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Refugees in Greece: An overview

During the greater part of the twentieth century, Greece has been characterized by emigration, either to America in the beginning of the century or to Germany and Australia after the Second World War. Since 1989, Greece has been transformed into a host country for immigrants, accepting hundreds of thousand economic immigrants coming from Balkans and East Europe. Since 2010, the immigration increased by a high influx of refugees from Middle East and Asia. In particular, from 1988 to 2004, the number of economic immigrants living in Greece were more than 1.000.000 (total population in Greece apx. 10.000.000). From 2006 to 2014, there was an increased influx of illegal immigrants (50.000-100.000). More specifically, there was a significant increase in the number of refugees who entered to Greece (i.e. during 2006, 2007, 2011, 2013, a number of 299, 234, 1522 and 8,517 Syrian refugees arrived to Greece respectively). From 2014 to 2015 there was an elevated influx (up to 860.000). More recently, in 2015 Greece receives the major number of refugees compared to Italy and Spain.

Economic crisis- refugee crisis

The influx of refugees coincides with the Greek economic recession. Gross domestic product has fallen by 25% since 2010, the income and employment of both native residents and immigrants have decreased, and the public health sector and welfare sector have been affected by austerity measures. Nevertheless, protection of the lives and integrity of refugees remains a major concern not only for the state, but also for allied health professionals and local communities. European policies play an essential role in immigration. Financial aid was given to Greek Government, European organizations and NGOs. European organizations and international NGOs received a considerable part of this financial aid. The Greek government has used the funding in order to provide medical and psychosocial services to refugee

accommodation centers, as well as to strengthen the public health system and epidemiological surveillance structures related to refugee issues. Greece has also received aid concerning security measures (e.g. patrol duties in the Aegean, NAVTEX International Service, Hot Spot policing). Nevertheless, the staff is less than that it was previously agreed and below the needs of the situation.

2015 a peak of the influx

According to the UN Refugee Agency: 860 000 refugees and migrants without travel documents had entered Greece by sea since 2015, with the Greek islands becoming the main gateway to the European Union. Most refugees (45%) were men, 35% were children, and 20% were women, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. More than 250 deaths and 149 missing people were recorded in Greek territorial waters in 2015. Almost half of those who have drowned trying to reach Greece were children. Journeys by sea in winter weather are particularly dangerous and children are often soaking wet and extremely cold when they are brought ashore, which leads to a high risk of hypothermia, and in many cases hospital treatment is needed. Thousands of people continued to arrive each day, leading to a shortage of supplies. The majority of refugees were living in tents and had to overcome dangerous situations. For refugees who finally reached a Greek island, living conditions are poor, especially for young children. The authorities, non-governmental organizations, church charities, and local communities have made a great humanitarian effort to host newly arrived refugees, address their primary needs, and care for young children and pregnant women. Idomeni is an example of what was going on of the refugee issue in 2015. Because of the European policies, 8,500 refugees were trapped in Idomeni, as they found their way blocked, living in extreme bad conditions. Greece managed to move refugees (even those who denied) in 11 hospitality centers without use of force in a relatively short period of time.

What happens to date

During 2016-2017, a further 347,000 refugees and migrants have arrived in Europe. Most refugees have crossed by boat from Libya to Italy or from Turkey to Greece. Both routes have proved more perilous during 2016 than in 2015. In 2016, 4690 refugees and migrants died or were reported missing in the Mediterranean Sea, 25% more than in 2015.

The reception capacity established in Greece by UNHCR and its partners, with EU funding, in support of the relocation scheme, reached the target of 20,000 on 1st December 2016. The Hosting and Accommodation Programs continue in 2017, are developed by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency and funded by the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO). Greek government provide free of

charge health services for refugees in NHS, refugee vaccination that covers all the hot spots and hospitality centers.

Mental health issues in refugees and unaccompanied minors

War experiences and exile-related stressors cause severe mental health problems to many refugees, including depression, PTSD, anxiety and psychosis. Communication difficulties often make it impossible for volunteers to provide emotional support. Despite the difficulties, mental health care is provided continuously through public health services in collaboration with NGOs (e.g. Medicines du Monde and Medicines sans Frontiers).

Children and adolescent refugees endure considerable physical and mental challenges before and during their journey and experience continued hardship after their arrival, (exposure to violence, separation from their families, insecurity, inadequate housing, trafficking, and sexual exploitation). All youths by entering Greece are under protection from the State that ensures all their human rights (social welfare, education, health). A national committee for the management of unaccompanied minor cases has been formed by the Greek authorities in order to ensure the life protection and wellbeing of these children. Medical examinations and health care, psychosocial support, and housing are being offered free of charge by a network of public services and non-governmental organizations through the national child protection legislation. All the necessary means, such as internet and social media facilitating immigrants' access to the public health sector have been used. Official mediators and translators are involved in a regular basis in the access process. Any medical support provided by medical personnel, though basic and sometimes inadequate, is treated with profound gratitude by the refugees. A great number of refugee children and adolescents that enter the biggest general pediatric hospital in Greece refer to unaccompanied minors. In general, the number of children entering the hospital upon order of protection has been increasingly raised since 2009, with a total of 536 cases being hospitalized to date.

The number of children coming from the Middle East countries (i.e. Syria, Iraq and Iran) has been increased during 2014–2015 compared to 2011–2013. The average duration of hospitalization for protection during 2014–2015 was approximately 50 days. A complicated issue with this population refers to age-disputed children, i.e. asylum applicants whose claimed date of birth is not accepted by the local authorities.

Another issue of concern was for some young mothers who were too stressed to breastfeed their newborns and were assisted by volunteers of "Save the Children" NGO.

It is noteworthy that statistics underestimate the actual numbers of child refugees who reach Greece without their own families, given that there may be a great difficulty in verifying the actual age of these minors. Medical examinations are required and many of those minors claim that they are adults or relatives of unidentified persons. These children may be separated by their families accidentally or deliberately. On the other hand, a number of children face multiple traumatizations through deliberate separation either by their own families or by traffickers. Abductions, forced labor and sexual exploitation and abuse are some of the major risks that these children face. All the aforementioned are reported repeatedly during the medical examination upon their arrival in hotspots.

Child and adolescent refugee in Greek schools

During 2017, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, the Greek mission of International Organization for Migration (IOM) implements an education program and also supplies children with the necessary equipment (notebooks, pens, pencils and other school supplies). IOM bus escorts, working at the hospitality centers, daily contribute to the safe and organized transport of children. 2500 children attend courses in Greece since the beginning of 2017. According to recent data, 61 school buses carry children daily to 94 schools located close to hospitality centers.

Nevertheless, it is reported that a number of immigrants do not want to stay in Greece and plan to move to west Europe. This results in prolonged uncertainty about their future. Moreover, many parents decide not to send their children to school, since they perceive that if they give their consent for their children to attend school, this will lead them to stay permanently in Greece.

Current difficulties

The prolonged living in hospitality centers & hotspots resulted in increased conflicts between teenagers of different origins, increased aggression, pure actions of violence leading to destructions of accommodation centers, increased psychopathology (e.g. psychosis) and elevated fake behaviors showing psychopathology. All the above burden the national health system with referrals that mainly appeared as emergency cases.

Despite the difficulties, Greece has made serious efforts to ensure that the basic needs of refugees, respecting their human rights without using violence of any kind. It is important that the processes of housing, education, health care and quality of mental health care provided to this specific population have progressed. Another crucial issue is to address the problems of unaccompanied minors.

Despite the serious and relatively effective efforts to deal with health and mental health problems, much remains to be done. The refugee status in the host country should be urgently clarified (late asylum decisions so far) as well as the improvement of their living conditions. The most crucial is the clarification of the European policy on the refugee issue. It is important to maintain the containment of refugee flows towards Europe (e.g. agreement EU-Turkey) and European countries to deal with the current issue. If they do not, then any positive steps that have taken place in Greece will collapse. Additionally, if the number of refugees, who have found their way blocked in Greece, be increased, this will have a detrimental effect on the stability of the Greek society and state.