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“ALL I WANT IS TO BE FREE AND LEAVE”

LIFE IN THE CLOSED CONTROLLED ACCESS CENTRE
IN SAMOS



**EUROPE
MUST
ACT.**

A report from the
SAMOS ADVOCACY COLLECTIVE
and EUROPE MUST ACT

In September 2021, Greek authorities officially opened the country's first 'Closed Controlled Access Centre' (C.C.A.C.) on Samos, forcing hundreds of displaced people on the island to move to the new facility. Constructed in an isolated hill area, the camp is equipped with barbed wire fencing, constant CCTV coverage surveyed from Athens, drone monitoring and 24/7 security. Around 426 [1] people are currently residing in the facility - living under constant surveillance and facing extreme restrictions on their freedom of movement.

The plans for the new reception centre, along with four others in other Greek islands, were first announced by European and Greek authorities in December 2020. Throughout the construction process and to this day, both the Greek and EU authorities continue to insist that the new closed facilities represent an improvement of reception conditions for refugees and asylum seekers, where their rights will be upheld.

But in the three months since the camp became operational, it is clearer than ever that the assurances of the authorities do not match the reality. Since October 2021, Europe Must Act and the Samos Advocacy Collective have been conducting interviews with residents of the new camp who wish to share their own lived experiences in the new facility. These testimonies show that far from representing an improvement, life in the camp is tantamount to life in a prison, and that the stark contrast between the old hotspot and the new closed camp is not a positive one.

One year after the camps were first announced, we believe it is time for a reality check. We also believe that this can only be made through the direct accounts of the people who have been forced to live in the first closed camp in Greece.

This short report focuses on two of the leading narratives consistently pushed by the authorities: that people are safer in a closed facility; and that the closed camp in Samos constitutes an improvement in living conditions when compared to the old overcrowded hotspot. Between 10/10/2021 and 10/12/2021, 6 semi-structured interviews were conducted with different residents of the Samos C.C.A.C. The residents have shared detailed accounts of their experiences in the camp, which present a very different picture to that painted by the EU and Greek governments. Contrasting the testimonies of residents with the statements of the authorities, this report shows that state assurances regarding the safe and humane nature of closed facilities are not tenable.

Background about the initiative:

This report forms part of an ongoing collaboration between members of Samos Advocacy Collective and researchers, facilitated by Europe Must Act. Through ongoing semi structured interviews with residents of the Samos C.C.A.C., the project aims to amplify the voices and concerns of camp residents and challenge the use of closed reception facilities.

[1] Last updated: 12/12/2021.

A SAFE SPACE FOR RESIDENTS?

Both the EU and Greek authorities insist that concerns about the camp are unfounded and that the facility will be a safer environment for displaced people on the islands. During her first [visit](#) to Samos in March 2021, **the EU Commissioner Ylva Johansson promised that the new reception centres “will not be closed, they will be humane, and allow for areas for families and vulnerable people.”** Expanding on the camps in a [blog post](#), she wrote that **“this is about people and their basic right to feel safe.”**

Despite the Commissioner’s assurances, it is clear that the residents interviewed for this report do not feel safe in the new facility. When asked about their first impression of the camp, one resident explained

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It scares you. It’s like a prison, with all the fences. I fled from suffering to come here to a prison.

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Another resident said

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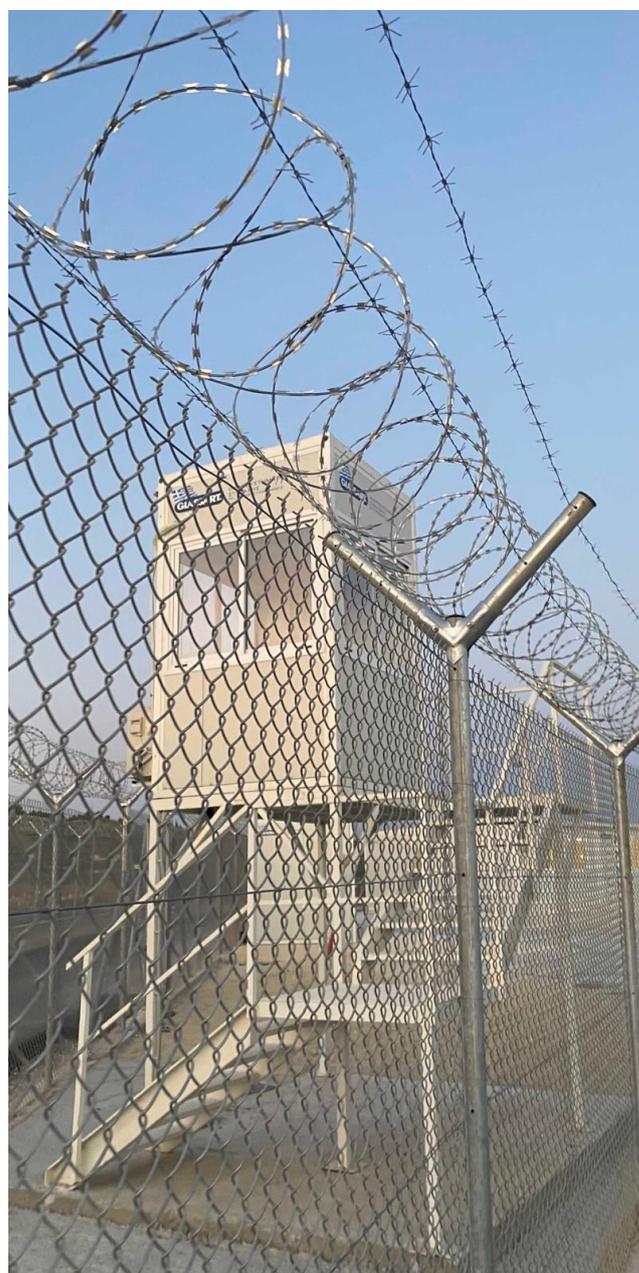
It’s not a space where human beings can live, it traumatizes them. I’m not comfortable. All I want is to be free and leave.

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In contrast to the assurances from the Commission that the centres would not be closed, the Greek authorities have been clear from the start of their intention to enclose people in the new island facilities, with the Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachis [stating](#) that

“we have created a modern and safe new closed, controlled access centre.”

But, whilst the Minister did not attempt to hide the fact that the camp would be closed, he has sought to suggest the ‘closed and controlled’ nature of the camp is actually in the residents interest, explaining that it **“will give back the lost dignity to people seeking international protection.”** He also repeatedly [mentioned](#) that the new structure would increase the safety of its residents.



Again, the testimonies of camp residents do not support the assurances of the Minister.

Indeed, the abundant and ubiquitous presence of police and private security guards has an opposite effect on people under 24/7 control:

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My feeling is that I'm in prison. This is what I feel. [There is] too much control around, cameras, and drones sometimes.

There (is) a lot of guards, and security. And if you're going out, when you come back: body check, or the bag". "Any place that you want to enter you find a private security person. Before you go there, they have to search [body-check] you. Search you well.

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Another resident was left to sit in the sun for several hours with handcuffs on for no reason and was threatened to be "returned back to Turkey" by a police officer in the camp.

In addition, the overcrowded container accommodation in the camp exposes vulnerable residents to complete strangers and fails to uphold their right to private life and intimacy.

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We share the container with another family. We only have one key for the whole container, there are no keys to the bedrooms. It's not easy to live together.

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These conditions have taken a heavy toll on the mental health and wellbeing of people forced to be contained in a place where they don't feel safe.

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Now we can't leave, we're trapped. It's never been good from a mental health perspective, but after two years being here and now going into the third year [in Samos] it's tiring.

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The prison-like conditions and feelings of being trapped have been compounded by rules implemented by the authorities over one month ago, which prohibit residents from leaving the camp without a valid ID. For hundreds of residents this means being forced into de facto detention, despite the lack of an official order or legal basis from the Ministry.



AN IMPROVEMENT IN LIVING CONDITIONS?

At the inauguration of the C.C.A.C. in September, **Minister Mitarachis proclaimed the new camp would have “better living conditions, a lot more space for each asylum seeker with all the necessary facilities.”**

This statement is challenged by the testimonies of camp residents, who consistently highlight the prison-like architecture and management of the facility, including geographic and time restrictions that seriously limit the residents’ basic freedom of movement.

The location of the camp is very isolated and the purpose is we don’t see anyone and no one sees us. At any moment they can just close the doors and then you’re detached from the world.

The feeling of imprisonment voiced by residents is linked to the remote location of the camp, far from the town where people can access better services autonomously, receive support from various NGOs and access the safe spaces they provide in the town centre. As one resident explained,

You are not free [...] You are like a slave. You are never really free.

In an attempt to justify the camp’s construction, the General Secretary of Reception of Asylum Seekers, Manos Logothetis, even went as far as to criticise the previous system for allowing people to

“register and the next moment be drinking coffee in the main square.”

The determination of the authorities to prevent people from freely accessing local services, or even enjoying the simple act of having a coffee in a cafe, has only made a bad situation even worse. As one resident of the closed camp explained:

Before, when I’m feeling so bad, I could come in the city, and talk with somebody. At least walking [on] the beach. But there, no...you have to be [in the camp]. And if you want to go in the city, you [need] the money. If you don’t have any money, then you cannot get here.

Ongoing delays with the provision of cash assistance means that even when residents have permission to leave the camp, they cannot usually afford to do so. Although asylum seekers living in reception facilities in Greece should receive €75 each month, the payment has not been processed for over three months. The cost of a €3.20 return ticket to the Samos town of Vathy is therefore beyond the means of most residents. Contained in the camp with little ability to leave, one resident explained

We don’t have any more space. [...] and during the whole day we’re just using our mobile [phones], we’re sleeping, and we don’t have any activities. And it’s so boring.

Unable to leave the camp and without the money to buy their own food or provisions, camp residents are instead forced to remain in a substandard facility characterised by inadequate services and malfunctions.

“Water runs in the room, almost everywhere (...) you cannot sit on the beds, that’s a problem, because these are bunk beds. The construction of the containers is not well done, the power socket has not been working for 4 days, so we cannot charge our phones.”

Problems with the containers are compounded by other substandard services within the camp. Despite assurances from Manos Logothetis that **“For the first time in the history of migration, a beneficiary will be able to sit in a restaurant [in the camp] that is air-conditioned and safe,”** both the quantity and the quality of food provided in the camp stands out as an important issue in the testimonies collected. As one resident explained:

“I think [the quality is] really terrible. Is not for humans. And you cannot eat [it]...if you come late, the food is finished, and then you just receive the bread. And one bottle of water.”

Another testimony reported that even when food is no longer edible **“they still give it to us – expired.”**

In the substandard conditions, access to much needed healthcare promised by the authorities remains elusive. One resident warned that

“if someone is really sick, he’s going to die. Nothing will prevent him from dying... We said everything that was not going well, the baby is coughing, I have medical problems and I asked to be referred to the hospital. They said not.”

SYSTEMATIC VIOLENCE

Far too often, the conditions documented by residents of the camp are only the latest examples of mistreatment they have been subjected to. The residents interviewed for this report shared their own experiences being pushed back from Samos to Turkey, and revealed a widespread use of physical and sexual violence by border guards. As one resident recalled,

“And after this, they were calling us one by one to beat us. They had batons. I took hits everywhere [I was hit everywhere], because when they were beating us they were not looking. They hit the eyes, it doesn’t matter where, they beat, they beat.”

The testimony of residents interviewed for this report is consistent with the overwhelming evidence that Greek authorities have been largely engaging in the illegal practice of ‘pushbacks’ - something which they continue to deny.

These testimonies are yet again proof of an hostile European border regime and its harsh consequences for people on the move attempting to cross various entry points to the European Union.

CONCLUSION

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My goal when I came here was to provide for my family and my daughter, who was 5 months old when I left, now she's 3 years old, to take them out of Syria, for them to be safe. This is still my goal but I'm less optimistic.

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As this testimony highlights, life in the new closed camp is taking a toll on those inside. The words of the camp residents reveal the huge impact of living behind barbed wire and under constant surveillance on their lives. Despite this worrying evidence, similar reception facilities characterized by restrictions of movement, prison-like architecture and digital surveillance are increasingly becoming the standard reception practice in Greece. On the islands of Leros and Kos two new Closed Controlled Access Centres have recently been inaugurated, while on the mainland camps have been surrounded by concrete walls.

And in an alarming development in recent months, other countries and their leaders have been showing an interest in replicating the new camp of Samos, perceiving it as a 'best practice model.' Gérald Darmanin, the French Interior Ministry, congratulated the Greek authorities for the opening of the camp, stating the importance of "controlling external borders" and that "living conditions are better." The UK Secretary of State for Home Affairs, Priti Patel, visited the new camp in August, and is reportedly planning to implement similar structures in the UK. Meanwhile in the USA, President Biden's officials are considering implementing Greek-style structures along the US-Mexico border.

It is deeply concerning that closed controlled centres like that on Samos might be replicated on other borders. As this report clearly shows, these centres are not the solution. Detaining people seeking asylum in prison-like facilities should not be normalised, and should certainly not be replicated. According to the testimonies gathered for this report, the camp on Samos is not keeping residents safe and it is not improving their living conditions. Instead, in many cases, it appears to be causing real and substantial harm. The voices and experiences of people forced to live in the camp must be heeded.

In strong contrast to this year's International Migrant Day theme "Harnessing the potential of human mobility", authorities keep pursuing their hostile migration agenda. **But this report is clear: authorities can have closed and controlled centres, or safe and dignified alternatives. They cannot have both. We call on leaders to stop portraying closed and controlled centres as the only solution and to offer space for safe and dignified accommodation schemes in urban areas. And we ask leaders to listen to people living in these camps:**

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I came here just for my future. If I wanted to have no future, then I [would not] come here.

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