 30 people per bus, and not on foot. Police blocked the roads to Panagiouda and Moria villages, where people used to go on foot for walks or supplies. Several humanitarian organizations, including UNHCR, MSF and other NGOs active in the field, made statements expressing their concerns regarding the situation in Moria, especially in relation to covid-19 and the living and sanitation conditions in the camp.

On Friday 20th March, the Ministry of Migration chartered a ship to transfer 129 people from Mytilene to detention facilities in northern Greece.

On Sunday 22nd of March, the government announced the enforcement of curfew, effective Monday morning 6 am. Henceforth, people will need a special authorization to leave their houses, and only for limited reasons including essential work, bank transactions, buying basic supplies, helping someone in need, visiting a doctor, vet or pharmacy, and for physical exercise/pet walk. It remains unknown how this measure will further impact the situation in Moria.

To be continued...