Easter and beyond – The refugee crisis in Greece, April 2017

What follows is based on a series of field visits, monitoring and meetings with our staff and representatives of other organisations at camps where we work, as well as some present in regions, but not camps, where we are present.

There are moments where perhaps what I write will seem like criticism of us as an organisation. This is not my intention. I am proud of the work we have done here so far –often under trying circumstances – and I know from direct first-hand accounts from men, women and children in refugee camps and other locations in Greece that what we are doing is both recognised and appreciated by the people we are here to assist.

On the other hand, we should – and should welcome the opportunity to – review what we have done and are doing, and understand better opportunities for improvements, where they exist. And that is really the point – this report is designed to highlight opportunities. I hope and believe we are capable of taking them, and doing an even better job for those we work for: the people who need our help.

As always I owe a debt of gratitude to the field teams, including their coordinators, translators and others, for their insights and information about their camps.

Introduction

There is something to be said for 'making the best of things'.

But equally, there are also moments to step back, take stock of events, and critically assess where we are and what we are doing. This, is one of the latter moments.

As an organisation, we at MdM can be encouraged by our achievements to date. Despite some extremely trying circumstances, we have achieved most of the targets we set on arrival in Greece, and from first-hand experience, I can confirm that as a rule (*there are occasionally small exceptions and we must not forget them*) the communities we work with and for trust and appreciate us.

However, we are a part of a response that has allowed some unacceptable failures, some of which have literally cost lives, and many others of which have harmed the physical and mental health of men, women and children caught up in this crisis all over Greece.

This is an emergency response, but it is playing out in a developed state, with a fixed infrastructure and which is a full member of the wealthiest political bloc ever to have existed.

Despite this, all those of us who work in or regularly visit field locations here have, in the last year, witnessed food shortages, disease, mental health deterioration, people left in freezing cold conditions – including blizzards, floods and snowdrifts – without proper shelter, heating or any power. We have seen adults removed of any control over their own lives, simply waiting for months on end while the world continues around them and they cannot partake in it, and children – gifted artists, talented mathematicians, potential sports stars with nowhere to train, linguists who can speak five languages but can read and write none - unable even to attend school and start to fulfil their potential.

It can be tempting to ask what we should expect: to compare the situation in Greece to that in the Sahara camps, or those on the borders of Syria. Those of us – and that is most of us – who have worked on emergency responses elsewhere, know that 'things could be worse'.

But that is not really the point.

As already noted, our teams – indeed all of us – have worked extraordinarily hard since April 2016 to create the means to save and improve lives across Greece, and to deliver those 'rescues and improvements'. And we have largely achieved that.

But we cannot pretend that everything is OK. It is far from it.

Over the course of the next few 'chapters' I will attempt to touch on many of the experiences of our teams and refugees in the camps where we live – and of course the problems and reasons for them that they indicate.

Very often, those problems relate closely to one major shortfall: management. The management of the entire response by UNHCR and the Greek government, and the failure by both to engage the right organisations and give organisations of our size and smaller clear guidance on our roles, and the purpose of the programme.

This failure is impacting on our ability to perform. It is impacting on our staff and their morale and stress levels (*as they see initiatives fail, refugees neglected, and organisations who should all be focussed on working with and for refugees, instead either competing for the right to do so, or getting in one another's way while they try to work*), and most importantly of all it is impacting negatively on the men, women and children caught in this crisis, who need and deserve our assistance, and who are our sole reason for being here.

I will also make a suggestion, which I hope will be considered in the spirit in which it was intended. I do not believe it is our responsibility, or even within our capacity, to 'run' this response. But we can be more proactive in organising and negotiating on matters which directly affect the physical and mental health of the people we serve.

As noted above, I believe this is an opportunity for us. We have a great deal to be proud of, but everything is not OK. And we can help to make it so.

1) Experience and Lessons: Winter, and what it indicates

The previous document of this detail I produced was on 21st November last year, a moment at which we were about to enter the coldest Winter in Greece for 15 years.

The document focussed on a number of issues – the poor relations between the UN, the Greek government, and ECHO; the failure to prepare properly; the awful conditions in the camps and how they impact upon mental as well as physical health.

Five months on, what has changed?

a) Winter

It seems a little odd, as the weather becomes warmer, to go back once again over what happened here in December, January and to a lesser extent February, but we need to be aware that we, as well as others, have lessons to learn from the winter just gone.

Because in two months in December to January 2016-17, in a developed EU member state, with a celebrated (*by its government*) infrastructure and with a much-publicised (*by critics*) hundreds of millions of Euros budget (*I have written at length about why the figures in the Refugees Deeply document released last month are not reliable for estimating how much has actually been spent, but we cannot escape the fact that even if more than €500m has not been accessed by the Greek government, our first response must be to ask 'why not?' and our second to see that this still leaves around €300m that we have to accept **has** been accessed*), five people died of hypothermia, suicide, or inhalation of poisonous substances they were using to try to heat themselves.

On 24 January alone, four people attempted suicide at **Samos**, while during the month as a whole, there were 12 suicide attempts and a further six incidences of deliberate self-harm.

Across the Greek islands, scores of incidents took place, indicating that mental as well as physical health was severely impacted by the winter and the ongoing feelings of both imprisonment and maltreatment because conditions are so bad there.

Hunger strikes were undertaken by refugee communities in January and February, and the Greek Migration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas was repeatedly the subject of blockades by refugees attempting to bar his access to camps, and against his policies and statements to the media.

We should not underestimate the feelings of anger, frustration, and the depression which is so often the 'flip-side' of those two emotions, caused and reinforced by the island detention centres.

Nor were these frustrations, or this suffering, confined to the islands alone. At **Petra Olympou** camp, the Yazidi community spent four days in several feet of snow, I met refugees (one featured later in this piece) who were moved from **Vagiochori** camp only after spending days 'trying to sleep while surrounded by ice' and one of the hypothermia deaths was of a toddler at **Ritsona** camp.

At camps where we do and did work, people were forced to suffer sub-zero temperatures, often without heating equipment or reliable access to electricity to power it. And already, at **Oreokastro**, a family of three had nearly died while trying to heat their tent with cooking equipment.

On more than one camp visit in December and January, I was met by the sight of men, women and children huddled around fires outside in the snow and freezing wind, because this was the only place they could light them. In warehouse camps (*notably **Redestos** and **Oreokastro***), people were actively risking their health by burning plastics simply because they had run out of other ways to stay warm.

b) Failure to prepare


In the last overview piece I wrote, I explained how at meetings across the North of Greece, persistent requests regarding Winter and preparations for it had been made to the Ministry of Migration, whose representatives had seemingly dismissed the concerns of actors including UNHCR.

Preparation and proactive measures have been a constant failing throughout this response, as illustrated by the fact that at several camps, shades designed to reduce the impact of the morning sun on people attempting (and failing) to sleep in Summer, were installed only in mid-September.

But one thing I heard at several meetings – and in reports of several others from people who had attended – was Ministry representatives saying: 'Winter is not a problem here in Greece'. This was said, and reported as being said, so often that it seemed as if it were an official line from the Ministry itself, perhaps suggested to each representative as a response if the matter was raised.

Whether or not that is the case, it was certainly a concerning statement to most of us at the meetings, and those concerns were sadly proven correct.

c) Failure to cooperate

Also in the last report, we talked about the dysfunctionality of the relationship between the Greek government, ECHO and UNHCR.

We will revisit ECHO later in this summary, but at present – and in general when we focus on the response as it is taking place within Greece – it is more useful to focus on the ways in which UNHCR and the Greek government work, and fail to work, with one another.

The last report noted the reasons for the character of the relationship between the two – from the government's perspective, largely connected to a desire to 'prove' to the EU that it can be trusted in the face of widespread criticism over its financial affairs, and the hard and in some ways certainly unfair financial 'solution' forced on it by the Troika.

I would also mention here that the IMF and EU's criticisms and the changes it is forcing on Greece also ignore that for all its problems (*and it certainly did and does have problems*), the Greek economy simply ran to a different model than much of the rest of the bloc, being geared towards its people and their welfare in ways many other economies simply are not, and that the single greatest concern was not the economy itself, but Greece's failure to collect the taxes it set.

The simplest solution would be to collect those taxes, but instead the EU and IMF have – certainly in the eyes of the Greek government – chosen to use the crisis to force on Greece a new model. This is a humiliating and frustrating situation for any government to be in, certainly one elected with left-wing promises of centrally-controlled programmes of investment, protection and redistribution.

Under these circumstances, a widely-criticised and in effect no longer 'economically-independent' government can be understood for wishing to 'prove itself' to those dictating terms to it. It can be forgiven for believing the refugee crisis might present such an opportunity. Certainly, nothing else has so far.

The Greek government has also been extremely critical of the United Nations, accusing it of failing to consider and accept the differences between this crisis and others elsewhere in the world.

As with all aid organisations, the UN – specifically in this case UNHCR – does rely on 'what has worked'.

This is largely because it is correctly accepted that organisations need codes of 'best practice' and of course because they (*equally correctly*) have to answer to their donors: if something new 'works' few people will complain, but if it does not, and you are found to have been 'taking a chance' on a new idea or practice, you lose the trust and future backing of those who provide the money you need to deliver aid to save and improve the lives of men, women and children in need.

But this can of course lead to inflexibility, and an unwillingness to regard new emergencies as holding their own unique or unusual factors.

Here in Greece, there is no doubt that UNHCR and ECHO could have been – and still should be – more open to advice from and initiatives developed by the Greek government.

However, we have to note that although every response has its own unique elements, and flexibility at a level beyond that displayed by UNHCR is important to meet and deal with those, the Greek emergency is not so unique that the majority of lessons learned by UNHCR over the last six-seven decades should be disregarded.

It may be convenient and understandable for the Greek government to bridle against what it sees as unwelcome and unnecessary 'foreign interference' and cite this crisis' 'uniqueness' as proof, but thousands of people in refugee camps in Greece need the same basic things as thousands of refugees in camps anywhere else – food, water, hygiene materials, decent living conditions. And this includes being warm in the Winter and cool in the Summer.

'Winter is cold' is not an unusual statement of truth – even considering that this Greek winter was the worst for 15 years. In Ioannina and Thessaloniki, for example, sub-zero temperatures are not unusual in the Winter months.

And it is a sad probability that the denial by the Greek government of the possibility of cold weather – and the associated sluggishness in preparing and responding to it – is not a signal of the UN's failure to adapt to Greece, but of the Ministry of Migration's effective refusal to accept any suggestion from the UN, and perhaps (though not definitely) also a reflection of a desire to be seen to 'know more' than the international body.

In any case, the absolute breakdown in relations between the Ministry and UNHCR certainly contributed to the debacle of the winter, and to the deaths and hardships forced upon innocent men, women and children in a developed state in the 21st century. None of us should fool ourselves into thinking that this is acceptable.

d) Response – from all sides

In some places – though very few – the response was just in time. At **Lagadikia**, for example, 40km or so from Thessaloniki, isoboxes were in place before the worst of the snow hit.

But this was only true in a tiny minority of cases, and even at **Lagadikia**, while the issue of shelter was effectively solved, the issue of provision of vital items was not. Despite Giatroi Tou Kosmou questions, little attention was paid to the issue of the water supply system at the camp, so that when temperatures fell (reaching -13° at one point), the water pipes simply froze. Refugees at the camp were without running water for 15 days.

Now, this may have happened anyway – perhaps under these circumstances, the water supply pipes simply could not have been prevented from freezing.

And our team responded well, by providing bottled water daily, and so 'plugging a gap' on this occasion.

But this was not only a frustrating example of failure of cooperation between actors at the camp, and failure of 'management' (*UNHCR and the Ministry of Migration*) to listen to warnings and take either preventative measures or at least prepare a response to the inevitable (*if that is what it was*).

It was also damaging to the people living at the camp – a reminder that even here, where suitable shelter had been provided in contrast to so many other people in a similar situation to them elsewhere in Greece, their continued welfare was being overlooked and they were not important enough to be assisted fully.

This was not, of course, any agency's opinion or intention. But the men, women and children at the refugee camps are already feeling isolated and vulnerable, and are watching people elsewhere in the

state suffering. Under those circumstances, the impact of believing that 'no-one has thought' about supplying even water, was dispiriting, worrying, and another reminder of their own helplessness and lack of agency to help themselves.

Elsewhere, the response was even less efficient.

At **Redestos** and **Oreokastro**, warehouse camps in Thessaloniki of the exact type that the Greek government had promised would be closed by September, and that the Greek national health advisory body KEELPNO specifically stated were in and of themselves harmful to human health, people slept in tents on concrete floors while snow fell and high-speed, low temperature winds whipped outside.

Oreokastro was closed only on 7 February, **Redestos** not until, 12 April, though it should be noted that the vast majority of its residents were moved by 14 January. Even then, however, new arrivals continued to be brought to the camp. The major – effectively the sole – concession made there to the cold weather was raising tents inside the buildings onto wooden platforms.

At **Diavata**, once referred to by the Greek Ministry for Migration as a 'five-star' camp, people were moved from tents to plastic shelters, which were only slightly better at retaining heat and keeping out the cold, until measures were taken in December to introduce isoboxes to the site. This measure was never completed, meaning that around half the camp's population spent the Winter in inappropriate conditions.

The UN – having failed to convince the Greek government that proper Winter preparations were necessary – fell back on its second option; one which ironically used the 'unique' situation in the location of the crisis. They moved large numbers of refugees in exposed camps to hotels, though not before many had spent several nights in sub-zero temperatures.

This is perhaps the major moment at which MdM should review seriously its response.

First, because this appeared to take us entirely by surprise. This is concerning because, in September 2016, I put together a piece which detailed how, in response to a series of concerted protests inspired by flooding and high winds (our own clinic tent blew away in one incident), UNHCR planned to move every resident of **Katsikas** camp, just outside of Ioannina in Western Greece, to hotels as soon as places became available.

By the end of the same month, roughly 25 per cent of the camp had been moved, while a further 50 per cent had been moved to 'improved tents', thicker canvas-and plastic-sheeted and raised from ground level (*the same 'new tents' on the same wooden platforms later used in **Redestos***) complete with sun shelters (*of the kind used in **Lagadikia**, which also arrived too late to be useful there*)*.

**It is worth noting here that the tents, wooden platforms and sun screens are indicative of a fundamental truth in this emergency response – if a 'new idea' is trialled in one place, it is extremely likely to be rolled-out in other places in Greece soon after. Our advantage is that we are working in several camps in several different parts of Greece and as such, provided we properly communicate, we should be able to 'predict' responses with reasonable accuracy. That we are not doing so yet is an indication of a failing, but one which can be easily remedied*.



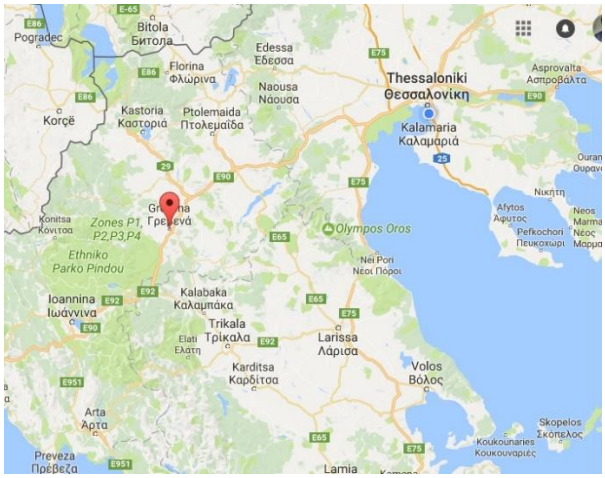
Images show (clockwise from left) Katsikas tents, boards and shelter, September 2016; Redestos tents and boards, March 2017; Lagadikia shelter, November 2016.

By the end of October, however, almost everyone had been moved to hotels, not least because in Ioannina, the winds had proven too high for the sun-screens – supported by concrete posts – to withstand. In one incident, a post was dragged by the wind and crushed a child's buggy; thankfully flipping the baby – Joad – out of it, rather than crushing him, too, beneath it.

Although we as an agency have a right to expect that UNHCR and the Greek government, as the self-proclaimed, de facto and legal leaders of this response, would have moved in a swift and organised fashion to deliver men, women and children decent shelter from the Winter weather, we were also given warning – at a camp where we worked – about how UNHCR might respond. Unfortunately, we were instead taken by surprise.

Organisationally, ensuring teams visited hotels to provide services where they were needed was always likely to be a challenge – not least because some people had been moved to Grevena, 110km

from Ioannina and 165km from Thessaloniki, where our two nearest teams were based (*in fact, Grevena is 138km from Larissa, but the road between the two is far slower than that linking Grevena with Thessaloniki and Ioannina*).



But matters were thrown into further confusion because, while men, women and children were being moved to, and then living at the hotels (*some liked the feeling of living once more in a building, others of having a lockable door and their own toilets and bathrooms, others again enjoyed being able to travel easily in their local area and meet people, while some concluded that they preferred the camps because it was easier to access services there: the hotels were not perfect, and opinions were mixed, but in general, the refugees preferred them to the camps, and certainly to being in sub-zero temperatures*) a discussion began about whether we should continue to provide them with services *at all* or instead encourage them to enter the local health service.

There were good arguments on both sides, and although I hold an opinion and it is known to most who will read this document (*I think integration to local services is vital, but it can't be done immediately, and had we withdrawn services it would have resulted in disaster. We did not do so*) this is less important now than the fact that we did not know for certain what our position was *even while events were happening around us*.

Once again, this returns us to the basic fact that at present we and the other organisations of our size are operating almost in a vacuum – because there are two 'managers' of this response, UNHCR and the Greek government, and for different reasons neither is effectively 'managing' or even planning the response's direction, we are repeatedly being thrown into situations in which we are not even sure of what the best response would be.

We have to be far clearer about our aims, far clearer about how we plan to deliver them, far better at forward-planning and I suggest also at working with the organisations of our size and below – in the instances where we are not being managed from above, we owe it to ourselves, our colleagues, and vitally to the men, women and children trapped in this crisis, to agree structure and strategy for ourselves, and with the organisations we share space with at the camps.

In any case, by 5 January, the process was advanced enough for Yiannis Mouzalas to announce to the media that 'Refugees are no longer living in the cold'.

This was surprising to those of us working at the camps in Greece, as almost every camp which had been open and had people living in it one month before, was still open, and still had people living in it.

Within two days, heavy snowfalls showed that his statement was far from the truth. The shots and video from Lesvos of camps collapsing under the weight of heavy snowfalls have become some of the most famous images from this response so far, and the islands were not alone.

As noted above, people in the warehouse camps were forced to burn blankets and even plastic when wood ran out. At **Lagadikia**, they were without running water because pipes froze, and across

the state refugees – and aid workers – wondered how this situation could possibly have arisen in a developed EU member-state in the 21st Century.

Some refugees at the camps had already feared that their discomfort was deliberately imposed, to prevent others from attempting to reach Europe. Their Winter experience did not convince them otherwise.

One man at **Redestos**, who asked not to be named, said: 'Even in Syria, we know that Winter is cold. We have children here, and people who are unwell. How can Europe not prepare for its own Winters? Why are we living like this?'

Of course, once again, when a reaction was needed, one arrived. Almost everyone left **Redestos** within two weeks, while **Oreokastro** was closed (*and has not, as yet, reopened, though it remains on the Greek Ministry of Migration list of 'usable camps'*) within days.

Ships were dispatched to the islands to provide alternative accommodation for refugees, while others were moved temporarily to hotels, such as the Hope Hotel (*a community project*) on Lesvos. But as noted above, the deaths, and their impact on mental health for refugees in the island detention centres and beyond, had not been prevented.

In the weeks that followed, hunger strikes were launched at Chios, Lesvos and Samos, as well as on the mainland at the **Elliniko** camps, in protest at the stark Winter experience, and the longer-term and ongoing depredations of life at the camps.

Yiannis Mouzalas, on a series of visits, was blocked entry by refugees, angered at what they had experienced, and at **Elliniko** told the media that there was no hunger strike.

He also said – correctly – that **Elliniko** must be closed (*though two months later all three unofficial camps remain open*), but as ever, it was his 'dismissive', rather than his 'constructive' comment which was most clearly remembered by the men, women and children at the camps.

e) The lessons and legacy of Winter

Of course, the ECHO project of MdM does not work on the islands, but MdM Greece does, and – thanks to the logo and colours it uses, and activities it undertakes – the refugees do not differentiate between our project and the activities of MdM Greece.

Neither should they – we are all one organisation, and we should be working far more closely together (*for example, we should not be allowing 'political' concerns to prevent our teams from regularly and openly sharing information and assisting one another*).

But this does mean that we on the mainland are associated with every failure and hardship the refugee community experiences. This is not the 'fault' of Giatroi Tou Kosmou – its field teams, like every single one of our teams, everywhere in the world – are working extraordinarily hard under extremely difficult conditions, and are saving and making a real difference to the quality of, refugees' lives.

They deserve enormous credit for their efforts and should receive it. But as people are moved from the islands, their experiences there certainly colour their views of the agencies they see here, as we shall see below.

Increasingly, what has happened and is happening on the islands – and in relation to them – is likely to be the major factor in our engagement and interaction with people in camps and other locations across Greece.

The islands are not peripheral any longer, if they ever truly were: they are central to the response at every level, from the international and political, to the local and voluntary.

Nor, as refugee populations are increasingly being moved between different locations, can we afford even to regard only the camps we work at as our sole mainland focus.

Not only is the refugee community well aware, through internet access on smart phones and other devices, of what is happening to people in other camps in the Balkans and here in Greece, and fearing that similar things might happen to them, while acutely aware that they can do little or nothing to prevent it, but in an increasingly-large number of cases, the refugees who experienced life at those camps are now people living in camps where we work. Their experiences are vital to our work on physical and mental health, our preventative efforts as well as 'curative' measures.

Equally, the experience of Winter can, and I believe must, teach us some lessons about how the response is being managed, and what it means for us, and for the people we aim to help.

As we shall see, this is especially true – and vital – at the level of MdM and other medium-to-large NGOs.

2) Movement and the Mainland

‘Do you think they will let us go in?’

‘It seems not.’

On 3 March 2017, a warm Spring morning, the MdM team from Larissa were met at **Koutsochero** by a group of refugees denying all actors access to the camp.

The protest was staged by a very small minority of the people living there – perhaps 35-40 of the 1,020 population – but of course any protest constitutes a security risk to MdM staff, and in any case it would be neither sensible nor acceptable to ignore the wishes of the people at the camp and attempt to force services on them.

On previous occasions, when such protests have taken place at – for example – **Kavala** (*the issues were enormous rats, and the intense cold. The latter had led to the refuges asking to be allowed to sign contracts promising that they chose to risk their own lives by heating their tents with cooking equipment, thus ‘absolving’ us and other organisations of responsibility: of course, the request was refused*), the refugees had invited us to enter, because medical treatment is important, and they trusted the team, but told us no other actor would be allowed in. We refused the offer.

At **Koutsochero**, no such offer was made. The crowd waved us away, and the team remained outside.

Even here, things were not as clear-cut as they first appeared, however.

A few refugees, after discussion with the group at the gate, are waved through to see the medical team, and after discussion amongst themselves, the team members agree – and tell those people who come to see them – that under the circumstances they will be able to see only urgent cases, and that those who arrive with patients should relay this message to others inside the camp.

The first two people seen, at the mobile clinic parked outside the camp, are a diabetic man who has run out of insulin, and a couple with a month-old child who is running a fever. In both cases, emergency intervention was needed, and this was recognised both by the refugees and of course by our team, which responded calmly and openly to the situation and those caught up in it.

And the protestors' unity is split a little later, when a catering truck arrives to deliver food for the camp. The five loudest and (seemingly) angriest of the group try to prevent it, too, from entering, but the others force a path to be made so it can pass.

Whether they have their own hunger in mind, that of the rest of the population, or concern about the effect on perception of their actions among their fellow residents which could result if they prevent them eating is unclear. Regardless, and despite the disagreement of a few of the protestors, the food is allowed to pass the small blockade.

These incidents – allowing people who need treatment to receive it, and allowing food to be distributed – show that the protest was not simply an act of rage from an unthinking group.

In fact, there is significant reason to believe it was both a signal of intense frustration at the group's current situation, and a reflection of its experiences over the previous 12 months.

The population of **Koutsochero** increased by 600 in late January this year, when the Greek government and UNHCR moved vulnerable cases from island camps to the mainland. At this camp, that means that there are roughly one third more refugees who had lived in island detention centres for ten months than people who were at **Koutsochero** prior to their arrival.

This has changed the atmosphere at the camp, as explained by Asimenia Goktsi, MdM's Larissa team psychologist: 'The situation is different, because the people already here had a routine they were used to, and the change has unsettled their lives. They are also concerned about the new arrivals, worrying that they are more violent or angry and may make things worse for them. The new arrivals have their own concerns, which have also set new challenges here.'

But among the new arrivals, too, there are significant concerns and frustrations.

After almost a year in detention centres – and we should remember that all those who have so far been moved from the islands (*see below*) are those considered the 'most vulnerable' people; those who require and have a right to expect a decent standard of care, and their immediate families and/or guardians, but have instead spent nine months effectively imprisoned, and in atrocious conditions – the men, women and children who arrived at **Koutsochero** had been led to believe they were moving to a better place.

Indeed, many have informed us that they were told they would be taken to a city location – perhaps a hotel, but at the very least a camp close to shops and a community.

In fact, **Koutsochero** is a collection of isoboxes and some tents in a semi-desolate mountainside location (*the comparisons the Larissa team make to the surface of the Moon are unfair, but not entirely wide of the mark*), uncomfortably hot even in early Spring and more than 15km from Larissa (*on a major road, with no public transport to the city*).

Koutsochero, 3 March 2017

At the camp itself, in part because UNHCR is a sporadic visitor at best, and Red Cross had previously had overall control, we and Catholic Support were for a long time the only two actors in regular attendance.

And as we have seen all over Greece, refugees often use our services and our presence not only to discuss medical and mental health issues, but also as an effective psychological 'crutch' – people trust their doctor, and in refugee camps we are often seen as the first step in a line of communication.

This is even more true for an already fragile (*after years of warfare, in many cases poor health and for the newcomers to **Koutsochero** ten or more months of effective imprisonment followed by intense disappointment and confusion at their new surroundings*) population.

On the other side of the country, our Ioannina team is also working at a camp where vulnerable residents of island camps – in this case, largely Afghans who had been at **Kara Tepe** – have recently arrived and changed the situation: **Filippiada**.

The team's social worker, Charikleia Tsavou, explained the situation there: 'The population here is now 75 per cent Afghan, 25 per cent Syrian. The numbers changed at the end of January, when refugees were moved from the islands. They were those considered to be the most vulnerable cases – unaccompanied minors; families who have been split; mothers with young children; people with chronic health needs.

'It's changed our job and our approach. The needs have changed, too. It used to be that people just needed blankets, basic hygiene equipment, but now the needs are quite complex. And so, we have to provide.

‘Some of the refugees here have been beaten at their previous camps, or earlier in their journey, or been tortured by police or others and have had no chance to reflect and talk about it. Many of them have had really hard experiences so we have to work with them.’

Unlike at **Koutsochero**, there have been no protests, at least in part because there are a range of actors at **Filippiada**, including Refugees Support, which operates an innovative and popular points-based ‘general store’ (*‘selling’ clothes, food and other items – Refugees Support is also scheduled to operate at **Katsikas**, when it opens*) and activities in the camp include social activities (*which we* run) and a school for youngsters.

Above (l) vegetables ‘on sale’ at the Refugees Support shop, Filippiada camp, Epirus. Other items include clothes, shoes and stationery; (r) the Etahad social group, set up by our team at the same camp, on a visit to Ioannina.

And **Filippiada** is both less desolate, and less remote, than **Koutsochero**.

But the issues faced by the refugees are very similar – poor experiences over the last nine to ten months, and a period in which they are expected to acclimatise and integrate extremely quickly – and are only likely to be met either by a large number of actors or with a detailed and focussed programme run by one or two groups.

Unfortunately, as noted above, we are one of only two regular visitors and operators at **Koutsochero**, and our own activity – or at least its frequency – has unfortunately contributed a little to the new residents’ sense of isolation and abandonment.

Though we had little choice (*as we had another two camps in the region to cover*), and the refugees’ wishes for 24 hour medical services could not be delivered and are unnecessary, our presence once or twice per week in the first days following their arrival unfortunately served to increase their fears and unhappiness.

These feelings were intensified only a short time later when our team was denied access to the camp by representatives of the Greek military, who had apparently not received ‘notification’ that we would be present and operating there.

This is another indication that this response is being at best extremely-haphazardly managed (*it is ludicrous that an agency registered to work at the camp should be required to follow-up and ensure that ‘notifications’ have been sent to camp management staff or risk being unable to even enter a camp and serve the people there*), but while we must note this problem and act accordingly, the men, women and children at the camp would simply have seen that MdM had – perhaps in their minds ‘once again’ – failed to meet their needs. This is, therefore, just another negative experience to be processed and meditated on by an already fragile and isolated community.

We must also note – and take the lesson forward as the crisis develops – that protests such as that at **Koutsochero** are not themselves solely designed to show anger or frustration.

The 'lessons' learned by those people who spent months trapped the island detention centres are that 'community engagement' – discussion between organisations and refugees about conditions, needs and aspirations – is simply not on the table. Protests, and preventing organisations to access camps, are the only thing they have seen succeed in opening dialogue and starting to make changes.

And this protest reflected exactly that position.

When representatives of our team and other actors went to attempt to gain access to the camp, the protestors responded with a list of complaints, (*including:*
> a sense of isolation,

> a woman who the refugees felt had lost a baby due to lack of medical coverage when she needed it including that the ambulance took more than half an hour to arrive,

> fears that we were at the camp too seldom, especially considering that we had a limit of 28 consultations per day for a camp of well over 1,000 people some of whom have been moved from the islands precisely because of their chronic healthcare needs,

> fears that too little medication is distributed, combined with concerns that the 'cash card' system run by Catholic Support was unreliable, leaving them both having to buy medicine and without the money to do so) and detailed agendas for change including a list of medical practitioners they felt were needed and times – some of them unrealistic – when they should be available.

For all its faults, the **Koutsochero** protest was not a wild overspill of incoherent anger, but a calculated attempt to open dialogue by a group of people frustrated by their experiences since arriving in Greece, and increasingly desperate after what they see as a series of broken promises.

We need to be aware that as more people move from the islands, this is likely to be their default first response to problems, because it is the only thing they have seen to work so far.

To avoid it, we need to be far clearer about who our partner agencies are, what they provide, and where gaps exist. Our 'projects' budget can be used to help plug some of those gaps.

We must also be clear that new refugees entering mainland camps may not always be automatically welcomed by the existing populations, that we can both bring the new and existing communities together, and help new arrivals understand that their concerns can be raised and will be listened to, without the need for protests which disrupt the life of the community, and prevent us and other organisations from offering the assistance people need.

3) Thessaloniki, Kavala and Drama – gaps, failures and messes

a) Redestos, March 2017

Redestos refugee camp had 52 residents on 30 March.

The majority of these were people who had been transferred from hotels (*see below*), the majority of them Pakistanis, but with some Syrians and Iraqis as well.

In one case, Aras Majid, a single man from Iraq who has been at **Redestos** since it first opened, actually left a hotel in Athens to return.

He explained: 'Athens was not good. It was hard to live there. There was food, but apart from that it felt like we had been forgotten by everyone. Here, I know what it is like, and I also know people, and the city (*Thessaloniki*). I just thought it would be better to be here, where I know my surroundings, than to be there, where I know nothing, and be forgotten.'

At the time, it had seemed like this was simply another part of the ongoing (and vital) debate on service provision and assistance for refugees who leave camps (*which I have so far seen no evidence that any organisation, anywhere in Europe, has a full and coherent position on. We are edging towards it, but we should be aware that there will be more, not less, upheaval in the coming months*), but in the light of what followed it seems also to be an indicator of a wider issue and problem: the effect on refugees of semi-constant movement.

The situation at the camp was itself indicative of the lack of management – and resulting disorganisation and basic failure of the refugee population – across the response at present.

We were still there, but apart from us, almost every other actor who had been at the camp when it was full (*at which point it must be noted, there was far too much overlap and significant gaps,*

including the failure of response when an infestation of bedbugs plagued the population last Autumn, and a failure to clear standing water left by flash floods in the same period) was not operating. Their offices still existed, and were furnished, but the organisations including Caritas, sent no staff to work at the camp (*Save the Children sent staff one day per week, but they did not carry out any activities. IOM also attended occasionally, but once again, did not provide services directly*).

As a result, alongside MdM and the police and air force who oversaw security, the only 'organisation' at the camp was the Swiss group Firdaus/Action for Refugees: to be more exact, it was one man, Maurizio, who was the group's sole permanent volunteer in Thessaloniki.

The other organisations – including UNHCR, nominally the camp's manager – had no staff or presence at the camp. It was our staff - alongside Maurizio and some volunteers he had signed up – who dismantled the camp's tents and helped prepare the few new ones (*the same material, size and shape, and on the same wooden bases as those at* ***Katsikas*** *the previous Autumn*) needed for the refugees.

The entirely predictable result was that the refugees who were at **Redestos**, though few in number, received a far worse service than those who had been there when the camp was close to full, with 1,200 residents – a point at which the camp was one of the worst I had ever visited.

With apologies to the health and management team, to whom I sent a report on this issue only a few weeks ago, the major problems were that because of decisions taken by large NGO's – seemingly for financial reasons – and the lack of clear management or guidance from either UNHCR or the Greek government which says it can manage the response and UNHCR should not, in effect the refugees at **Redestos** received almost no services at all.

Apart from our medical services, and a daily food delivery (*on which, more below*), every item and service provided at the camp came through Maurizio.

As my report noted, this meant that at the same time as we were running hygiene promotion sessions, no-one was providing soap, or toilet paper. At the same time as we were assisting with access to medicines and health-promotion items, diabetics were not receiving the food they needed. Maurizio's efforts went some of the way to meeting needs, but relied entirely on donations from the public, which is a far from reliable income source.

Noting that we had budget available, our management agreed to step in and provide essentials, but this can serve as a warning and an opportunity for us – though we and the refugees we serve have every right to expect that those who have put themselves in management positions will actually manage the crisis, ensuring no gaps are left and as little overlap as possible exists, our experience proves that this is not in fact the case.

Another shortfall in the approach was highlighted at the end of March, when refugees at the camp began to report their tents were infested with bedbugs (*we must also be aware that snakes may be a severe problem at* ***Koutsochero*** *as Spring turns to Summer. At* ***Cherso****, the mountainside camp from which refugees were moved to the warehouse at* ***Kavala*** *last August, the camp was infested in May and June. Conditions are not dissimilar at* ***Koutsochero***). It seems likely that this new infestation came about as the weather improved, and eggs left by the previous infestation were able to hatch.

It was an unsettling indication that despite organisations' best efforts and intentions, the increasingly reactive, seemingly under-planned and at times arbitrary nature of the response here is causing 'sins of omission' – in a settled response, the agencies who oversaw the extermination of the

bedbugs would have been prepared for their return in Spring. Because everyone left, and left no information, 52 refugees suffered yet another indication (*to them*) of the 'indifference of the West'.

I do not suggest that it is our responsibility to control and advise at camps, but on matters like this, where health is so directly and obviously affected, I would suggest that those of us (including me) who can advise, add information and suggest action, should do so. Our teams work extraordinarily hard, in often difficult situations. They deserve both the assistance we can offer, and not to have their jobs made harder by avoidable infestations and outbreaks of disease.

In the event, at **Redestos**, before our plan was put into operation, the camp closed.

b) Redestos' closure, 11 April.

On 11 April, at **Redestos** camp, I was asked by seven (*out of a population of 45*) refugees about **Kavala**.

That is, on the morning they were due to leave **Redestos** – for all its faults, their only home in Greece – forever, to go to the refurbished and newly re-opened **Kavala** refugee camp, nobody had told them what to expect. In combination with the lack of services and even food noted above, it is hard to imagine a situation so indicative of the lack of human dignity these vulnerable people were receiving. This was to get worse.

Four separate times during that morning, I was asked by men and women whether they would be living in tents at the new camp. I was also asked where the camp was in relation to the town, how many people would live there, and most often of all, 'why?'

At Café Ali (*a small room at **Redestos** selling coffee, tea and cigarettes 'owned' by Ali al Jabawi, an Iraqi refugee who had in turn bought it from a previous **Redestos** resident Mahmoud*), Asif, a refugee from Pakistan, asked: 'Why do we keep being moved? Why have they shut this camp?

'I work in civil engineering, and I can see they have spent so much money here on this camp, to make it possible for people to survive here.

'It must have been expensive, so why have they wasted so much money just to close a camp?

'I was in **Vagiochori**. There was no light there, no heaters in this camp. I was sleeping in ice every night. I went to a hotel next, **Sun Beach**, and then I was sent here. They said it would be better. And it is.

'But now, I am being moved again. Why?'

On this issue, the refugees had as much information as our team at the camp. Indeed, some asked the same question.

While nobody could seriously describe **Redestos** as an acceptable place to live – and indeed last summer it was perhaps the worst camp at which MdM and Giatroi Tou Kosmou worked – there is no doubt that it had been improved over the previous few months, and that money was spent on the camp.

And no reason at all has yet been given for the camp's closure, leaving our team almost as confused as the refugees forced once more to move.

On the issue of staff, it is worth noting that within the team, feelings of confusion, disappointment and frustration currently sit alongside a recognition that **Redestos** was never really fit for human habitation.

To some extent, this is of course to be expected – the camp's closure means the final days there were characterised by emptiness and silence, where there had once been life and noise (*often too much noise, as detailed in my previous report*), and the psychological impact of this change should not be underestimated.

But aside from that possibly unavoidable effect, the team was also impacted by the fact that no real explanation has yet been given for the camp's closure, that there is literally no indication that where the refugees will be moved is actually any better than **Redestos**, and the fact that because of the haste with which this closure took place, there was also a real sense of 'losing touch' with patients (*in one case a mother and her two-week old baby*), often midway through their treatment.

Though it can be tempting to regard such concerns as in some way inappropriate – after all the people we are supposed to be looking after are the refugees who are fleeing war and terror, and living in atrocious conditions – we should also note that our staff work in often very stressful conditions, that they work hard, most of them have little prior experience in emergency responses and that as medical practitioners they almost by necessity develop close working relationships with their patients.

To have to leave so abruptly, knowing they will likely never know how their 'cases' end, is an additional complication and difficulty for them to overcome.

3i) A note on the closure – reasons and indications

As noted above, the closure of **Redestos** took place astonishingly quickly.

Of course this was in part because the camp's small population – just 45 people by 11 April – facilitated speedy evacuation (*though as we shall see, not without significant complications*).

But there was also no escaping the feeling that this had not been planned at all.

There had been speculation over the future of **Redestos** since February (*when a new wall and fence, designed in part to prevent children from running out into the busy major road on which the storage complex sits, was completed, leading some to conclude its status was to be changed to a detention centre*).

But each inquiry into its future led to us – Kostas Konstantinidis, other organisations' field co-ordinators, the police, the airforce and I – being told that there were no plans to alter the camp's status in any way, far less to close it.

Perhaps it is because UNHCR had not been present at the camp for several weeks, because the camp was effectively unmanaged throughout that period, or because of the virtually non-existent relationship between the UN and the government here in Greece, but we were told on Friday 7 April that **Redestos** would close. By the afternoon of Tuesday 11, it was empty.

Even on Tuesday morning, the immediate future was far from clear. Police officers who had been employed as security at the camp for ten months were unsure of whether they would be moved within days to Athens, or other locations. Maurizio was concerned that not only had no document been sent by the Ministry of Migration to confirm the camp would be closed, there were nine refugees who, because of official geographical restrictions placed on them by the government, would not be allowed to travel to **Kavala**.

Despite repeated inquiries, it was far from clear that those restrictions would be lifted, or whether the camp would stay open to accommodate the nine until they were allowed to leave.

Under such circumstances, it is hard to be certain why the camp closed at all. The common assumption to date has been that there was a financial disagreement between the government and the owner of the former agricultural supplies warehouse, but there are reasons to doubt this.

First, it is hard to imagine that there would be any real advantage financially in turning a decision to evacuate into an actual evacuation within five days – surely a contract must be in place which cannot simply be broken at almost no notice.

Second, **Redestos** remains on the Greek government's list as a 'useable' (*though of course now empty*) camp. Along with **Oreokastro**, it is now counted as part of the 32,514 'surplus' spaces available for refugees on mainland Greece – 22,250 of those in the North. If there were a financial problem so pressing that the entire camp had to be emptied of refugees and staff with immediate effect, it is hard to understand how the Greek government could count **Redestos** as amongst its useable locations.

Another possibility is that the Greek government was simply keen to move to close another warehouse camp, in the knowledge that while none of the camps opened between April and September 2016 is truly fit for human habitation, the warehouses were the worst.

Certainly, when they opened, the Greek government said they would be closed before September, and the Greek Health advisory body KEELPNO released a study in July stating that the warehouses were actively detrimental to human health.

But huge numbers of warehouse camps – not those refurbished such as **Drama** and **Kavala**, but in the same condition as they were when they opened – are still being operated by the government as camps, seemingly reducing the likelihood that this was the reason for **Redestos**' closure.

Nor would this explanation sit well with the fact of the evacuation's haste and lack of proper preparation, or the fact that **Redestos** (*along with **Oreokastro***) is still listed by the Greek government as an available space for refugees.

It is extremely hard not to conclude that **Redestos** will be reopened and reused. Some people have said it could happen in three weeks (*arguably, it could*) but it would be actively surprising were it to still be closed by August.

3ii) A note on the islands – mistake, cynicism, or long-term plan (part one)

At present, there are some 14,923 refugees on the Greek islands. Not only should this in itself be a cause for immediate concern and action, this number is also 6,164 people more than the accepted safe limit for the islands as a whole.

On Lesvos, there are 699 more people than can be safely accommodated; on Samos 1,200 more and on Chios 2,618 people more than is considered safe by IOM, the United Nations and the Greek government.

Nor is this situation improving. Since the end of February, the number of refugees on the islands has actually risen three times, and is at present only 600 lower than it was nine weeks ago.*

In the same period, as a comparison, the number of refugees in Epirus region has dropped to the point where there are now 2,574 available places, including the entirely refurbished and empty 1,500-capacity **Katsikas.*

We already know that conditions at the island detention centres are extraordinarily bad, and suicide attempts – some successful –are far more common among the populations there than either on the mainland or in communities operating under normal conditions.

On Thursday 30 March, Ali Aamer, a 27 year-old Syrian refugee at the **Souda** detention centre on Chios, set fire to himself in protest at his – and other people's – treatment on the islands. Eleven days later, on 10 April, he died as a result of his injuries.

Since then, images have been released of people being held in cages inside buildings at island detention centres.

It is a little unsettling – given that we are part of an organisation working on the islands – that we hear about these incidents only through third-hand accounts, but in any case, it is clear that due to the intense overcrowding on the islands, and the extraordinarily bad conditions there, it is impossible to make a case of any kind for people remaining on the islands, especially not if one is interested in humanitarian or human concerns.

On Wednesday 12 April, Chios' Mayor, Emmanouil Vournos, said: 'I know what is happening and this is very hard for the locals and the refugees and immigrants as well. I cannot be complaining or saying things about what Turkey is doing. Turkey is an independent state. It is acting by itself. We in the EU, we should have our own policy.'

Added to this, on average so far this year, more than 44 people have arrived by sea to the islands each day (*4,815 in the 108 days to 18 April*) – and because numbers of people crossing increase significantly during the improved weather and sea conditions of Summer, this number is set to increase considerably even if all else remains equal (*and there is significant reason to believe it will not, as explained below*).

Even without any change in the current international balance, we can and should expect that by the end of August there could be 20,000-30,000 people on the islands. This is not even physically sustainable, let alone acceptable in terms of regard for human life and decency.

And then we must consider the likelihood that the EU/Turkey Deal – the only (*and profoundly immoral*) reason that numbers of crossings from Turkey to the Greek islands are currently so much lower than they were this time last year – will collapse in the near future.

- *The EU/Turkey Deal*

Under the terms of the Deal, the EU agreed to hand Turkey cash and a series of political concessions in exchange for preventing refugees leaving its shores to travel to Europe. This was not only a deal based in inhumanity, and a compromise of the EU's own stated ideas and ideals, it also left the EU with a debt to the Turkish state – and one it cannot easily repay.

Because although the EU – and some of those living within it – may have regarded the money (*€6bn over the course of three years*) as the 'headline', to do so is based on a serious misreading of Turkish politics over the last 20 years.

Because the Turkish state's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has staked his entire career to date on proving that he can 'normalise' the experiences of Turkish people with the EU. This, rather than a desire to alter his nation's policies in ways with which he scarcely agrees, was why he spent so long attempting to force EU membership talks to proceed.

And when the refugee crisis broke, he saw what he thought was an opportunity. In exchange for preventing refugees leaving Turkey, he demanded that Turkish people should have visa-free access to the EU.

It is worth noting that the EU has not even managed to give Turkey the money it promised to it for the first year, despite the fact that that year has now passed. But far more importantly, it has not – and cannot – deregulate visas for Turkish citizens.

Because in the wake of the attempted coup of 15 July 2016, Erdogan's government has run an often brutal crackdown against its own people. During a twice-extended (*and still operational*) State of Emergency, the state has detained more than 113,000 people, and jailed 47,155 of them. They include journalists (*Turkey has the worst arrest figures of journalists anywhere in the world*), opponents of the regime (*Left-wing and Kurdish people have been particularly targeted*) and teachers – some 40,000 of whom have been fired.

Equally, the Turkish state's move towards what is accurately seen as a system of 'one-man rule', expressing itself most recently in the extremely close but ultimately successful referendum on whether to hand Erdogan extensive new powers, and its stated desire to reinstate the death penalty would both individually be enough to prevent the EU 'improving' either its trade or population relations with the state.

For its part, Turkey has repeatedly warned that for it, the EU/Turkey Deal without its most attractive and important component – arguably the only element in which Turkey has any real interest – is hardly a deal at all, and will be abandoned.

As recently as Saturday 15 April, its Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu repeated the state's warning – that if it does not hear 'positive' news regarding visa deregulation soon, it will dissolve the agreement.

Turkey is currently hosting around four million refugees. Not all of them will want to leave – three million are Syrians, and Turkish and Syrian people have a historically close and warm relationship, while the Erdogan regime has spoken publicly about its plan to offer Turkish citizenship to Syrians fleeing war.

But some of them certainly will. Many of the Syrian refugees are in fact Kurdish people, and Turkey has for close to two years now been fighting a civil war against its Kurdish population. Many people

in the camps in mainland Greece are Kurds, who describe in detail the dangers they faced simply by being Kurdish in Turkey.

Equally, many of the Syrian refugees already have family in the EU, while around one million refugees in Turkey are Iraqis, Afghans and people from Pakistan, the majority whom will not be offered any status or right to remain in Turkey.

To put it another way, even if three in every four refugees in Turkey decide not to come to the EU, that would still leave one million who would. By far the largest number of them will enter via Greece, and more specifically, the islands.

The result will be disaster.

3iii) A note on the islands – mistake, cynicism, or long-term plan (part two – mistake?)

It is almost certain that the islands will be at three times their capacity for refugees by the end of August. It is certainly possible that one million people will enter Greece in the next five-to-six months.

As noted above, the latter would be a disaster, which would require EU-wide action. No-one could sensibly expect the Greek government – or any government – to be able to cope alone with that, even with the assistance of international NGOs including the UN. There are a number of ways in which that crisis could be sensibly managed, but this is not the right place to detail or discuss them.

But even if we avoid that, we should expect the former scenario, in which 20,000-30,000 people are on the islands by the end of August.

At present, there are 'spaces' at refugee camps on the mainland for 32,514 people. Even if we accept (*as we should, but so far it appears the Greek government has not*) that neither **Redestos** nor **Oreokastro** are fit for human habitation, that number reduces by less than ten per cent, to 29,514 – still at the highest end of the likely refugee population on the islands by the end of August.

Under such circumstances, the 'logical' conclusion ought to be that camps are being cleared – possibly for refurbishment first – for refugees to move from the islands. Therefore, we should conclude that **Redestos**, and other empty camps (***Oreokastro*** *in Thessaloniki;* ***Katsikas*** *in Ioannina, for example*), will be open again and hosting men, women and children by August at the latest.

However, so far, no indication of this has been given. In turn, this has led to speculation that in fact the government has no intention of moving refugees from the islands.

3iv) A note on the islands – mistake, cynicism, or long-term plan (part three – policy?)

This speculation runs as follows. The refugees currently on the islands – some 9,000 of whom have not yet had their asylum requests even registered – are not likely to be allowed to go directly to other EU states.

This, in turn, has come about because the EU's states have been desperate to block the flow of refugees in any way possible, while the Greek government, in its understandable eagerness to be seen as a safe pair of hands by the rest of the EU, has simply failed to inform the other 27 states about the true situation here and has, as in my own direct experience, actively moved to prevent photos, videos and written testimonies get out of the camps.

This is foolish because the refugees themselves have access to social media and are regularly posting their own views of the camp, and because this situation allows the EU to pretend that everything in Greece is now OK, and on that entirely incorrect basis has reintroduced the Dublin regulations, under which refugees can be returned to Greece if that was their first point of arrival in the EU.

This means that an increasing number of the 14,923 must either be found places to live in Greece, or sent back to Turkey (*and, it must be added, from Turkey likely forced back to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and in certain cases even Syria. None of the four are safe: war is ongoing in Syria and Iraq, in more than a third of Afghanistan – where conflict has been raging for almost 35 years, resulting in ruined infrastructure and severe food shortages – and in Pakistan, in common with the first three, there is also significant terrorist activity*).

It is clear that finding places for these people poses a significant problem for the Greek government. Unemployment remains at 23.4 per cent (*40 per cent for people aged 18-34*), meaning jobs simply cannot be found for the refugees without significant directed investment from the EU in job creation and economic growth (*as opposed to the current bail-out policy, designed to deliver money to banks which lent Greece cash prior to the 2008 global economic crash*).

This is frustrating, and the lack of investment is actually a significant missed opportunity for Greece – and by extension the EU as a whole – as many of the refugees here at present are well-qualified and highly experienced men and women, and children with more than enough capacity to adapt and develop in their new environment. By regarding them as a 'burden' we are wasting an opportunity to help Greece recover and the whole EU benefit, even aside from the obvious moral and humanitarian imperatives at play here.

Equally, the refugees know the situation here. A recent survey (*19 April*) found that 95 per cent of refugees in Athens intend to leave Greece for other EU states. Many of the people we see at camps have been extremely impressed – often touched – by the hospitality shown them by Greek citizens, and have expressed a desire to stay if it were possible, but like everyone they can read and understand the news: they know there is little opportunity for them or their children here.

The EU could act to change that, but is instead pursuing a policy designed to block entry and remove people.

Under these circumstances, there are two clear – albeit horribly cynical – reasons not to move people from the islands. First, because the longer people are forced to stay in the horrific conditions at the detention centres (*at **Moria**, there is one toilet block between more than 2,000 people, while people are caged while their documents are examined, followed by months on end of waiting. The winter deaths, and the high rates of suicide and self-harm, of course also affect more than just the people who are directly involved*), the less likely they may be to want to stay.

One significant indicator that this might be Greek government policy is the simple fact that despite the fact that there are twice as many open spaces on the mainland as the total number of refugees on the islands, and despite the fact that we and other organisations were instructed before Christmas to expect large numbers of refugees from the islands to arrive at the camps at which we work, no significant number have yet arrived.

Of course, this policy would rely on two enormous errors. First, the idea that the refugees would want to return to their homelands; second, that they might be happy to be in Turkey.

These would be based simply on a total failure to engage with and understand the issues. Although it is convenient for most EU governments to deny it, by far the largest group of people who have arrived in Greece are fleeing conflict, whether all-out war or ongoing localised-violence. And while it is vital for European politicians to argue that Turkey is in some way a 'safe state' the vast majority of people at Greek refugee camps arrived after attempting to live in Turkey. They already know that Turkey is either unsafe or impossible to live in, at least for them.

There is a second 'strand' to a supposed policy of leaving refugees on the islands and allowing the situation to deteriorate to the point of catastrophe by standing by and doing nothing while the population increases to up to four times its safe limit: perhaps under these circumstances, the EU will be forced to step in more directly with aid, and to re-suspend the Dublin Regulations and relocate refugees directly from the islands to other EU states.

The problems with this as a policy are that first, it would rely on the EU accepting that something must be done – Greece would in effect be using vulnerable people to blackmail a political bloc over which at present it has very little influence. Not only would this be a horrifying and immoral course of action, it would also be very unlikely to work.

Secondly, the EU is adamant that it is already providing a great deal of aid for Greece to respond to the crisis. Although there is significant reason to doubt the often-repeated idea that €803m has been spent on the crisis so far (*and, for that matter, that all of that money was spent in Greece*), it is far more widely agreed that the Greek government has so far failed to access around €514m which has been available to it. This would seem to indicate that what Greece wants is not help with the crisis, but for the crisis simply to move somewhere else.

Finally, of course, this would be a significant reversal of Greece's position to date, and an embarrassing admission of 'defeat'. This seems so out of character with its actions so far that it is an enormous stretch to believe that Greece would deliberately engineer a major humanitarian crisis on its own soil to force the EU to help it.

We cannot, however, entirely rule the possibility out. As I have noted on a number of occasions, the situation on the islands is already more than awful enough both to make open communication of the conditions imperative for any health organisation serious about its role, and to make such communication itself a powerful tool to improve the situation for the innocent men, women and children at the detention centres, and by engaging the EU, actually improve Greece's position, and ability to respond to the crisis.

Should things get worse, we will be working in the midst of a humanitarian disaster: we have a moral and professional duty and logical pragmatic reasons to report it.

But we must also accept that it is far more likely that the extraordinary situation on the islands will not – cannot – be allowed to deteriorate further: that people will be moved to the mainland in the relatively near future, and that Thessaloniki, as Greece's second largest city, and by far the largest in

the North, where the largest number of spaces are available for refugees, will be central to this process.

It is vital under these circumstances for us to be prepared, and to retain presence in Thessaloniki if we are to meet the needs of refugees here. Whether the 'solution' lies in genuine accommodation being found by the government and UNHCR, or in moving refugees from the islands to refurbished warehouses including **Oreokastro** and **Redestos**, we must be ready to assist them.

4) Thessaloniki

Mention of Thessaloniki and our future role – if any – there is a good opportunity to note once again the centrality of Thessaloniki to this crisis.

First of all, as already noted, the Greek government lists far more places available for refugees in the North of Greece than in any other region (*a capacity of 25,399; 22,779 of which are within 30km of the city: Attiki, the area with the next highest capacity, has 14,966 places*).

Secondly, Thessaloniki already has a far higher population of refugees and undocumented migrants than any Greek city other than Athens.

This is highlighted by the fact that the city's Polyclinic in the first three months of 2017, carried out 6,172 separate consultations (*more than 30 per cent up on the same period of 2016*), around two-thirds of which were with refugees. In some cases, this is because increasingly, refugees are being bussed in to the clinic from the camps in and around the city (*in itself underlining a shortfall in medical provision at the camps*) but it is also the case that the service is being increasingly relied upon by people who have never been in a refugee camp, those who have been moved to hotels either to escape winter or while they await relocation elsewhere in the EU, and those who have been moved to apartments.

The refugee population in Thessaloniki is not set to significantly decrease any time soon.

Ali al-Jabawi, the man mentioned previously as owner of the Café Ali at **Redestos**, is a refugee who lived at **Redestos** for seven months from July to January with his wife and four children (aged 4-13).

He returned every day to work at the small coffee shop, and to assist Maurizio with food distribution each day; but also brought his children for medical treatment from our team because, he said, he and his family trusted us, and for a number of other reasons:

'We lived here for a long time, and things never really got very much better. While I was here there was no power, and that stayed the same until they brought a large generator, which did not happen until after we left, after the Winter. Also, despite people's complaints, the food never improved either. It was inedible, and it still is now. If it wasn't for the extra food provided I think some people here would not eat.

'We went to the Sun Beach Hotel and now we have been given an apartment in Thessaloniki. It is small, but it is much better than the camp, or even the hotel.

'I come here each day because the people here like the café and it's good to do something they like, and also because I am grateful to Maurizio, so I am glad to help him to help the people who are here.

'It is also because when my children are sick, they know the doctors here, so it is good to come here. We are supposed to be given a card with money on it*, to help us to live, but the money does not always get paid, and in any case there is only enough to buy the food we need – sometimes not even enough for that – so we cannot afford to buy medicine.

**The card system, under which refugees are provided with a pre-paid debit card topped up once a month, is operated by different organisations in different regions. In the North of Greece, it is primarily run by Catholic Relief Services. But the scheme is not operating well. Not only have some families had their monthly requirements severely underestimated, many have also experienced missed and irregular payments – it is of course impossible to plan a budget if you have no idea when*

or even if the next payment will be made, and the 'budget' is so small that any interruption or irregularity can be extremely difficult to overcome.

On 2 January 2017, Yiannis Mouzalas announced that from 1 March all refugees in Greece would be given cash instead of food. This has not yet happened. On the same day, as part of the same announcement, he promised that all refugees would be moved from the camps at Elliniko 'as soon as possible'. On 18 April, there were 1,209 refugees at the three camps.

On 25 April, with no mention of the previous 'deadline' Mr Mouzalas promised the card scheme would be in place 'by 31 May'. It remains unclear whether this will apply to the men, women and children in island detention centres.

'My children also come because they are bored. They have nothing to do in the daytime. We ask every day when they will be allowed to go to school again – they want to, as well – but we are always told 'it will be next week'**. They have not been to school for more than two years. Two of them have never been. They are clever children, but they must have fallen so far behind now. I am very sad. If they come here, they can play, and they can practise their languages. They are better than I am at Greek and at Urdu now. Otherwise, they have nothing to do.'

***The Greek Ministry of Education announced that all refugee children in Greece would receive places in schools starting in September. So far, 2,500 out of an (under-) estimated 10,000 have been able to attend. One major problem is that the Ministry requires 'at least 1,400' Arabic translators, and that 'resource' is simply not available within Greece.*

Nor is our potential (*and arguably necessary*) role limited to camps and refugees in apartments in and around Thessaloniki.

On 14 March, in a meeting with the Greek Refugee Council, solicitor Dimitris Koros told me about the complexities – and shortfalls – of the wider Greek policy on refugees and asylum seekers, particularly Greece's 'pre-removal' centres.

There are currently 2,261 people held in the centres (*they are included by the Greek government as part of the refugee population*), each of whom are at various stages of the application and/or deportation process.

Mr Koros explained: 'The system doesn't really work. The people in the centres are people who have come through at Evros, or who have turned themselves in to police. Some other people in the centres are people regarded as being a risk of escaping, but there are fewer of them.

'The law is that the Removal process takes up to 90 days. That's a 45-day detention which can be renewed by another 45 days.

'In most cases, the people at the centres will apply for asylum while they are there. At that point, the detention is suspended – the 90 days no longer applies and will only start again (from zero) if the application fails.

'Of course, most people try to apply for asylum and the process then is that they stay in detention only until their application is registered.

'But in practice, even those whose applications are rejected can stay for a much longer period. Because the system doesn't work, they cannot be released but it takes time, effort, energy and money to return someone and often it doesn't happen for extremely long periods, if at all.'

He added: ‘As you can imagine, there are serious mental health issues at the centres. People are detained for long periods. They have no opportunities to do anything other than sit and wait.

‘I sometimes feel that some of the people who come here to our centre are really only getting the chance to bang their fists on a different wall, but even then, they are better off than those in the centres here who have always the same walls and no way to get out.

‘There’s a real need for medical and mental health assistance here, because the police and centre staff can’t deliver it. We need someone like MdM to help them.’

Finally, while it is perhaps not the first concern of MdM at this moment, decisions affecting the whole of the refugee response in the North of Greece are made more often in Thessaloniki, which has its own ‘secondary’ infrastructure and governmental make-up, than in Athens, for which the cities of Thessaloniki, Kavala and others sometimes seem remote.

We will continue to work in the North, where there are more places for refugees than any other region, where there are a variety of mental and physical health-related issues on which we can work to improve lives and assist people who require our services, and where a large number of new refugees are likely to arrive before the summer ends.

It seems sensible, under those circumstances, to retain a presence in Thessaloniki, where decisions are made, even if only for now in the form of one or two people who can attend meetings and share information and experiences between our field teams and the other actors in the North.

5) Dehumanisation, Redestos and Kavala? Evacuation

In the event, despite concerns that nine of them were not allowed to travel because of geographical restrictions imposed by the Greek government, the 45 men, women and children at **Redestos** left the camp at 2pm on 11 April, to travel to their new 'home' at **Kavala**.

They were supposed never to return.

By 9pm all 45 were back at the warehouse.

What happened in those six hours was another example of the opportunism, improvisation and to be frank, chaos, which has characterised this response since its beginning.

The bus containing the refugees was stopped around one hour from Kavala, and forced to wait on the road for three hours.

In that period, the refugees, who were told nothing about the reasons for the delay, were feverishly discussed at camp management and government levels. In those discussions, and without any consultation or explanation with them, the 45 people were first denied access to **Kavala** (*whose population on 18 April was exactly as it was on 11 April: just 68. The camp's capacity is 270*), and then to **Drama**, before being forced to return to Thessaloniki.

There, they were told they could not re-enter **Redestos** camp, which was by now closed (*the police at the camp having been told not to allow anyone to re-enter, but not having been instructed where the men, women and children were to go instead, or what to explain to them*).

Thirty-five of them were put back on the bus and driven to **Derveni Alexil** camp – itself due to be closed in only three weeks' time, when they will again be forced to move – but the nine who were 'geographically-restricted', including the mother and her two-week-old baby, were offered nothing.

They slept, alone in a state which is not their own, in the open, in a field across the road from the camp.

The following morning, the nine were taken to a police station, where officers assured us that they would be well-treated and would be moved somewhere more appropriate almost immediately.

We have no reason to assume the former is untrue. But experience suggests that the latter promise may not have been kept, however good the police's intent.*

I do not wish, here, to downplay the difficulties involved in the smooth management of a crisis, and I do not intend to suggest I could have done this better.

But this evacuation was spectacularly botched by all parties. Once again, the people working in the field were expected without guidance and having been let down by the organisations who are supposed to be 'managing' the situation, to improvise and solve problems which should never even have arisen had others done the job they are expected to do and in some cases have insisted they must do.

And it is dispiriting to note that in a situation of grave humanitarian need, the overriding sense of the **Redestos**/**Kavala** failure is that at the level where it is arguably most important to remember, the central fact – that we are dealing with people; men, women and children – was forgotten.

This is not simply about the inconvenience caused by poor cooperation and lack of management of this crisis, it is about the fact that the lack of both of those things served to dehumanise some of

humanity's most vulnerable individuals, and left them at best with the effective status of farm animals or problematically-large and awkward pieces of furniture.

Nobody died as a result of this failure. But in an EU member state, in the 21st century, and with cash and organisations from all over the world flooding in to 'help', it is unacceptable that the best we can say is 'nobody died this time'.

**It may also be worth noting here that this misadventure effectively removed the final 'consolation' held by humanitarian workers – that the refugees they work with and for are at least moving to better places – and served to underline for them their inability to follow 'cases' to their conclusion.*

6) Drama – organised/chaos. Part one: the people

Just after 1pm on 10 April, the first refugees arrived at the newly-refurbished **Drama** camp.

That there are positive and negative things to be said about the camp may be quite neatly illustrated by the fact that as IOM proudly announced, they had readied it before the targeted deadline.

Such efficiency is in some ways to be applauded, but its early opening brought with it some significant complications, too, not least the fact that most actors (*though not us – our team was present to welcome the men, women and children as they arrived*) were unprepared and not yet ready to work at the camp, as well as the fact that some significant and important services were not yet operational.

And, as is depressingly common in this response, failure to coordinate and communicate is set so far to lead to over-provision of some services, and large gaps where others should be provided.

The camp is a former tobacco storage facility on an industrial estate of five buildings, three of which are effectively derelict.

The space within the two-level building is well thought-out and designed, with small 'apartments' for families and individuals, each containing beds, kitchen equipment and sinks. On the ground floor, each 'apartment' has two rooms, while upstairs the living spaces are 'split level' with the beds on a mezzanine level accessed by a metal staircase. They are generally light, airy, and if the building itself is a little cold, the electricity supply is at least reliable enough for heating to be possible without

compromising lighting and other electricity use.

Our working area (*on which more follows*) and that of the other organisations working at the camp, is on the ground floor, where there is also space for a kindergarten, primary and secondary schooling (*an attempt to address the fact that refugee children are unlikely to be able to access the Greek education system any time soon*).

The camp's capacity is 550, but so far – and since 10 April – it has 234 residents.

They are all Kurdish* – though some are from Afrin, in North West Syria, north and west of Aleppo, and others are from Qamishili in the North-East, closer to the Iraqi border.

**here, I must stress how important it is that we get some Kurdish translators. When I am at the camp I increase Doctors of the World's Kurdish lexicon by six words (I know eight words in Kurdish). It is true that most (though not all) Kurdish speakers also speak Arabic, but we are then dealing with a situation in which vulnerable and often ill people are forced to see a doctor in yet another strange place, where they feel powerless and uncomfortable, to try to explain to doctors what is wrong with them in a second language, and then to have to rely on translators to relay that message in a third language. If there are not Kurdish translators available in Greece, there certainly are in the UK, and we are an international aid organisation.*

While it is certainly an understandable idea to place Kurdish people together, there are some potential problems in the scheme, some of which have shown themselves in the first two weeks since the refugees arrived.

Effectively, the communities – while viewed from outside as perhaps belonging to one group – are from quite different regions of the wider 'Kurdish continuum' and along with differences in accent and some in dialect, there are divergent experiences which each have been through, including their relative relationships with the Assad regime and IS, as well as with local populations.

We should not mistake such differences for insurmountable obstacles, and in relation to Assad the difference is far closer to being the difference between ambivalence in the North-East (*and relatively recently born, in the wake of the response by Assad to the threat of IS after the Sinjar massacre and the threat of the terror group entering Syria*) and opposition further West (*the Kurds of Afrin and the surrounding area saw first-hand Assad's attacks on the city of Aleppo, the nearest large centre to them, and are aware that Assad's regime did almost nothing to help when IS marched into Kobane and other Kurdish towns nearby*) than any real ideological position.

But in the heightened pressure and unfamiliar surroundings presented by the repeated movement the refugees have undergone since their arrival in Greece (*many in the camp have been in four or five different places since their arrival, none of them their own first choice*), their new arrival in yet another unfamiliar space, worse in some ways than the hotels in which they had been staying for the previous two-three months – and which is, as we shall see, in some ways far from ideal – and their disappointment at still being trapped in Greece after almost 15 months (*itself heightened by yet another move to a place within Greece when most of them are increasingly desperate to leave*), not to mention the war they have all experienced and fled, where many of their opinions were formed, confirmed and/or changed, even seemingly-small differences can become larger problems.

Within moments of the refugees' arrival at the camp, indications of their frustration and its results were apparent.

Translators were explaining, repeatedly, that the camp 'is not a hotel', and at one point tempers flared and a short exchange of punches took place between two men. It was not a serious fight, and came about because of a mix-up over bags, which was easily and quickly sorted out, but it was a reminder that the populations of refugees are not only uniform in opinion and outlook but have also been under extraordinary pressure for the last six years – pressure which occasionally spills over into anger.

And there are some problems with the new camp.

While its rooms are certainly a huge improvement on what has come before (*and still exists*) in warehouse camps across Greece, its location leaves a great deal to be desired.

First, because it is one warehouse – impressively converted – amid five which are effectively derelict. The camp is full of children, and the broken glass, machinery and overgrowth inside and outside the other buildings do present a risk.

Equally, on the outside of the buildings themselves, the fire escapes and sections where upper floors' exits open onto staircases set alongside rooves of adjacent buildings are a significant potential hazard.

These alone are not an enormous problem. Our team has already noted the risks and on the staircases there has at least been some effort to prevent climbing over bannisters with plastic sheeting: it is to be hoped that serious injury can be prevented. But they do connect closely to a second problem: the camp is extremely isolated and remote.

For children, the camp is currently a 'new space' to be explored and played in, but this will soon end, as they become bored through familiarity. The immediate – closest and most obvious – 'next space' is the expanse of fields which stretch in front of the warehouse.

But men, women and children have already passed through the holed fence into the field, only to be told that it is out of bounds.

And there is effectively only one other place to play. Drama – the nearest town to the camp – is 8km away, and there are dangerous roads and waste ground between. Faced with this, the empty and derelict buildings may become more attractive.

Our project budget – a small but excellent response to the hardships, some privations and the resultant mental health problems faced by people in refugee camps – could be used to lessen the risk here. For example, the team is already looking at the potential for creating both gardening areas and safe play spaces in the warehouse's grounds.

But of course, this only deals with a small part of the problem posed by the camp's remote location.

Because there is still no escaping from the fact that it is unrealistic, unfair, mentally-damaging and in fact cruel to expect people – adults as well as children – to remain always in the 'grounds' of the camp. Especially when those grounds effectively constitute one usable building and a gravel surround.

It is both reasonable and sensible for men, women and children to want to be able to visit the town closest to them, for shopping, activities and education. But the closest bus stop is two kilometres away, and no alternatives have yet been offered.

Equally, it should be noted that **Drama** effectively opened too soon.

Though IOM has done a good job of overseeing the refurbishment of the warehouse (*though not the improvement of its surroundings*), its decision to announce with pride that they opened the building 'ahead of schedule' was misplaced.

Because although we were on site alongside IOM when the refugees arrived, we were alone in that. Not one other actor was there, and as a result almost none of the services they had every right to expect, were available.

Even now, some two weeks later, the Kindergarten, Primary and Secondary Schools are not open, and there is no indication when – or in reality even if – they will be. In effect, the only services provided are by us, Solidarity Now and IOM. All of us are working hard, but it is hard to see how this could possibly be regarded as 'enough' – particularly at a camp as remote as **Drama**.

One development in the last week is that the internet has finally been connected, but even this came only after more than a week had passed. This is a particularly sensitive mental health issue, as many of the refugees at camps all over Greece have family members elsewhere in Europe and often, within Syria.

On 14 April, four days after the camp opened, Mohammed, a 22 year-old from Afrin, Syria, explained: 'I left Afreen three and a half years ago. I went to Istanbul and I stayed there for two and a half years.

'There was no humanity there. No life. I was treated very badly. So were other people like me. So I had to come to Greece.

'I stayed before this in a hotel in Kilis. It was so much better than here.

'Here is nice, but it is so far away from everywhere. We have no way to get to the town. The nearest bus stop is two kilometres away. There is no transport.

'I walked to Drama one day but it takes two hours. Maybe if I had a bike it would be OK. But not everyone can go by bike.

'It's so remote here.

'The most important problem is Wi-Fi. Without this, we cannot speak to our families. We are alone, in a warehouse, so far from everything.

'My parents are still in Afreen. My sister is in Istanbul, my brother is in Germany. I can't talk to any of them. It is important. It means a lot to me. It is no good.

'In Afreen, my parents are OK at the moment. The fighting is not there any more. There is no war in their village now. But it is around them and it can come back and I do worry about them every day. Of course I worry. It is very hard not to be able to talk to them and see if they are OK. I want to talk to them.'

On the day of arrival, ten year-old Samet, a Kurd from Turkey, showed how important activities – especially the school – are to youngsters, as well as parents. He said: 'I am Kurdish, from Turkey.

'I speak Greek and English and Turkish and Kurdish. I come from Diyabakir but I can't live there. We had to leave, because of war.

'I love school. Will there be a school here? When will the school open? Can I go to school in the town? Or here?

‘Why is this here? This camp? Why is it here? Will there be a school? Activities for children like me?’

By 25 April, with the new community more settled (*although the camp is still nowhere near full*), refugees were happy to talk about positive and negative factors in their ‘new’ lives.

Fatimeh, a mother of four from Aleppo, Syria, said: ‘There are no children at school here. None of my children.

‘We have been here at **Drama** for 15 days. We were at **Dimitra Hotel** before that, for two months.

‘We were at **Derveni** for nine months, and **Idomeni** for three months.

‘I really want my children to go to school. I try to speak about when the school will be open. But there is no school here. I very, very, very much want school for them. In Aleppo, I was an Arabic teacher. My husband was an office worker.

‘I worked in **Derveni** as an Arabic teacher with Arsis. So of course I want my children to go to school.

‘Greece is a very good place, very good people. But I would have no house, no salary, no work, no job. I know living here will be very difficult.

‘Here it is good, but at night I sleep at 11pm and it is very noisy. In the mornings, too, people are loud. So it’s hard to sleep.

‘The hotel was three families to a room. Here, it’s only us. So it is better. And it is much better than **Idomeni**.’

Ibrahim, a 26 year-old from Kasmishli, Syria, said: ‘I’m 26 and Kurdish. I have now been here in Greece one year and two months.

‘It is very bad here.

I was at **Idomeni** for three months and ten days. I lived in **Vaghiochori** and in a hotel in Veria.

‘I have been here 12 days.

‘It’s very bad here. There is nothing for us.

‘It want to leave. I applied to leave but no-one tells me if I can go.

‘I have two brothers in Germany. They want me to come and I want to go to see them. My family is in Syria. I am worried about them and they worry about me. I want them to come to Europe. Because there is war and I want them to be safe.

‘I have been to see the doctor because my teeth are bad. I didn’t clean them because I felt very bad. I was afraid and depressed. My bothers left and I had no money to go, so I had to stay. The soldiers told me that either they would kill me, or the terrorists would, so I was scared and I didn’t do anything because I felt sad and I couldn’t move.

‘Tomorrow, I will go to the doctor in Thessaloniki about my teeth. It will cost a lot of money and I do not know how I will afford it, but I have to go.

‘I want to work again, and to have a life, but I have nothing. It has been a very long time.’

And this is perhaps one of the most important points for us to remember. For all its improvements, **Drama** refugee camp is still a refugee camp. No-one wants to live in a refugee camp, and indeed for

the people there, it is a symbol of their inability – to some of the prevention - of them to restart their lives.*

**In fact, the UN has, since January, repeatedly attempted to address the fact that refugee camps are unfit for extended habitation, calling for empty buildings – late last March a study revealed there were more than 500,000 across the state – to be converted for refugees to live in while they stay in Greece.*

This is perhaps one example of a genuinely 'unique' property of the Greek crisis, but the Greek government has stated that it would be 'too complex' to negotiate with each ministry which owns all or part even of the properties in the government's possession.

Despite this, on 25 April, Migration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas and the UNHCR announced that, using €1.76m from ECHO, they would work with authorities on Crete to find 125 apartments on the island for refugees.

*Even so – and even if this programme is repeated on the Greek mainland – it is extremely unlikely that refugees 'housed' in 'new' camps such as **Drama**, **Kavala**, or even **Katsikas**, would qualify for such accommodation.*

6) Drama – organised/chaos. Part two: the Greek government, UNHCR, and us

This report has noted several times already the dysfunctionality of the Greek government's relationship with UNHCR, some of the reasons for it, and some of its effects on refugees.

The first 15 days of **Drama** camp (*and to a lesser extent also **Kavala**, where so far only we, Red Cross who are carrying out solely child protection, and IOM, have permission to operate, resulting in another camp where services are at a minimum, albeit one from which the city centre is in easy walking distance – and before that **Redestos**, as noted above*) have underlined a series issue for concern for us here, which seriously impacts upon the lives of refugees, including their mental and physical health – the lack of management of this project as a whole.

Because as all those of us who have worked on a number of responses are aware, the UN's job in emergency response is often far less about the delivery of immediate aid or ongoing services, as the management of the delivery of those things.

They (*and here, the EU's ECHO organisation does the same*) receive donations from governments and other sources and, in turn, are expected to oversee the entire project, noting which services are needed, inviting applications from agencies to provide them, and ensuring that the correct agencies are in place to deliver all the services needed by the men, women and children we exist to care for, with minimal 'overlap' and no 'gaps' in which no service at all is provided.

I do not believe any of us thinks for one second that the UN does a perfect job of this, ever. But in comparison to Greece, its efforts in North and sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America - despite their definite limitations, imperfections and failures - have been exemplary.

This does not mean the UN is flawless, and it should not be 'let off the hook' in future analyses of the crisis here in Greece. Its failure to interact well with the Greek government, for example, is not solely the responsibility of the Greek government.

But despite this, it is extremely difficult not to conclude that the factor hampering UN management of the crisis is the sole major difference between this response and the others – the Greek government.

As an example, **Drama** camp.

We had been informed we had two spaces at **Drama** camp, each with a central 'reception' area and four rooms connecting to it. In those rooms, the team was ready to have a doctor, paediatrician, psychologist, social worker, midwife, nurse, and spaces for sessions on breastfeeding, baby-cleaning and matters requiring more in-depth and private consultations.

When we arrived – as the only agency there aside from the camp's site managers IOM to welcome the refugees – we were informed that we had only one of the spaces, and that Solidarity Now would take the other.

We were also informed that IOM had been led to understand that one of the rooms in our area was to be used for dentistry.

As everyone reading this report will be aware, we do not have a permanent dentist.

It turns out that Solidarity Now had applied for and won UNICEF 'blue dot' funding, and were then handed a contract to work at **Drama**, where their contract requires them to run mother-and-baby sessions, as well as to offer legal advice to refugees, and counselling and play sessions for children.

The ‘Blue Dots’ programme is an excellent initiative, and Solidarity Now have been given the money to roll it out not only because they applied, but because they have been judged capable of doing so well.

But it is impossible to escape the fact that the ‘managers’ of this response employed two agencies – Solidarity now and us – to perform many of the same services, expected us to perform a service we simply do not offer, and in employing two agencies for the same role have left significant gaps at a remote and isolated camp.

Conclusions and possibilities

This is not about our team, and how it reacts – though of course it would be foolish and unfair to forget the upheavals at **Redestos** in the context of the further significant disappointment at **Drama** – but that they once again underline a simple and concerning fact.

Whatever the reasons for it, UNHCR, who would normally manage an emergency response like this; and the Greek government, which insists it can do so; are not only failing to effectively manage this programme, they appear in fact to be preventing one another from doing so.

Perhaps there are lessons for us to learn from the opening of **Drama**. First, maybe the Greek government and the UN – or one of the two – simply does not know what we actually do. If so, maybe we need to sit down with central representatives of both and provide them with this information.

Secondly, perhaps we should have applied – or still could apply – for the Blue Dot funding. There are certainly reasons why this would not be a good idea, but Solidarity Now had experience in only a small number of the services they are now expected to provide, prior to applying. We certainly had as much, if not a little more, experience, and in this specific response.

Though this does not mean it would be 'the right thing to do' to apply for every funding possibility on offer – still less to accept every one available – we could, perhaps, in future, work more closely with the 'management' agencies to see what is available, and make decisions from there.

However, after almost ten months in the field, working with our teams and regularly meeting and conversing with other agencies large and small about the challenges we all face at the camps where we work, and with no clear end to this crisis in sight (*of course, we should and must be campaigning for all refugees to be given decent places to live rather than being trapped in refugee camps and detention centres, but we are not doing so at present, and in any case our field teams must deliver services to those who need them, for as long as they need them*) I must note that this response is simply not being managed.

There are two (*with ECHO, arguably three*) 'organisations' vying for control of this crisis. That is not how things should operate, but we have to face the fact. Those organisations – despite, perhaps, the best intentions of some of the employees of each one – do not share information, or work to assist one another as a general practice.

The result is effective chaos. So far, seldom fatal (*though I would argue in the strongest possible terms that the atrocious lack of preparation for Winter was in fact fatal in its consequences*), but chaos nonetheless, and actively detrimental to the lives of refugees trapped in this crisis – refugees whose mental as well as physical health it is our duty to defend, improve, and protect.

I started this report by talking about 'opportunity'. And this is an opportunity, for us to help change the nature of this response, by building closer relationships with the agencies of our size and smaller working where we work, and helping to ensure that the crossover of services is reduced, and the gaping gaps are filled.

We do already have some precedents for this. Our projects budget was and is an excellent response to the recognition that privations and shortage of activities and facilities from washing machines to day-trips were actively damaging the mental and physical health of thousands of people living in refugee camps, and that it was therefore within our remit to provide them, with input from the people themselves about what they want.

And at every camp where we work, we already have relationships with those we work alongside.

But this does not yet go far enough, as our experiences to date illustrate clearly. And we can help to make things work a little more smoothly.

Our field coordinators and their teams are extraordinarily-busy ensuring their vital responsibilities are met and the health and wellbeing of men, women and children are improved and maintained, and our management staff need to focus on our direct responsibilities and the welfare of our field staff.

But there is a need, and a space, for a small unit of perhaps only 1-3 people to work on analysis, and on relationship-building, opportunity-spotting and greater and closer cooperation with other agencies – perhaps in some cases even alongside other jobs, where those already require regular travel and field visits.

As noted previously, this does not require any 'break' with what we are already doing, and is arguably in fact the best means available to us to promote our aims and goals in Greece – providing refugees with services they need, to help their health and well-being.

Nobody could truly argue that the refugee response here has been a 'success' – even though we have met the goals we set ourselves when we applied for ECHO funding the first time.

This way, through active analysis, and through active cooperation, we can help ourselves and other agencies help refugees in the best and most efficient ways possible.