

The Refugee Population in Greece



Background

Thousands of refugees arrived on Greek shores, fleeing from political persecution and violence in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Refugees faced great difficulties, having little to no understanding of local culture and customs, as well as lacking financial resources. **For many refugees, Greece was their only hope for safety and the opportunity to start over. They were given the chance to file and plead their asylum cases at the Greek border, followed by relocation to a refugee camp. Approximately 50,000 refugees currently reside in camps across Greece, awaiting asylum approval** (International Rescue Committee, 2019). Due to a lack of consensus among European Union (EU) members regarding the refugee crisis as well as limited economic development in Greece, many refugees will live in camps for a prolonged period, during which time they will be exposed to violence. Greece experiences tension and social unrest due to the recent economic stagnation and imposed austerity measures by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Furthermore, high unemployment and weak social services cause many Greeks to develop negative opinions of refugees. Citizens believe that refugees burden an already overtaxed system, exhausting the economy and social services.

The Causes of the Humanitarian Crisis in Greece

With a growing number of armed conflicts raging in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, the EU is witnessing an influx of refugees arriving in Greece. Built around a strong commitment for human rights and humanitarian intervention, the EU has been positioned as a sanctuary for those fleeing persecution and oppression. However, in recent years, the EU hasn't seen any promising signs that the refugee population will lessen. In fact, conflicts have worsened, causing the refugee population in Europe to swell. Therefore, the EU has altered its policies and imposed restrictions on immigration. Greece, the main port of entry to Europe, was asked to shoulder most of the responsibilities. Recently, the EU has implemented stricter border crossing policies, barring migration from Greece, which means that many refugees cannot establish their lives beyond Greece. **Approximately 16,000 refugees were relocated to camps in the Greek cities of Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Samos, and Leros.** Roughly 38,000 other refugees were dispersed throughout mainland Greece (International Rescue Committee, 2019).

While awaiting approval for their asylum cases, the refugees reside in horrible living conditions. The camps are overcrowded, unsanitary and unsafe. There were many reports of sexual assault on women and girls. Reports showed that men broke into their tents and attempted to rape them. Many minors were at risk of brutality and excessive use of force by adults. Approximately 5,000 women refugees at the camps experienced some type of assault or violence (Townsend, 2017).



For those refugees who are dispersed throughout mainland Greece, the majority were simply left vulnerable without sufficient government assistance and no plans for assimilation within society. For many refugees, the language barrier and their limited financial resources remain the main challenges for building sustainable lives in Greece. The government has been unable to provide adequate healthcare and services for the most vulnerable - the children. The causes of this stagnation and limitation of government support are due to the preexisting financial conditions within Greece. The country was hit with austerity measures, which caused limited government spending. A lack of financial support from the international community, particularly the limited funding from the EU, pushed Greece to the edge of collapse. It is evident that a combination of financial crisis and limited humanitarian aid from abroad fueled violence from within. Greek natives were not fond of refugees, because many viewed them as burdens to society. In January 2018, the unemployment rate among young people in Greece was at 43 percent, (International Rescue Committee, 2019). Social unrest led to violence and police brutality. Nighttime attacks on refugees were a daily occurrence. In addition, native shopkeepers in Greece complained of the unattractive presence of the camps in the area as the cause of the significant decline in tourism (Townsend, 2017). It is fair to say that the humanitarian crisis in Greece is a result of poor coordination of resources and support from abroad, which has led to the intensified negative conditions in the country. For many, various humanitarian intervention initiatives seemed to be almost impossible to accomplish in Greece.

Embrace Relief Initiative and Contribution

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What Still Needs to be Done:

Once refugees are integrated within society, ongoing support from agencies and government services are necessary for long-term sustainability. Services, such as job training and education, are mandatory for this vulnerable population. Integration programs must include social workers and diverse professionals who can identify and help overcome cultural, housing, legal aid and employment barriers. There is a tremendous shortage of legal aids available to refugees and asylum seekers. According to the UNHCR report, the agency has provided 52 lawyers to help with refugee and migrant cases in the appeals stages, but clearly this is not a sufficient amount of help in time of crisis (Vigliar, 2016). In addition, government offices must implement programs that monitor violations of human rights in the region, to ensure compliance and enforcement of regional regulations. Lastly, education is a key component of refugee assimilation in Greece. As per a United Nations report, half of the Syrian refugee population is under the age of 18 (Bodewig, 2015). **Thus, providing quality education to this young population would secure economic prosperity and long-term sustainability. As part of the international community, every partnership is valuable for building strong and vibrant societies.**



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