

“IN THIS PLACE, WE HAVE TO HELP OURSELVES!”



OVER 1,600 REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS ARE LOCKED-UP IN MALAKASA REFUGEE CAMP DURING THE COVID-19 QUARANTINE WITH MORE THAN HALF OF THE RESIDENTS UNREGISTEREDⁱ AND NEAR 250 OF THEM LIVING IN COMMON AREAS AND MAKE-SHIFT SHELTERS.

<https://rsaeegean.org/en/quot-in-this-place-we-have-to-help-ourselves-quot-malakasa-camp/>

Throughout last year, the refugee camp in Malakasa, has been extensively used by homeless refugees to find emergency shelter – most of them newcomers from the Evros region. As of February 2020, near 250 people resided in common areas and makes-shift shelters in dire conditions and more than half of the camp’s population were not registered as residents by the Ministry of Migration and Asylumⁱⁱ. In the midst of this situation, on 5 April 2020, the first Covid-19 case was detected in Malakasaⁱⁱⁱ and the camp has been locked-down for a 14-day quarantine. Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) and PRO ASYL have documented 27 cases of asylum-seekers who sought shelter in the camp without official referral. The vast majority of the interviewees arrived from the Evros region and some from the islands. They described vividly the harsh living conditions and the challenges they face during the pandemic.^{iv} The failure of the Greek authorities to refer those arriving in the Evros region to a shelter following their release from detention means that many remain unregistered and in precarious accommodation for some time and face more risks for their mental and physical welfare particularly at the time of the pandemic.

**Names of those interviewed have been changed to protect their identity*

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INTRODUCTION



The Malakasa temporary reception site for third country national and stateless asylum seekers' (former "Gerakini" Army camp) is one of 32 (hereinafter: refugee camp/s), that operate in mainland Greece with an approximate total number of residents of about 25,000^{vi}.

As of February 2020, the 1,611 residents of the camp came mostly from Afghanistan (95%) and Iran (3%) with a significant percentage being children (39%). The occupancy rate of the crowded camp in the last four months has exceeded its maximum capacity.^{vii}

The camp is located next to an army camp and lies 40km away from Athens and only a ten-minutes-drive from Ritsona camp. Nearby in Malakasa, a new closed tent camp was opened in mid-March 2020^{viii} to detain some of those who arrived on the

Aegean islands after 1 March 2020. Earlier that month, Greece issued an Emergency Legislative Decree suspending the registration of asylum claims and allowing for the immediate deportation of those entering Greece to their country of origin or Turkey.^{ix} The validity of the Decree ended on 1 April 2020, but asylum claims continue not to be registered as the Greek Asylum Service has suspended its functions due to the Covid-19 pandemic since 13 March.^x

The Hellenic Army is responsible for the camp management as in various other camps in the mainland. However, on 6 April 2020, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum issued a tender calling for applications for the posts of directors for 32 refugee camps in mainland Greece including that of Malakasa^{xi}. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is responsible for site management support and provides for basic legal advice and psycho-social services. Further, the Hellenic National Public Health Organization (EODY) is tasked with providing primary health care services to the residents. The NGO Solidarity Now^{xii} provides services for children, families and vulnerable women (specifically: survivors of

gender-based violence).^{xiii} Foodkind, a small grassroots organization, operates in front of the camp’s gates offering hot meals for the unofficial residents without cash-cards.

Malakasa opened in March 2016 with the aim of providing emergency accommodation but since then turned into a mid-term accommodation camp. Its current capacity is for 1,589 individuals. The residents live mainly in the 264 containers and there are 28 rooms.^{xiv} There are also over 100 summer tents until today, which were set up by homeless refugees in different places around the camp. Such small tents have first appeared in greater numbers after a sudden increase of new arrivals from the land border in early 2018.

On the same day that Greece announced a national lockdown to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, on 23 March 2020, the authorities finally provided a legal basis for 28 refugee camps in the mainland by adopting Joint Ministerial Decision (2945/2020).^{xv} For more than three years since its opening and until 23 March 2020, the Malakasa refugee camp and the vast majority of the other camps on the mainland had lacked any legal basis, a factor that contributed to the substandard reception conditions.^{xvi}

The persistent deficiencies reported by residents from the opening of the site until today are its remote and isolated location, limitations in accessing legal, medical and social services especially for persons with vulnerabilities and families with small children and a general lack of security.^{xvii}

SYSTEMATIC LACK OF RECEPTION CONDITIONS FOR PEOPLE ARRIVING FROM EVROS REGION

Reception conditions are particularly poor for camp residents who arrived in Greece via the East Thrace Sea and sought shelter to any state camp – and Malakasa in particular, without official referral. These categories of residents find only provisional shelter and remain for weeks or months as unofficial residents awaiting their registration on site by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. While across Greece’s refugee camps an average of 14.4 % residents are unregistered on site, in Malakasa almost 60% of the residents are not officially registered (958 as of February 2020).^{xviii} In the vast majority of cases, those interviewed had reached Greece via the East Thrace Sea (23 cases).

Four of the unregistered individuals interviewed, had escaped the Aegean Islands (specifically Lesbos and Samos) for health reasons and due to the violence experienced there.^{xix} Three of those had their geographical restriction lifted but felt unsafe to remain in the hotspots.

Only 2 out of the 27 cases documented by RSA reported that they have been registered officially as camp residents. They were the only ones interviewed, who arrived in Greece before 2019. All others, reported they had not been registered until today.



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Most of the unregistered persons interviewed were families with small children and vulnerable individuals such as pregnant women, lactating mothers with newborns, people with mental health issues or chronic conditions, persons with disabilities, unaccompanied minors and victims of violence.

Land border arrivals in 2019 reached 14,887 and more than 2,000 in the first trimester of 2020.^{xx} According to those arriving crossing the borders from the Evros region, in all cases they had been detected and arrested in the Sea of East Thrace near Samothraki Island and Alexandroupoli, where arrivals increased in general since 2018.^{xxi} New arrivals in that area are not subject to the EU-Turkey 'Deal'. Therefore, they are not subject to the fast-track border procedure, their claims are not examined under the 'safe third country concept', and there is no geographical restriction imposed on them upon release.

Upon detection and apprehension, according to law, they should be transferred directly to the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) of Fylakio. Despite this fact, all persons interviewed reported a period of 1-3 nights of so-called 'pre-RIC detention' in a warehouse type building at the port of Alexandroupoli pending their transfer to Fylakio RIC. The interviewees said that during that time they had no access to the outside world and they were all held together in mixed detention in an inadequate space and slept on the ground. In two cases, interviewees reported that they had been pushed back from the land border back into Turkey by Greek law-enforcement officers before they could finally reach Greek territory.

Those interviewed said that they were then held for a few days in Fylakio RIC but were not given the opportunity to register their asylum claims – with only one exception. In three cases of obvious vulnerability including a case of a female asylum-seeker at the advanced stages of pregnancy and a male asylum-seekers with a physical disability, the RIC identified the vulnerability and noted it on their Foreigners' Medical Card from the Reception and Identification Service (RIS), which then seemingly facilitated their access to the asylum procedure in the Piraeus Asylum Office.

Those interviewed including those with identified vulnerabilities said that upon their release they were not referred to any reception facility for shelter and found themselves homeless. They then sought shelter in Malakasa camp. The problematic system of Fylakio RIC where asylum-seekers are able to register only their will for asylum means that they need to seek the registration of their claim from the competent Asylum Office.

Since the end of February 2020, when hundreds of refugees and migrants tried to cross the land border to Greece after the announcement of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan that he would let them pass to Europe, the few who actually reached Greek soil despite the massive presence of border police forces, got arrested and charged with irregular entry and were given prison sentences.^{xxii} Reportedly, there have not been any arrivals from the land border to Malakasa ever since.

Fatima* aged 23^{xxiii} from Afghanistan was in the advanced stages of pregnancy when she managed to reach Greece in the summer of 2019 with her mother and siblings. She described what the family faced upon their release from Fylakio RIC.

"(When we reached Athens), for two weeks we slept in different parks nearby because we didn't know where to go and we had to wait for my relatives to get their asylum cards too (from the Piraeus Asylum Office). (Then) we went to Malakasa. We bought a tent for all of us: 8 persons. My brothers slept outside. After 10 days, I went in labor. The camp management brought me to a room. I shared the space with two families. I slept in the kitchen. A few days after I moved there, my family had to call the

ambulance to bring me to hospital for the birth. It didn't come all night and I suffered. In the morning I went to the police at the gates and they called the ambulance again. It arrived two hours later. I had a Caesarian. After a week I returned to the kitchen I was sleeping in. A month later the two rooms were vacated and my family moved in. The situation in the building we stay is difficult. There is humidity in the walls. For seven months I was without money. My baby was getting sick, I had to bring it to the kids' hospital in Athens, because the camp pediatrician is not specialized on small kids, but I couldn't pay the ticket. I was travelling without. Sometimes they'd kick me off the train. I had no money for medicines. I need dry milk for my baby. I had breakdowns. I get panic attacks. I don't feel someone can help me while I am still inside this camp."

HUNDREDS OF VULNERABLE REFUGEES LIVE IN COMMON AREAS AND MAKESHIFT-SHELTERS

In the last few months, an average of 280 persons per month were staying in summer tents without further protection, in summer tents inside a rub-hall or in summer tents inside a warehouse type stone building referred to as the "tea-house".

Month	Ppl in "common spaces"	Ppl in "makeshift shelters"	total
November 2019	368	0	368
December 2019	368	0	368
January 2020	155	71	226
February 2020	133	116	249

Source: International Organization of Migration Factsheets^{xxiv}



According to the interviewees, during November and December 2019, there were around 50 small tents inside one rub-hall, and dozens of others sought shelter under corrugated iron, self-constructed cardboard huts or ended up living in tents in the open space around the camp.

Following snow and rain falls before the change of the new year, interviewees reported that many persons residing in summer tents had moved - following the intervention of IOM staff - into a warehouse type building in the camp. Only a few single men were still staying in tents in the open space. An electricity cut in the rub-hall lasting for reportedly more than 10 days during the same period, had deteriorated further their situation and left them without light and access to little heaters or water boilers. According to them, in January 2020 there were around 30 tents inside the building, while more or less the same number

of tents inside the rub-hall.

In March and April 2020, interviewees reported that some families had been moved into prefabs or rooms, whereas many newcomers had arrived from Lesbos island and had filled the rub-hall and the outside area again with the summer tents they brought along.

On average the asylum-seekers interviewed stayed for up to three months in tents. The longest stay being reported was between 7 and 8 months in cases of one single father and two single men. IOM reportedly transferred the ones registered as the most vulnerable ones to prefabs or rooms as soon as there was empty space. In the majority of cases, the asylum-seekers interviewed said that they found themselves an empty prefab or room, and then asked IOM to move there. Some interviewees reported they had moved in with other residents, who were hosting them.

Shakiba* aged 26^{xxv} from Afghanistan arrived with her husband and two small children (aged 1 and 6) to the camp from the East-Thrace Sea in summer 2019.

"This is a camp for the (vulnerable). They should say this openly. The people the organizations bring here are all those who have problems. The people who come here by themselves were homeless and just ended a dangerous journey across many borders or escaped from very bad living conditions on the islands. So they also all have problems. They first stay in tents, then the most (vulnerable) of them get transferred first into containers. The others stay in the tents until they also (become as vulnerable) ... But this is also a camp of the strong. They should say this openly too. The one who knows how to speak and demand, the one who knows how to fight, will get things faster. It is the rule of the jungle."

Karim* aged 29^{xxvi} from Afghanistan is now a recognized refugee. He has a disability in his legs and uses crutches to move. He arrived in Greece in August 2019 via the East-Thrace Sea.

"I stated that I was in need of housing from the first day I reached Greece. I slept one week in Victoria park and Saint Panteleimonas, until somebody told me to go to Malakasa camp. Other residents helped

me out with the construction of a tent. Since then (September 2019) I live unregistered in Malakasa. It has been five months since I got recognized as refugee in Greece but I still don't have money and a home.^{xxvii} I depend on food baskets and free food meals from volunteer organizations. I cannot easily use the public toilets in the camp due to my disability. I have to go in the "jungle"^{xxviii}. The water in the showers is cold, so sometimes my friends boil water and come to help me wash my head just next to my tent. During the winter my tent broke down only a second after I could escape it. A tree fell on it. I could have died. I have to borrow a heater from others during the day. Sometimes my whole tent is flooded with water. I am a survivor but I am (at the end of my tether) ... Now we are in quarantine. They said: 'Everyone stays in their tent, don't go out, don't shake hands, don't get close to each other!' I was far from help before but now I am cut off. I cannot receive aid. I have to borrow from whoever possible inside the camp. I am a vulnerable person, a recognized refugee in a tent. I feel ashamed even before my friends about my living conditions, my looks, my smell. Those who get asylum in Greece have very bad luck. I cannot even stop my hunger."

Feruza* aged 36^{xxix} from Afghanistan reached Greece with her husband and six minor children via the East-Trace Sea in January 2020. Her little son (aged 9) suffers from strong headaches and is in need of a stress free and calm environment according to his doctor. In Afghanistan he had to undergo a head surgery due to inner bleedings and stayed two months in coma.

"All our family suffers from mental health issues because we were attacked and injured in Afghanistan. Our children carry injuries. We survived a shipwreck. We got returned by Greek police to Turkey unlawfully. In Fylakio, we told them our problems and that one of our children was very sick. (EODY) gave us a medical referral and told us to go to Athens and show this there (to the responsible Asylum Office). In Athens we slept the first night in Victoria Park. Then we went to Malakasa. We build a shelter from plastic for ourselves. We handed the referral of our son to the organization in the camp (IOM) and received an appointment at the hospital. We went there with a fellow Afghan as we didn't know the language neither the way. Our son got twice hospitalized then. Meanwhile, we spent the 25 first days living in a tent. Then we were moved in a place with two rooms which we share with another family. We are supposed to be 8 persons in one room. Four of our kids sleep in the kitchen. Our appointment with the Asylum Service is in seven months – if the Asylum Service opens by then. Until that time, we cannot get a Cash-Card. We are eight persons depending on the food baskets distributed for our meals. We don't have gloves, masks or disinfectants. I am four months without my medication for my mental health. I suffer from headaches, insomnia and depression. Now we are locked inside. But our biggest problem is we have no money and we have nothing. We cannot go anywhere to buy something cheap

or to find things for free. We cannot get fresh fruits or vegetables with vitamins. We cannot buy medication. We have to wait for the virus to pass and pray."



Photo: Private
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LIMITED ACCESS TO SERVICES FOR THE VULNERABLE

All the refugees and asylum-seekers interviewed reported vulnerabilities within their families.^{xxx} The cases documented included: families, most of them with small kids including single parents; unaccompanied minors; persons with disabilities or chronic conditions; persons with mental health issues; pregnant / mothers with newborns; as well as victims of violence including gender-based violence.

They reported that they had informed the site management of their arrival (usually within the first few days), requested to be officially housed there and receive help to apply for asylum. Most of them reported also their health problems and other vulnerabilities. As they explained, they were all told IOM would apply for their registration on site at the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and they were awaiting an answer.



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The interviewees described that when asking the site managing support organization IOM for a shelter, the information given regularly was, that the site was already full. When later asking for specific help, they were being told, they "had decided themselves to come to the camp", so they weren't officially residing on site and only services within the camp could be offered to them. In general, the legal, medical and psycho-social services on site are very limited. They can only answer basic needs due to the low number of staff in relation to the population.

In practice, most residents have to travel to Athens for further support, such as: legal aid for the asylum procedure, family reunification, and appeals procedures; medical examinations or specialized medical treatment; free medication provision from NGOs; pre- and postnatal care, psychological therapy and

social care for victims of violence; free humanitarian aid such as food meals and clothes; language lessons and other integration measures.

NO FREE TRANSPORTATION TO ATHENS; NO CASH!

In order to access the above-mentioned services in Athens, but also the competent Asylum Offices in Piraeus and Katehaki, the Urban Cash Center (UCC), as well as hospitals, the camp residents have to use the local railway for a 50-minute journey and pay an 8 euro return ticket each time.

On 30 August 2019, residents of the camp closed the railway lines of Sfindali station at Malakasa for more than one hour in protest against the re-installation of tickets as police officers had taken refugees off the train shortly before.^{xxxii} This happened after TRAINOSE policy changed and the unemployed were not anymore able to travel for free and controls increased hindering refugees to use the train without paying.^{xxxiii} On September 3, 2019 they carried out another protest in front of the camp with banners stating slogans such as: "Malakasa=Jail. We are human".^{xxxiii}

This limitation is a greater challenge for new arrivals who have not yet been able to register their asylum claim and lack access to a Cash-Card. On average, new arrivals who managed to reach Greece in 2019 said that they received the first payments on their cash-card after 6-7 months. Nowadays, even when issued they will not be able receive the Cash-Cards practically, due to the quarantine. Many reported technical problems, that interrupted the functioning of their cards and forced them to reapply, staying again for some months without money. Persons who had arrived from the islands and moved themselves to Malakasa, reported of transition periods of some months, where their Cash-Cards were not loaded until the change of residence.

Zeynab* aged 33^{xxxiv} from Afghanistan arrived to Greece with her husband and their four kids in October 2019. The mother suffers from mental health issues and back pain, her husband is a victim of violence and two of her elder kids are in need of mental health support and another one suffers from epilepsy.

"We arrived in Malakasa and found ourselves a tent. We asked to be registered in the camp. We asked also to register our asylum claims... The appointment we received in Piraeus was four months later. For seven months now, we are without access to (an allowance), which means without access to Athens and help. We look for the food people throw away after the weekly markets. ... I have a lot of health problems. The doctors in the camp tell me to go to Athens for medical tests and for physiotherapy. My small son is epileptic and has fever attacks. He also suffers from mental health issues for more than three years. I have no money to buy a train ticket. If I go, sometimes they kick me out of the train and I then have to wait for the next one. Once they tell me, 'Why you come to Greece?' Sometimes Greeks stand up and change their seat, because they don't like to sit next to us. At least I don't get injured. The other day I saw the ticket controller beating a young Afghan man on his head, because he had no ticket and he didn't want to leave the train. He was bleeding a lot and had to be transferred to hospital. I am taking medication to feel better in this bad place. People get sick and sicker here. Our lives are like the open sea in the night. We cannot see the end and everything is dark."

SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING ASYLUM PROCEDURES

Those asylum-seekers who are arriving from the Evros region and seek shelter to the camp face significant challenges in accessing asylum procedures. Farsi/Dari speaking individuals who expressed their will apply upon arrival in Fylakio RIC, can only access the asylum procedure by email. Many lack the necessary technical and language skills as well as access to the internet.

RSA was informed from those interviewed that they face a waiting period of several months until their scheduled appointment with the competent Asylum Office in Piraeus. In cases of some families that arrived between October 2019 and February 2020 in Greece, the date given for the registration of their asylum claims was between four and six months from the date they emailed the Asylum Service. Some families who registered their claims during that period were provided with an interview date for 2023. On March 13, all administrative services of the Asylum Service got suspended for one month^{xxxv}. The suspension was later extended until 15 May.^{xxxvi}



It has to be mentioned that due to the restrictive stance of Germany in applications of family reunification based on the Dublin III Regulation^{xxxvii} - deadlines are interpreted to start from the registration of the willingness to claim asylum – all interviewees arriving from October 2019 onwards (4 cases), having family ties in Germany, were given late appointments to register their family reunification application at the Asylum Service – as described above, scheduled after the three-month deadline had passed. In all cases legal representatives asked the Asylum Service to re-schedule, but only in two cases this got accepted. In one case the Asylum Service replied that no earlier appointments were available.

Massoma* aged 27^{xxxviii} from Afghanistan arrived in Greece in December 2019 with her two small girls via the East-Thrace Sea. She travelled with her two underage children and the two underage brothers of her disabled husband who is legally resident in Germany for the past four years.

"When we arrived in Greece, we felt relief. We felt safe, but we didn't know what we had to do. In Fylakio, I said immediately that my husband is in Germany and we want to go there. They said: 'Go to Athens and apply there.' We were homeless. Somebody advised us to come to Malakasa. We received one tent by (other) residents of the camp who helped us. We found another broken one in the camp and fixed it. We put them in front of the big tent under a tree to keep ... the rain away. After a week it started snowing. My kids got sick. Everybody was told to move his tent into the 'teahouse' building. I told the organizations I needed help to go to my husband. They sent an email to Piraeus (Asylum Office). Our appointment was scheduled for six months later. I didn't know anything about deadlines or procedures. We found help from an organization outside the camp. Only with our lawyer we could change our appointment to apply for family reunification in the last moment, but that day the Asylum Service closed due to the quarantine.^{xxxix} ... We suffered a lot in the tent. I have mental health problems. When it gets worse, I faint. Once there was a big fight in the 'teahouse'. I kept my kids in my arm and sat in the middle of the tent waiting for the sounds of screams and beatings to end. After 2 ½ months, we are now in a container. There are often water cuts for some hours. I don't know when the quarantine will end and we will be able to continue our application. In these hard times, everyone wishes to be with the persons they love and feel safe."

Salima* aged 37^{xi} from Afghanistan arrived in Greece with her husband and four minor children (aged 4, 6, 7 and 16) in October 2019 from the East-Thrace Sea. The mother is in a risk pregnancy and suffers from mental health issues. Two of her children are resident in Germany.

"Upon arrival to Fylakio, we said directly that we want to join our two sons in Germany. They told us, go to Athens and apply. We came to Athens and we were homeless. We were lost. Some other Afghan told us to go to Malakasa. We arrived there, but the organizations told us the camp was full. We looked for tent. We built a construction out of cartons to have a "roof". In the bad nights, I would get panic attacks and hit myself. I couldn't breathe. The pregnancy also makes me feel sick. ... We asked the organizations in the camp for help to get an appointment to apply for family reunification. They emailed the Piraeus (Asylum Office). They gave us an appointment for six months later.^{xii} ... Now we are in quarantine. I cannot see my psychologist, and I cannot visit my midwife. We are waiting for our Cash-Card to be charged for first time. We have been without money for six months. We live solely from the food baskets the organizations give us here. Before we had some free meals offered by volunteers, but now they are not allowed to hand them to us anymore (as we are in quarantine)."

OBSTACLES IN ACCESSING HEALTHCARE AND MEDICINES



EODY the primary health care provider in the camp has one pathologist, one paediatrician and two nurses deployed in Malakasa. A dentist visits the site once a week. A psychiatrist is present twice a week.^{xiii} Psycho-social services are available on site by IOM and Solidarity Now.

Access to the camp doctors was described as difficult due to the high number of residents in relation to the number of available doctors. Persons in need of specialized doctors were told to seek help in Athens hospitals. In all the documented cases, interviewees said that there were no available interpreters to accompany them to the hospital and this made communications about their health issues difficult. Female interviewees said that they felt uncomfortable reporting gynecological problems to the doctors because the interpreter

available in the camp was male.

There is no hospital in Malakasa and the nearest health centre is located in 10,6 km distance.^{xliii} Interviewees said that most tests and medical treatments they had were in Athens hospitals. As the persons interviewed in the majority of cases had to wait or still wait for months for their cash-card, they could not/cannot afford the transportation costs to the hospital and back, neither they can afford buying the medicines needed.

Those interviewees who arrived after July 2019 with the exception of two very vulnerable cases lacked a temporary number of insurance and health care (P.A.A.Y.P.A)^{xliii} which allows for free access to public health care as the government delayed implementing a Joint Ministerial Decision signed in January 2020

regulating the provision of the temporary number. This number will be granted following an announcement of the Ministry of Migration to all asylum-seekers in Greek territory between the first and mid-April 2020.^{xlv} P.A.A.Y.P.A will have limited duration and will be terminated automatically if the asylum claim is rejected. Those residents of the camp however who have not been able to register yet their asylum claims will only be able to have access to primary health care to the camp doctors with all the challenges this poses due to their insufficient number and emergency care in hospitals.

Refugees also complained about the problems they faced in emergency cases as in the afternoons and weekends – since there is no interpreter available – they rely on the police to call the ambulance as well as long delays in ambulances, i.e. in cases of women suffering miscarriage.

Nuriya* aged 36^{xlvi} from Iran has arrived in Greece in October 2019 with her husband and two children (aged 3 and 5). After three days of detention in Fylakio RIC, they were released and travelled to Athens and then sought shelter in Malakasa camp.

"I was pregnant, and I was bleeding and having pain and we were in a tent. I was scared that I was going to lose my baby. In the end, I had a miscarriage. I think because of the conditions and the stress. The toilettes are dirty, the showers cold. The first weeks, we had no room and no money because we could not apply for asylum. We were given an appointment four months later. I am visiting a psychiatrist to deal with the situation. But if our situation doesn't change, how will my soul be healed?"

Soraya* aged 34 from Afghanistan arrived in July 2019 from the East-Thrace Sea to Greece with her disabled and sick husband and their four kids. The mother was pregnant and had a miscarriage. She suffers more than 15 years from psychological problems.

"We stayed for five months in a tent. In the new year I collapsed and had to be taken by ambulance to the hospital. It arrived after eight hours. I stayed nine days there to be treated by a psychiatrist. The ambulance arrived eight hours after my friend called them. ... Another day, I did not feel well again. I started bleeding. A neighbor called the ambulance. It was a Friday. They didn't come. On Monday I went to the camp doctor and she gave me a painkiller and told me to go to the hospital. I already had lost my child. I was scared to go as I do not have a (health care number)."

VIOLENCE AND LACK OF SECURITY

Interviewees residing in prefabs and tents, reported a feeling of fear and lack of safety in the camp. They said that they are left to protect themselves. Specifically, during the nights and weekends, when employees are absent, they can only ask the police for help, but there are no interpreters. Interviewees differentiate between the dangers "outside" and "inside". The term "outside" refers to open spaces inside the camp between the prefabs and tents, around the water taps and toilets. "Inside" is a term that refers to the area inside the prefabs or tents, within the family unit or roommates. The nights are described in general as dangerous. Most residents stated, they prefer to stay during these times "inside", even if inside is a small tent. A pervading feeling is that those who commit violence are often not punished despite frequent incidents of violence between residents.



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Outside, upon darkness there are reportedly often fights between men including beatings and use of knives. Interviewees described, that people were getting drunk and acting wild. The situation was described as getting "out of control". One family described how two teenage boys had been attacked in the camp one night by masked men. This was also described by one of the boys who experienced the attack. They further described feeling terrified by unknown people knocking their door and window at night. Others spoke of containers being broken and things getting stolen.

In general, more often women and girls as well as their parents are feeling afraid of being exposed to gender-based violence if they go outside their living areas and spoke of being subjected to verbal sexual harassment by males not belonging to their family. A few teenage boys also said that they were also subjected to verbal sexual harassment and expressed fears of being exposed to sexual violence.

Khalida* aged 40^{xlvii} from Afghanistan lives in the camp with her husband and three underage daughters. They reached Greece through the East-Thrace Sea in October 2019.

"I do not bother about my own situation, but I am scared for my girls here. It is unhealthy and dangerous to live like this in a tent in this camp. We go to the toilette and the sewage water comes out. My daughters get (verbally sexually harassed) by older men here. My kids are in danger."

Fereshta* aged 23^{xlviii} from Afghanistan lives in the camp with her husband, their 5-months old baby and 4-year-old daughter. They have been recently granted international protection in Greece. They left from Samos after being 11 months in a tent as Fereshta was pregnant at the time and could not bear the dire conditions. Upon arrival to Athens, the family stayed for four months in a summer tent in front of Eleonas camp before coming to Malakasa.

"After 18 o'clock I don't go out. No women go out. It isn't safe. The police don't do anything if there is a fight and the ambulance comes after hours. In an emergency who we will address? Who will survive? I feel here more in danger than on Samos, because here in the nights and weekends there is no one who cares if we live or die. ..."

Omid* aged 17^{xlix} from Afghanistan arrived with his five underage brothers, his two adult sisters and his mother in Greece. His mother and small brother are now in Germany. The rest of the family lives still in the camp.

"Two of us brothers got attacked inside the camp. We got beaten by masked persons. Nobody did something for this. We were bleeding and all our body pained. We don't know who it was. My mum cried when she saw us. She then decided to leave for Germany with my smallest brother, to find a way to bring the four of us there too and be safe. She was told it was the safest and fastest way if she'd go first and we'd apply for family reunification. Until today we receive threats in the nights. ..."

The situation is even worse for the people residing in tents, who have no door to lock and need to use the common toilets, water tabs and showers. They said that every activity outside their tent has to be carried out together. No one can be left back alone. More than that, the lack of money (cash-card) and the poor living conditions created an atmosphere of tension, where fights easily erupted i.e. over the fair distribution of donations.

The marginal location of the camp far from support structures in Athens, further exposes female asylum-seekers to an enhanced danger of domestic violence. The "inside" is where the abuse is committed. In the three cases where domestic violence was reported, the survivors felt alone with their problems and did not know of places where they could seek specialized help. While in some of the reported cases, help and advice had been offered by organizations inside the camp, the women and girls said that they did not feel Greece could provide them with a safe environment, where they could report the violence, be transferred in a safe shelter and survive daily life alone. This is why the survivors said that they chose to remain in the abusive environment until they can finally escape Greece.

Parwana* is a young female asylum-seeker¹ who described her experience of domestic violence.

"We are almost one year in this camp. In the beginning we spent four months in a tent. Since we moved to a container, our living conditions are more human but life has become more difficult for me. We experience a lot of violence at home. In this place, we have to help ourselves. I try to find help for myself and my siblings. I try to know my rights as a human. I have to search for them beyond the camp's fence, in Athens. We are far from the society. Support for us asylum seekers is very limited in Greece. I cannot imagine finding a safe place within this country. I cannot imagine that I can survive on my own here. It took four months to get our Cash-Cards. My asylum interview will be in one year. I cannot wait. I want to leave Greece. To escape from my private war at home."

CAMP LOCKDOWN DUE TO COVID-19



On 21 March 2020, the government with a Joint Ministerial Decision restricted for a month the movement of residents of the hotspots on the Aegean islands and the temporary accommodation sites in mainland Greece for staff of NGOs and international organization due to the Covid-19 pandemic.^{li} Heads of refuge families or groups living in these camps are allowed to exit the camp only between 07:00 and 19:00 for the covering of basic needs. The Decision also restricted access of staff of international organizations and NGOs to these sites save some exceptions. On 23 March, Greece decided a nationwide lockdown which was later extended until the 27 April.^{lii}

The operational plan "Agnodiki" was concluded on 24 March 2020 by the General Reception Secretariat and outlines the special emergency measures to be applied for refugee camps during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to this,

EODY staff should be increased in all sites and three special sections should be created for quarantine, examination and recovery.^{liiii} On 5 April 2020, Malakasa camp was locked-down after the first detection of a Covid-19 case on site and a 14-day quarantine was put in place.^{liiv} Currently, there are five Covid-19 confirmed cases in Malakasa and 23 in the nearby Ritsona camp. In the past few days Koutsochero camp was also placed in quarantine.^{liiv} In a statement, the President of the Greek Federation of Workers in Public Hospitals raised concern over the delay of the authorities to test a suspected case in Malakasa.^{livi}

In a public statement, the Minister for Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarakis, spoke about a "health shielding" for the refugee camps. He stated, that: *"We have taken extraordinary measures of health protection and cleanliness in reception structures and we have also increased the awareness of the residents in their languages, so they can understand the extraordinary conditions that exist due to the coronavirus."*^{liiii} The authorities also announced the enhancement of EODY presence in the camp, the coverage of the residents basic food and health care needs during the quarantine period.^{liiii}

The camp's residents reported that some special measures were taken since the national lockdown and also after the quarantine such as distribution of food baskets and hygiene kits to all residents. They were also given the possibility to reach site management in their own language in case of emergency by phone through a special whatsapp number.

IOM continues its presence despite quarantine, but with limited emergency staff on site during normal working days and hours as well as EODY. Residents said they were asked not get to out of their shelters if possible and in general avoid social contacts. The persons tested positive on the virus were reportedly quarantined in their own prefab.

Yet, in locked-down Malakasa, many prefabs and rooms are overpopulated, while people stay also in makeshift tents and common spaces and have to share showers, toilets and water taps. The poor hygiene standards, overcrowded accommodation and shared toilets and showers can increase the risk of infections for those living in provisional shelters in the camp and make the requests for social distancing futile. According to Greece's Health Ministry spokesperson and infectious diseases expert Professor Sotiris Tsiodras, there is general danger for persons living in such settlements as refugee camps: "In closed populations there is an increased possibility of a spread and transmission of such a virus that is so easily transmitted."^{liix}

Interviewees staying in prefabs said that they could remain in isolation and adhere to the measures, despite the difficulties they had. But persons staying in tents were desperate as they live side by side to each other and keep social distancing or "stay at home". Until the lock-down, they were queuing daily in front of the camp to receive free food meals from volunteers. They share 30 toilets that described as filthy, 16 showers and water taps and said that there is no hot water which made handwashing and disinfecting of items more difficult. According to those interviewed, they were not provided with masks, gloves and disinfectants by the authorities save chlorine and soap.

The asylum-seekers interviewed described of feeling "like a mouse in the trap", not knowing who is infected and who not and not able to protect themselves. They are trying to stay inside as much as possible, but due to the limited space and their already burdened psychology, it is a hard task. Some persons resorted to sewing their own masks, where possible. A few had managed to find some masks in advance to the quarantine. They are highly concerned as they lack basic medicine against fever and cough and are not sure if they would have access to them if needed. Some persons with chronic conditions said that they lacked enough supplies of their medicines.

Some persons expressed a fear to report symptoms, as they didn't understand what would happen to them in such a case and where authorities would bring them. Two interviewees who suffered from cough and fever and were concerned about their symptoms said that when they approached the doctor he said that symptoms were not worrisome and that they corresponded to cold/flu.

Interviewees spoke about deficiencies in nutritious and wholesome food, the lack of ingredients such as fresh fruits and vegetables, and insufficient oil, rice and flour. In seven cases, people said that they lacked Cash-Cards (charge) or they could not access them due to their age or legal status. They said that they tried to borrow from friends and feared how the situation would develop as they completely depended on the site managements help. Some persons stated, they had no more savings and could due to quarantine not receive money transfers from relatives living abroad, or borrow money from friends living outside the camp, find free fruits and vegetables in the end of weekly markets (as they used to do) or access humanitarian assistance from NGOs based in Athens.

Sayed Ali* aged 36^{lx} from Afghanistan arrived through the East-Thrace Sea in Greece at the end of October 2019. He lives in the camp his wife and two kids (aged 5 and 10). They could only apply for asylum in February 2019 and thus still lack a cash-card while still living in a tent. In the winter, the father suffered a heart attack.

"We are locked up in quarantine but living side by side with dozens of others in one big tent. They say: 'Keep two meters distance from each other'. But we are stuck with each other day and night. We share the dirty toilets and showers. We don't have hot water. Sometimes there isn't running water at all. We come together to the water taps and in the tent all the time. If one of us gets the virus, we will all be infected. Peoples' mental health gets worse day by day. On top of the problems we already had, we are now also anxious not to get sick and about not knowing if our families are safe. We don't have anything to defend ourselves so we can only wait for the worse to come. We cannot sleep. Many people had mental health problems already and they are getting worse now. We move towards a very basic struggle trying to survive the virus, the conditions, the dangers. ... Don't leave us alone!"

Shakiba* aged 26^{lxi} from Afghanistan arrived with her husband and two small children (aged 1 and 6) to the camp from the East-Thrace Sea in summer 2019.

"I am scared that with the virus here, we could die. Whatever we do to keep distance from each other, we are too many here. We pray that no more people get sick here in the camp and in all of the world. We are all the same, no one should get sick. Every day I call my family in Iran and beg them not to go out. God should save us all!"

RECOMMENDATIONS

PRO ASYL/ RSA maintain their call to evacuate vulnerable refugees who are homeless or live in overcrowded Greek camps under poor conditions and family reunifications should be eased specifically in light of the pandemic under the humanitarian clause. In light of the lasting and worsening reception crisis, PRO ASYL /RSA call on EU Member States to maintain the stop of Dublin transfers and not to deport recognized refugees to Greece.

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RSA
REFUGEE SUPPORT AEGEAN

ⁱ IOM Factsheet (February 2020). Source:

https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/FINAL_FEB_compressed.pdf

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Source: https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/ygeia/237999_poly-liga-kai-poly-arga-ta-metra-kai-sti-malakasa

^{iv} RSA researchers in the period November 2019-January 2020, conducted six visits to Malakasa village and documented interviews with 27 unregistered residents in the surrounding area of the site representing families with 106 persons in total -including 53 kids and 7 unaccompanied minors, 4 single headed families, 7 pregnant or lactating mothers and 2 disabled persons. Most of the interviewees are families with small kids and many suffer from chronic diseases and/or mental health problems. The team has followed-up on their situation until today 2020, conducting individual meetings in Athens and by telephone calls.

^v Greek term: Δομή Προσωρινής Υποδοχής Πολιτών Τρίτων Χωρών ή ανιθαγενών, οι οποίοι έχουν αιτηθεί διεθνή προστασία – Joint Ministerial Decision No. 2945, Gov. Official Gazette B' 1016. Source: <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-allodapoi/prosphuges-politiko-asulo/koine-upourgike-apophase-2945-2020.html>

^{vi} IOM Factsheet (February 2020). Source: <https://greece.iom.int/en/sms-factsheets> (last visited 27 March 2020)

^{vii} IOM Factsheet (December 2019). Source:

https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/December_2019.pdf

See also: According to the Greek Army, as of their last update on 22 November 2019, the MALAKASA camp was hosting 1,837 persons exceeding full capacity (1,752). Sources: <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1538074/geetha-pano-apo-55000-prosfuges-stis-domes-filoksenias-enoplou-dunameon> ; <http://www.geetha.mil.gr/media/20191122.pdf>

^{viii} The permit for the positioning and construction of the site took place with the Joint Ministerial Decision number 51 / 12.3.2020 of the Ministers of Environment and Energy - Interior - Immigration and Asylum (Gov. Official Gazette B'834)

^{ix} Emergency Legislative Decree of 2-3-2020 'Suspension of the submission of asylum applications', Gov. Official Gazette, (A' 45) approved by the Greek Parliament by Law 4681/2020, Gov. Official Gazette 74/A/27-3-2020, See also <https://rsaeegean.org/en/protect-the-most-vulnerable-to-ensure-protection-for-everyone/>.

^x Currently it is suspended until May 15, 2020. Source: <http://asylo.gov.gr/?p=9453> and http://asylo.gov.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/English-Announcement-April-10_MK.pdf

^{xi} Source: <https://www.firstreception.gov.gr/news-detail.php?type=comp&id=388;> <https://www.firstreception.gov.gr/PRIImages/EditorImages/PEΦΠ46ΜΔΨΟ-ΔΙ2.pdf>

^{xii} They provide for Child and Family Support Hubs in Malakasa and other sites, including the identification and targeted case management of children at risk and vulnerable women and families. Amongst others, they focus particularly on unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), sexual and gender-based violence survivors (SGBV) and people with disability and/or illness and provide psychosocial and legal support, including appropriate referrals to other service providers when needed. Source: https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/blue_dots/

^{xiii} IOM Factsheet (February 2020). Source: https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/FINAL_FEB_compressed.pdf

^{xiv} IOM Factsheets. Source: <https://greece.iom.int/el/sms-factsheets>

^{xv} Joint Ministerial Decision (2020/2945). 28 of the pre-existing of the temporary reception sites for third country nationals or stateless persons who have applied for asylum in Greece. Source: <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-allodapoi/prosfuges-politiko-asulo/koine-upourgike-apophase-2945-2020.html?q=2945/>.

^{xvi} Only three were operating with the necessary prior Joint Decision by the competent Ministries of Economy and Migration Policy. These camps are Schisto (September 2015), Eleonas and Diavata (November 2016).

Joint Ministerial Decision 3/5262, "Establishment of the Open Facility for the hospitality of asylum seekers and persons belonging to vulnerable groups in Eleonas Attica Region", 18 September 2015, Gov. Official Gazette B2065/18.09.2015. Joint Ministerial Decision 3.2/6008 "Establishment of the Open Facility for the temporary reception of applicant of international protection", 18 September 2015, Gov. Official Gazette B' 1940/6.06.2017. Joint Ministerial Decision 3/14762, "Establishment of Open Facilities for the Temporary Hospitality of applicant for international protection", Gov. Gazette B' 3720/16.11.2016.

Sources:

https://www.firstreception.gov.gr/PRIImages/EditorImages/Ευρετήριο%20Νομοθεσία%20ΥΠΥΤ_1_οὐνιος%202018.pdf

A fourth legally pre-existent refugee camp is the open accommodation site specifically for applicants of voluntary return in the region of Attica Alsos by the Municipality of Athens. Joint Ministerial Decision 3/5023/2015: *Establishment of the Open Facility for the reception of applicant of voluntary return in the region Attica Alsos of the Municipality Athens, Attica*", 15 September 2015, Gov. Official Gazette 1990/B/2015. Source: http://www.et.gr/idoocs-nph/search/pdfViewerForm.html?args=5C7QrtC22wE4q6ggiv8WTXdtvSoClrL8Rc9TCA8iZVfNZ8op6Z_wSuJlnJ48_97uHrMts-zFzeyCiBSQOpYnTy36MacmUFCx2ppFvBej56Mmc8Qdb8ZfRJaZnslAdk8Lv_e6czmhEembNmZCMxLMtXAhS_zSqOCr_LZZ6OWOjukL-WEVtvZu-2P7MzjivJas

^{xvii} RSA 2018: Reception Crisis in Greece: The Malignancy of Attica's Refugee Camps. Source: <https://rsaegean.org/en/reception-crisis-in-greece/>

^{xviii} IOM Factsheet (February 2020). Source: https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/FINAL_FEB_compressed.pdf

^{xix} As they explained, the procedures to recognize their vulnerabilities and find them proper shelter were lasting too long. The families and minors felt in danger and could not endure any longer the inhuman conditions, lack of protection and help, as well as experiences of violence. It has been reported, that the fire which killed a small boy in Moria hotspot on Lesbos in March 16, 2020 led to the most recent arrivals of homeless refugees to Malakasa.

^{xx} UNHCR. Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

^{xxi} Source: <https://www.tanea.gr/2019/01/31/greece/oie-ayksimeni-i-roi-prosfygon-kai-metanaston-ston-evro/>

<http://hcg.gr/node/22283>

^{xxii} For the situation at the land border after February 2020, see: Human Rights Watch 2020: Greece: Violence Against Asylum Seekers at Border: Detained, Assaulted, Stripped, Summarily Deported. Source: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/17/greece-violence-against-asylum-seekers-border>

For the lack of access to the asylum procedure for persons arriving after 1. March 2020, see: Press Release by 121 organizations (26 March 2020): 'Restore legality to protect refugees and the society at large amidst the pandemic'. Source: <https://rsaegean.org/en/protect-the-most-vulnerable-to-ensure-protection-for-everyone/>

^{xxiii} Interviewed on 15.01.2020, 19.01.2020, 06.03.2020 and 08.04.2020.

^{xxiv} IOM Factsheets. Source: <https://greece.iom.int/el/sms-factsheets>

^{xxv} Interviewed 8.12.2019 and 9.4.2020.

^{xxvi} Interviewed on 29.01.2020 and 09.04.2020.

^{xxvii} In March 30, 2020 Migration Minister Notis Mitarakis announced that beneficiaries of international protection would have to leave the official sites and ESTIA housing from

31.5.2020 on and upon a deadline of 30 days from the issuance of their asylum decision, as outlined in the Article 5 of the Joint Ministerial Decision of April 7, 2020 (13348 – Gov. Official Gazette B'-1199-07.04.2020)

Source: <https://www.mitarakis.gr/gov/migration/1973-dt-yma-estia-ii>

^{xxxviii} By "jungle", the interviewee refers to the forest next to the camp.

^{xxxix} Interviewed on 02.04.2020.

^{xxx} The 27 persons interviewed correspond to families including in total 106 persons.

^{xxxi} Source: https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/209011_astynomikoi-katebazan-prosfyges-apo-treno-sti-malakasa

^{xxxii} See, for the possibilities to get reduced tickets according to the new rules the internet page of the train company. Source: <http://www.trainose.gr/επιβατικό-έργο/εισιτήρια-προσφορές/>

^{xxxiii} Source: <https://thepressproject.gr/choris-isitirio/>

^{xxxiv} Interviewed 23.11.2019, 9.1.2020 and 8.4.2020.

^{xxxv} Source: <http://asylo.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Announcement-Suspension-of-Services-to-the-Public-English.pdf>

^{xxxvi} Source: <http://asylo.gov.gr/en/?p=5303>

^{xxxvii} RSA 2019: Refugee Families Torn Apart. The systematic rejections of family reunifications requests from Greece by Germany and their detrimental impact upon the right to family life and the best interest of the child. Source: <https://rsaegean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/REFUGEE-FAMILIES-TORN-APART-3-1.pdf>

^{xxxviii} Interviewed on 15.01.2020, 19.01.2020 and 4.4.2020.

^{xxxix} The family's appointment for the registration of their reunification request was originally outside the three-month deadline and it was only changed for the mother and her children following an intervention by the RSA legal team. In the last day of the deadline, when they were supposed to register their claim and the application for family reunification, the Asylum Service suspended its services for the public due to Covid-19 pandemic.

^{xl} Interviewed on 08.12.2020, 14.1.2020 and 4.4.2020.

^{xli} Only upon repeated intervention of RSA legal team the appointment for the registration of their claim could be rescheduled for the last day within the 3-months deadline. On that day, when the family presented themselves to the competent Asylum Service they were informed that they received an order to suspend their administrative services to the public due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The claim did not get registered yet.

^{xlii} EODY did not respond on the two requests on information sent by RSA in January 2020. Information on EODY staff in the site was found here: Source: <https://www.902.gr/eidisi/politiki/210154/periodeia-klimakioy-toy-kke-ston-prosfygiko-kataylismo-foto>

- xliii Source: <https://www.902.gr/eidisi/politiki/210154/periodeia-klimakioy-toy-kke-ston-prosfygiko-kataylismo-foto>
- xliv Joint Ministerial Decision (717/2020 - ΦΕΚ 199/Β/31-1-2020) "Regulations for ensuring the access of applicants for international protection to health services, medical care, social insurance and the labor market - PAAYPA issuance".
- xlv Source: <https://www.mitarakis.gr/gov/migration/1975-dt-yma-apodosi-paaypa>
- xlvi Interviewed on 23.11.2019 on 9.4.2020.
- xlvii Interviewed on 23.11.2019.
- xlviii Interviewed on 08.12.2019 and 11.4.2020.
- xlix Interviewed on 15.01.2020, 6.3.2020 and 5.4.2020.
- I Interviewed on 6.12.2019 and 8.4.2020.
- ii Source: <https://www.mitarakis.gr/gov/migration/1962-dt-yma-kya-periorismou>
- iii Source: <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/04/05/greece-extends-coronavirus-lockdown/>.
- iiii Statement by Manos Logothetis, Secretary General of Reception for Asylum-Seekers of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. Source: https://eody.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/0403_briefing_covid19.pdf.
- liv Source: <https://www.mitarakis.gr/gov/migration/1984-dt-yma-ygeionomikos-apokleismos-malakasa>
- lv Source: <https://www.efsyn.gr/node/238634>; <https://www.amna.gr/en/article/448817/Covid-19-cases-in-Greece-reach-2-011-on-Friday-population-still-very-vulnerable-to-infection>
- lvi Source: https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/ygeia/237999_poly-liga-kai-poly-arga-ta-metra-kai-sti-malakasa.
- lvii 25 March 2020. Source: <https://www.mitarakis.gr/press/81-tv/1968-dt-yma-ert1-kentriko-deltio>
- lviii Source: <https://www.mitarakis.gr/gov/migration/1984-dt-yma-ygeionomikos-apokleismos-malakasa>.
- lix Source: <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/koronoios-ta-prota-kroismata-kleistoy-plithysmoys>
- lx Interviewed on 8.12.2019 and 10.4.2020.
- lxi Interviewed 8.12.2019 and 9.4.2020.