

Samos
Advocacy
Collective

**EUROPE
MUST
ACT.**

A report from the
SAMOS ADVOCACY COLLECTIVE
and **EUROPE MUST ACT**

***“A LIFE WITHOUT
FREEDOM IS NOT A LIFE”***

**LIFE IN THE CLOSED CONTROLLED ACCESS
CENTRE IN SAMOS**

20.06.2022

I. INTRODUCTION

“This Samos camp is not in European standards, sorry to say, but they just waste the European money to build that prison.”

- a resident of the CCAC Samos

Eight months have passed since the opening of the first ‘Closed Controlled Access Centre’ [1] (CCAC) on the Greek island of Samos. The construction of the Samos CCAC and four other similar facilities on the five Aegean islands (Samos, Chios, Kos, Leros, and Lesvos) was agreed upon by European and Greek authorities and fully financed by the European Commission.

In December 2021, our first report **“All I Want Is To Be Free And Leave”** unveiled that life in the CCAC is tantamount to life in prison. Despite assurances by both European and Greek authorities that the new centre would represent an improvement in living conditions and a safe environment for its residents, the testimonies of people forced to live in the prison-like facility revealed instead limited or no access to basic services, constant surveillance and extreme restrictions on the residents’ freedom of movement.

Today, we believe it is time for a second reality check. The Samos CCAC remains surrounded by barbed wire, monitored by 24/7 CCTV surveillance and residents have to undergo security checks every time they enter and exit the camp. The camp hosts 372 people as of May 2022 making up 18% of the facility’s total capacity of 2040 [2].

Despite the population being nowhere near the total capacity, the residents have experienced extended periods of water and electricity shortage as well as lack of access to primary healthcare.

This report, following up on the previous one, aims to highlight ongoing issues and the daily reality of the people living in the Samos CCAC by focusing on the personal experiences and perspectives of camp residents. Between January and April 2022, a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents of the facility as well as with people living in the town of Samos. Not only do the direct accounts of people confirm and complement the testimonies collected in 2021, but they uncover new severe restrictions and rights violations taking place in the EU-funded facility.

Background about the initiative:

This is the second report resulting from the collaboration between members of the Samos Advocacy Collective and researchers, facilitated by Europe Must Act. Through ongoing semi-structured interviews with residents of the Samos CCAC, the project aims to amplify the voices and concerns of camp residents and challenge the use of closed reception facilities.

[1] The camp was also referred to with the name ‘Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centre’ (MPRIC)

[2] Last updated: 31/05/2022. Available at: <https://migration.gov.gr/en/statistika/>

II. GENERAL SITUATION - FOLLOW UP

Unfortunately, the experiences of people on the move living in Samos are far from the warm and welcoming attitude that Greece - and Europe - has given to people fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The provision of essential support and services for those living in Samos is precarious: rather than by the government, services are mostly provided by NGOs and grassroots groups. Yet, the Greek Minister for Tourism Vassilis Kikilias suggested that NGOs providing support to displaced people in the Aegean islands should instead go to Ukraine where the real needs are, while

Notis Mitarachi, the Greek Minister for Migration and Asylum stated that ***"Europe and Greece should show practical solidarity to refugees from Ukraine, whom I rightly described as 'real refugees'."***

These words stand in stark contrast to his statement in August 2021 when he stressed that ***"[w]e cannot have millions of people leaving Afghanistan and coming to the European Union ... and certainly not through Greece."***

FOOD

The Samos CCAC does not uphold people's right to access to the most basic services. Firstly, the testimonies reveal that, while the quality of the food distributed in the camp has slightly improved over the last months, with no recent report of mouldy or expired food, it has been stressed that the quantity has remained unchanged and unsatisfactory.

Moreover, as the facility staff does not take care of non-functioning kitchenettes in the containers and cooking equipment is not allowed in the camp, residents are left with no options. When complaining about the issue with the competent staff, a camp resident was asked:

"Why are you cooking? We give you food here. You are not supposed to cook."



ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Secondly, access to healthcare - a fundamental right enshrined in international, European, and Greek [3] law has been repeatedly violated over the last months. The EU-funded Philos program, a healthcare program for asylum seekers and refugees in Greece, was scheduled to expire at the end of February 2022. It was only thanks to political pressure that the programme was renewed until the end of 2022. Nevertheless, during the month of March 2022, no doctor from EODY, the National Public Health Organization, was operating in the CCAC. Since then, temporary responses have been found with doctors being present in the facility only for a few days a week. However, as Prince*[4], an asylum seeker who has been living in the Samos CCAC since its opening last September, rightly points out, even

“with only one doctor operating in the facility, I think there will always be people who won't have access to medical care”.

Besides, there are serious concerns over the continuation of the Philos program given it only got extended until the end of the year, with seemingly no clear future plan in sight in Samos.

While it remains unknown when a sustainable solution will be found, most camp residents explain that they prefer seeing a doctor from MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières), which is currently operating a mobile clinic in the camp to compensate for this gap. Not only does the absence of a doctor in the camp prevent CCAC residents from accessing adequate and timely health care, it also hinders the vulnerability assessment. This forces many asylum seekers to undergo the asylum procedure without proper prior identification of vulnerability, which is necessary to obtain the lift of the geographical restriction and a transfer on the mainland. This issue, which emerged recently, only adds to the pre-existing factors that were hindering the resident's access to health care and the local hospital: long waiting times, lack of dedicated transport to the hospital, and lack of knowledge and training of the medical staff on specific issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM).

[3] Article 33 of L 4368/2016 states that the Greek Public Health System has to ensure the right of free access to health care for all refugees, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, as well as people living in Greece on humanitarian grounds

*[4] All names in this report have been changed to protect the person's identity



Finally, as the migratory journey can have a heavy toll on a person's mental health, the provision of psychological care is of utmost importance, yet completely disregarded, as pointed out by one current camp resident, who is yet to receive any psychological support from the camp:

"[coming] from Turkey to here. Even, [passing] through that sea.. you will develop psychological problems."

This is only exacerbated by being forced to live in a closed facility for a long and unknown period of time:

"When will I get out of this place? When? When? When? And then after you start having bad thoughts, I need someone that can talk to me"

The inadequacy of the camp to uphold the most basic rights of asylum seekers was further seen when the water supply in the camp was interrupted for 17 days in May 2022 due to a broken pump. Tap water supply was limited to two hours a day and around six extra 1.5L water bottles per person were distributed, but the situation deteriorated quickly over the days. A camp resident told us: ***"[We get] two bottles each person and the tap was on for only 20 minutes. I couldn't even take a bath."***

As people were forced to use water bottles for drinking, cooking, washing, and flushing the lavatory, the distribution was not enough to meet the daily needs of water supply that, according to the Sphere standards in humanitarian action, should amount to at least 15L per day per person.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Meanwhile, people are forced to live in this environment for an unknown period of time, having limited or no access to information about the asylum procedure nor the stage of their claim. Prince* explained that

"it's difficult to have people in the camp who inform you about your rights, and who teach you about the [asylum] procedure. We [camp residents] are always trying to look for information about how to do things, it's to have a minimum knowledge, but the majority of people ignore completely. I didn't know anything [about the asylum process]."

A common sentiment voiced by residents is the general lack of trust in the staff and lawyers provided by the Greek Asylum Service:

"I don't trust the asylum lawyers. No, no one trusts them."

A further obstacle to fair access to information is the low availability and competence of translators working for the asylum service. As a consequence, people prefer relying on the legal support provided by NGOs working in the town of Vathy.



CASH ASSISTANCE

“There are people in the camp who are registered for the cash card [cash assistance], sometimes they receive 75€ and they live the whole month with 75€, and I think that this is outrageous. A bus ticket costs 1,6€ [one way], if you have to buy tickets for 20 days you spend 64€ and you are left with 11€, this is crazy”.

Between December 2021 and January 2022, the payments of the cash assistance finally resumed, after asylum seekers across Greece had not been receiving any form of financial support for 4 months due to severe delays since the Ministry of Migration and Asylum took control of the EU-funded program. Now, asylum seekers receive a monthly cash allowance of 75€.

As camp residents explain, the amount distributed does not cover the cost of a daily bus ticket to go to the city. This creates an additional barrier to people’s freedom and right to access services outside the camp, including legal support.



III. A RESTRICTIVE AND UNSAFE ENVIRONMENT

As the residents’ basic rights and human dignity are not upheld by the Samos CCAC where poor living conditions continue to be a daily matter, their possibilities of leaving the facility are severely limited by the draconian security and police apparatus

Extreme securitisation indeed continues to be a problem:

“They have a drone that will be passing right throughout the camp. 2-3 drones passing like we are criminals or like we are terrorists.”

It is significant of the state of fear reigning in the Samos CCAC the fact that many residents refused to do an interview for this project, while many more refrain from speaking up and denouncing the rights violations they face due to the fear of being arrested or jeopardising their asylum case. We have come to know of a person ***“trying to do a Tik-Tok video in the camp. They arrested him”.***

This person, who had been using his phone and social media to shed light on the prison-like conditions in the Samos CCAC and advocate for the rights of the residents, was brought to a police station and police officers ***“searched his phone, they saw a lot of videos, [and] they force him to delete the video.”***

Speaking about the digital surveillance in the camp, a resident asks himself if the CCAC is

“a detention camp or a camp for asylum seekers? We are no longer free to live our private lives.”

This security apparatus, said to be implemented to protect people, does not make the facility a place where people in need of protection feel safe:

"The camp is very unsafe, [and] the police people, they are so aggressive."

A camp resident recounts how his accommodation was not respected by the facility staff:

"The morning they came to tell me that they had to change my container. We had a compromise that I was leaving for my classes, after the classes I would come back at a certain time to find a solution, [but when I come back] I find all my stuff outside of my container."

The person had to move to another container eventually.

"We have a private life to protect, and this is an attack on our private life."

Issues raised in the previous report are still affecting people's daily life. For instance, the residents' right to intimacy and privacy are not upheld as people continue to be forced to share the same container with several other people, often also from other communities, while having only one key to the container. Vulnerable groups such as women and LGBTQI+ people are at greater risks and not adequately protected.

"That place [the camp] is not safe for women. Sometimes they even mix single women and single men [in the same container]."

Women can be victims of sexual and gender-based violence but ***"even if they complain, they will not do anything."***

"I don't feel safe in the camp at any time. When I'm already in the camp it's stress, it's depression, it's stress that starts."

POLICE VIOLENCE AND ARBITRARY DETENTION

The high presence of police and private security guards in the CCAC complements the use of digital surveillance in making the facility an unsafe, restrictive, and abusive environment.

David*, another asylum seeker residing in the facility, has been victim of abuse and arbitrary detention by the police.

"I was sleeping, [it was] 4 to 5 in the morning, and then the police people knock on [my container] and I wake up. There were more than 15 police officers."

He recounts that it was winter and cold.

"I said: let me take on some long trousers, because [it] is too cold. I got one jacket, They said "no"."

He was handcuffed and ***"there [were] some police officers hitting me by my back"***, saying ***"faster, quickly"***. He and other residents were brought to a section of the camp:

"[We] were just sitting there, up to 9 people and more than 30 police officers. And then I was thinking for the past weeks, for the past months "what did I do wrong?""

A police officer told him: ***"You are illegal here, you [are not] supposed to be in this country, we don't like you"***.

While police officers repeatedly denied him the possibility of wearing warm clothes, he and the other people were brought to the local police station.

David* spent three days in a cell without any charges being pressed against him, only because he had received a rejection to his asylum claim and had not filed an appeal on time. He was then forced to file a subsequent application.

"People come here to seek protection", but then they are met with arbitrary detention and subjected to inhumane conditions. He recounts verbal abuse and violence by police, and appalling living conditions in the police cell, where all the nine people apprehended in the CCAC were also left:

"It's very very bad, even for animals. Sometimes [the] place was very very cold. The windows were open, we asked them to close the windows [but] they said 'no'".

When he and the person sharing the cell with him asked for water to drink, they were told: ***"we need to drink from the tap, the toilet tap"***.

He said that another man who was in the same cell with him had a physical impairment and needed a special toilet. When he asked for an adequate lavatory to the police officers, he was denied it, verbally offended, and hit by a police officer.



DE FACTO DETENTION

While this may be an isolated case, the implementation of strict measures regulating the residents' freedom of movement creates a state of *de facto* detention. Since mid-November 2021, camp residents without a valid ID card are prohibited to leave the camp. This de facto detention applies to new arrivals until their full registration and to asylum seekers whose claim has been rejected. In theory, permissions can be delivered to access medical and legal services outside the camp, but in practice they are not always granted. Not only did a court sentence rule that the above-mentioned movement restrictions are unlawful, but legal organisations also highlight that, in many cases, restrictions for newly-registered residents exceed the time limit of 25 days of detention allowed by law.

In the past months, we contacted the EU Commission and the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum requesting clarity on the legal basis on which the restrictions were enacted. Beate Gminder, Deputy Director-General of the "Task Force Migration Management" of the European Commission stated that *"the Commission is closely monitoring the situation on the ground and will continue to address the matter with the competent Greek authorities."* Yet, at the end of April, camp authorities started to prevent people from accessing these services by refusing to issue the permissions. As both European and Greek authorities disregard their accountability for the situation in the facility, this random implementation of the law is illegal detention and a violation of people's freedom of movement.

IV. CONCLUSION

Despite the harsh reality in the Samos CCAC, people continue to hope and dream of a better future.

"[My] dream, in my country, is to achieve being a professional football player. I didn't achieve it but I'm still hoping, if I have my freedom, I will achieve it in my life",

says Koffi*.

Prince* told us:

"I have many dreams, I need to always have dreams. While coming to Europe, I had a dream in my head – if I obtain my papers I will make a master or a PhD in finance."

This report provides mounting evidence that life behind fences and barbed wire whilst having no access to adequate essential services has a heavy toll on people's physical and mental wellbeing. ***"People [are] sick, mentally."***

The aim of this project is to highlight the inhumane reality in the Samos CCAC and highlight that closed and securitized facilities are and will never be a safe, humane, and dignified reception solution for people in need of protection.



On the one hand, the facility and its increasing restrictions represent an obstacle for its residents to lead a full life. In Prince's* words,

"It's really hard, you have to be very brave to sustain this situation, because the majority of people are traumatised and leave."

On the other hand, it is also impacting those few asylum seekers and refugees who live in the town of Vathy, such as Koffi*. He says that living in the city instead of the closed facility ***"has its positives and negatives. It is very positive because I am living in a house, have access to everything. I can go out, I can go and sleep anytime I like. The negative is that I'm alone, always."***

While we previously called on all European leaders to stop looking at the "Greek model" of closed and controlled centres as safe and humane reception solutions, the UK has recently opened its first centre based on the model of those implemented in Greece. But the increased use of detention centres and restrictions on asylum seekers' fundamental rights and freedoms are in stark contrast to Europe's humane, welcoming and solidarity-based response towards people fleeing Ukraine. In the words of an asylum seeker living on Samos, Greece and Europe should

"welcome refugees from Africa, from the Middle East, the same way they welcomed the Ukraine refugees, because nobody is different: we are one."

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Images:

All pictures from a photo project by Luzie Drawe

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Europe Must Act (EMA) is a growing grassroots movement, bringing together activists and NGOs to campaign for the humane, dignified and legal reception of refugees in Europe. EMA was established in March 2020 by a group of volunteers on the Greek Aegean islands in response to the ever-worsening situation of the hotspot camps.



<https://www.europemustact.org/about-us>



<https://www.facebook.com/europemustact>



<https://www.instagram.com/europemustactnow/>



<https://twitter.com/EuropeMustAct>

The **Samos Advocacy Collective** (SAC) is a collaborative project of individuals, NGOs and human rights groups operating on Samos. The collective advocates for fair and dignified migration policies, especially focusing on reception conditions and the current situation on the island for displaced communities.



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