

REFUGEE/MIGRANT CRISIS IN EUROPE

SITUATION UPDATE, Greece: March 2016

KEY FINDINGS

- + Humanitarian organisations have major concerns for the protection of thousands of refugees and migrants who are now in overcrowded detention facilities on the Greek islands and may soon be returned to Turkey.
- + The system for assessing asylum claims in the Greek islands and mainland is understaffed and inadequate, and there is limited safe and acceptable accommodation to host asylum-seekers pending their decision.
- + Arrival date and nationality are likely to have the greatest impact on the level of protection that refugees and migrants receive from European states and their access to services, irrespective of their specific needs and vulnerabilities.
- + Many refugees and migrants will likely seek to continue their journey by irregular and more dangerous means unless they receive reassurance that both asylum and decent accommodation will soon be available to them.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

- + Following the full closure of the Balkan transit route on 8 March, the EU-Turkey Agreement came into effect at midnight on 20 March. Any new arrivals to Greece after this date, regardless of nationality and need for international protection, are subject to possible deportation back to Turkey after a fast-tracked asylum process. With Turkey reclassified as a "safe country" migrants and refugees can still claim asylum in Greece, but applications will likely be declared inadmissible (European Commission 19/03/2016). As a result, hotspots have overnight become pre-departure detention facilities where all new arrivals are held while their case is assessed. Most will then be returned to Turkey raising protection concerns.
- + The day after the agreement came into effect saw widespread confusion among Greek authorities and anxiety among refugees and migrants present on the islands.

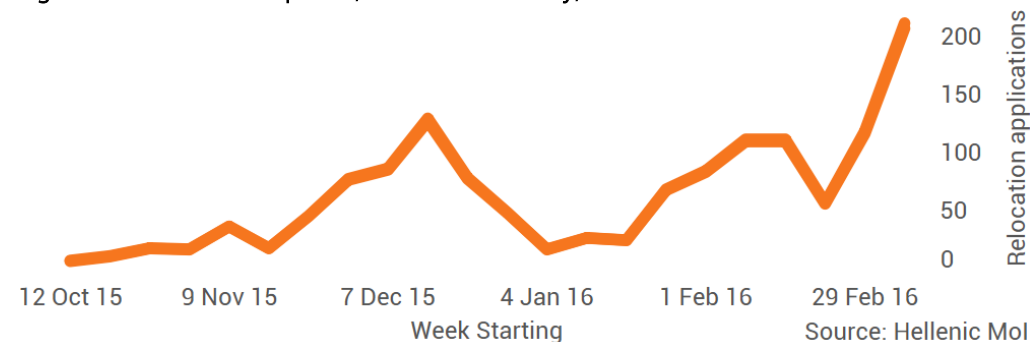
The first step authorities took was to begin sending all refugees and migrants who had arrived before 20 March to the mainland. This had the effect of separating refugees and migrants into two very different groups with entirely different needs and challenges:

- + The approximately 48,000 refugees and migrants who arrived before 20 March and continue to be stranded in Greece with reduced options for onward travel. For them, the focus of the response will shift from providing emergency services to a mobile population, to addressing the longer term needs and prospects of a more static group.
- + The new arrivals (currently at 1,419) who have been forcibly held in detention facilities. The majority of them will likely be returned to Turkey where protection concern are high (HRW 23/11/2015, UNHCR 11/2009).
- + Key humanitarian organisations working in the Greek islands have reassessed their position and suspended most of their activities in the hotspots. They have raised serious protection concerns around the transformation of hotspots into dangerously overcrowded, police-run detention facilities (UNHCR 22/03/2016, MSF 22/03/2016, NRC 23/03.2016)

LEGAL CHANNELS

Increase in asylum applications: There has been a sharp increase in stranded migrants and refugees in Greece asking for asylum or family reunification directly from Greece and signing up for the EU relocation programme. As it has become clearer to them that borders across the Balkans will not reopen in the near future, most remain determined to find alternative places to start a new life in Western Europe. Migrants and refugees believe that these programmes could help them achieve that, or at least live in Europe until conflicts in their countries of origin cease.

Figure 1: Relocation requests, October-February, Greece



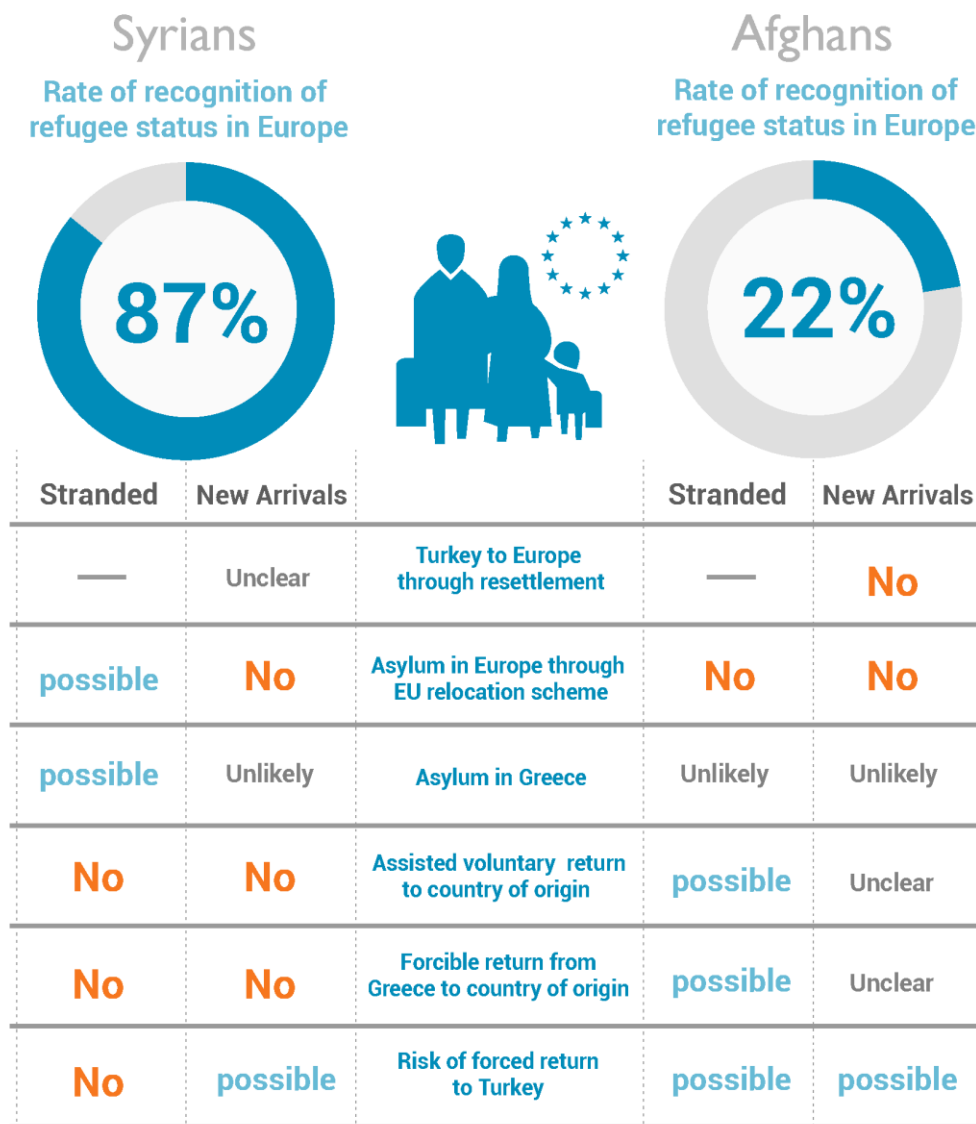
The system for assessing asylum claims in the Greek islands and mainland is inadequate, and there is limited safe and acceptable accommodation to host asylum-seekers pending a decision. Because public sector recruitment is frozen in Greece, the Greek Asylum Service is currently understaffed. The result is a backlog and over a four-week wait for any new appointments.

Asylum process and concerns: In the islands, the speed at which the EU-Turkey Agreement has been implemented did not allow the Greek authorities time to prepare for the changes. Under the agreement, a new “fast-track” asylum processing system is being put in place, envisioning the support of 4,000 asylum officials from the rest of Europe (international media 23/03/2016), including judges, border guards, translators and other staff. If arrivals continue at their current rate, hotspots will become overwhelmed before extra support arrives, creating particular concerns for the many women and children who are currently held in detention and could remain there for weeks. This will also increase the risk of migrants and refugees being sent back before authorities take the time to process their claims in line with recognised standards.

Inequity of options: Even if the asylum processing capacity increases significantly, not all asylum-seekers will be entitled to the same degree of international protection and their chances of eventually obtaining refugee status will vary considerably. As shown in Figure 2, Afghans, the second-largest group of people arriving in Greece, have a significantly lower chance than Syrians of obtaining refugee status in Europe and will not be able to apply for the EU relocation scheme (EASO 03/2016, UNHCR 03/2016). In the long term, and as a large proportion of people get rejected from these schemes, there will likely be an increase in the already large of undocumented migrants in Greece and Europe entering the informal labour market — or people being forced or assisted to return to their country of origin.

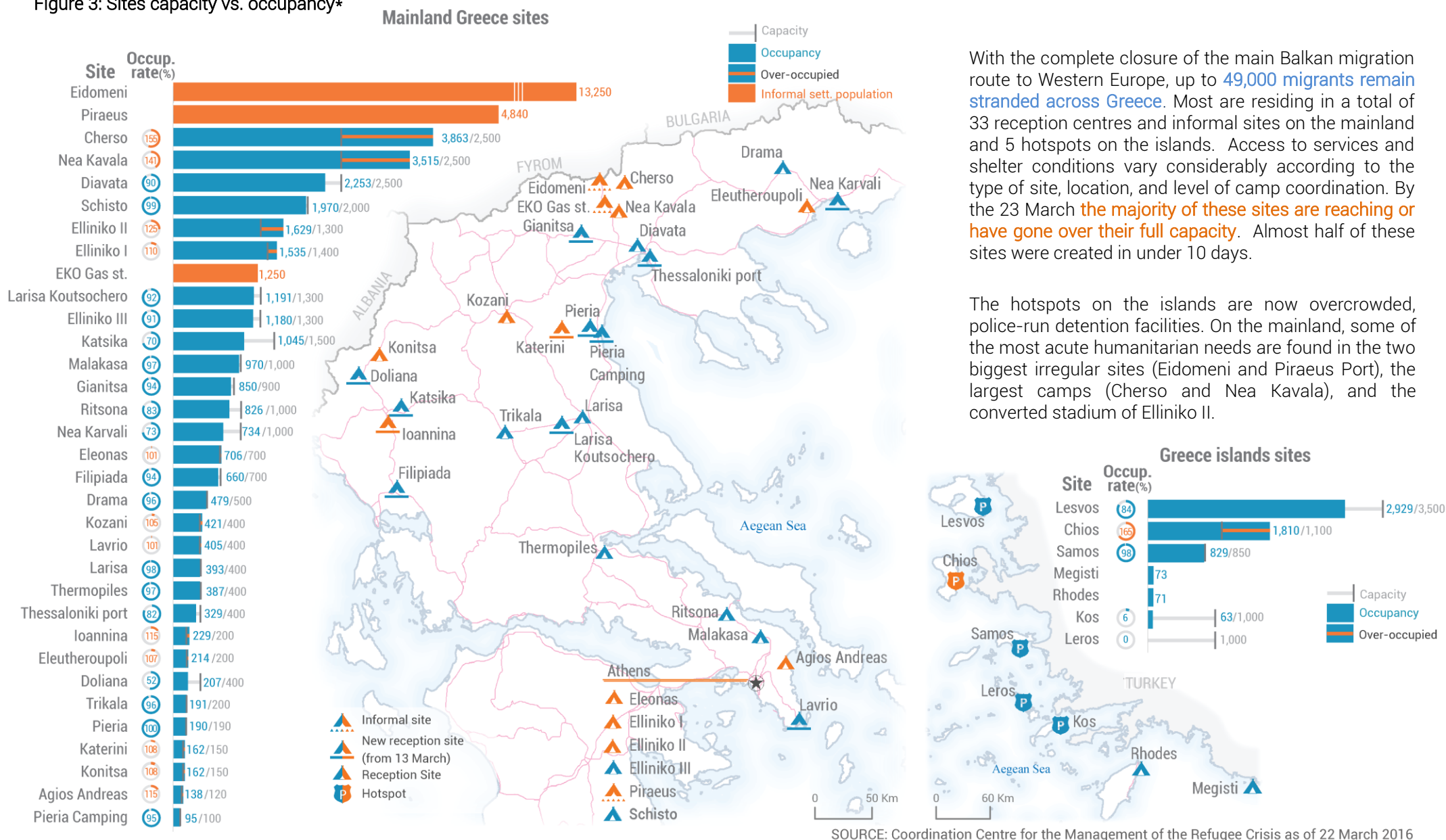
Invisible migrants: While the attention of authorities is focused on processing new arrivals and those going through the asylum process, the growing number of undocumented migrants in Greece remains a key protection concern. Although there is currently no reliable figure quantifying irregular migration in Greece, 2011 studies suggest there were over 390,000 undocumented migrants in the country before the upsurge in arrivals in 2015 (Maroukis, 2012). When refugees and migrants lose their temporary legal status, their access to public services such as medical facilities is greatly reduced and they are at risk of lengthy periods of administrative detention (MSF 2014). Addressing their needs will be challenging as humanitarian organisations will face legal challenges in providing migrants and refugees with accommodation and basic services.

Figure 2: Inequity of options



First instance decisions by outcome and recognition rates in EU-28, 4th quarter 2015. This does not include positive decisions for subsidiary protection and humanitarian reasons. Sources: Eurostat, Asylum Services, EASO.

Figure 3: Sites capacity vs. occupancy*



With the complete closure of the main Balkan migration route to Western Europe, up to **49,000 migrants remain stranded across Greece**. Most are residing in a total of 33 reception centres and informal sites on the mainland and 5 hotspots on the islands. Access to services and shelter conditions vary considerably according to the type of site, location, and level of camp coordination. By the 23 March **the majority of these sites are reaching or have gone over their full capacity**. Almost half of these sites were created in under 10 days.

The hotspots on the islands are now overcrowded, police-run detention facilities. On the mainland, some of the most acute humanitarian needs are found in the two biggest irregular sites (Eidomeni and Piraeus Port), the largest camps (Cherso and Nea Kavala), and the converted stadium of Elliniko II.

*ACAPS has also produced a map with accommodation sites in Athens as of 15 March. To obtain an updated copy of the map, please send an email to info@acaps

INADEQUATE RECEPTION CAPACITY

Camp coordination and camp management: As of 23 March it is still unclear to humanitarian workers which part of the government will be in charge of running camps. This has made communication and coordination very difficult. Since the borders closed, new sites are opening almost every day, some in very remote locations, with little to no notice to humanitarian actors. The army has led the setting up of most of the facilities and is providing key services. Whilst this has helped respond to the most urgent needs, the military do not have the skills to identify and deal with nuanced with protection issues. The very presence of the military can also increase anxiety among the refugees and migrants. With unclear communication structures in place, it is difficult to evaluate how much the government uses humanitarian standards to measure the adequacy of services and conditions for people within the camps.

Immediate needs: Humanitarian actors noted service provision gaps across many sectors and in some locations more than others. In the islands the detention centres are already dangerously overcrowded. In Chios, for instance, the large number of refugees and migrants including pregnant women and children are reportedly lying on the concrete floor in the reception hall (Reuters, 23/03/2016). On the mainland Eidomeni, Piraeus Port, Elliniko I (hockey stadium), Nea Kavala, and Cherso have some of the most acute gaps including WASH, Health, Shelter, Protection, NFIs, and Food distribution.

Eidomeni: In the informal site of Eidomeni, 12,000 migrants and refugees of whom 40% are under 15 years old are sleeping in the open or in basic tents (UNHCR 23/03/2016, NPR 19/03/2016). Many people have been living there for weeks in sub-standard sanitary conditions with only cold water available for washing. There are no warm meals and refugees queue for hours to receive food. After some cases of Hepatitis A and diarrhoea were detected in the camp, health experts warned of serious risks for a spread of contagious diseases. As the situation deteriorates and refugees and migrants remain in the camp, growing tensions are also rising among different groups who are blaming one another for their collective problems, such as theft and general conditions in the camps. On 23 March some of the major aid organisations pulled out because of security concerns for staff amid rising tensions.

Medium to longer term needs: Many of the current reception sites lack protection from rainfall or wind. Electricity and sewage systems are also lacking. Such conditions will quickly become problematic as the situation becomes protracted. For instance, as Greece can experience water shortages in summer, the lack of drinking water may become a problem. Should slow asylum procedures keep people stranded in reception centres for over six months, they will increasingly require integration assistance, education, and longer-term health interventions

IRREGULAR CHANNELS

Smuggling: In the absence of a clear legal route to Europe, officials and migration experts warn that many of the 90% of people fleeing war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan will simply find other routes to Western Europe with the aid of smugglers. Few, if any, had planned to remain in Greece and the many with family in Western European countries will go to great lengths to be reunited with them.

Smuggling is triggered by many factors including:

- + the absence of any legal route to Europe;
- + poor conditions in camps;
- + lack of appropriate information;
- + a rise in desperation;
- + the inability or unwillingness of authorities to tackle smuggling and border control.

The combination of these triggers pushes migrants and refugees to seek help from smugglers whose operations have proliferated from Greece to Slovenia. Without an improvement of any of these factors, it will remain difficult for humanitarian actors to access and address their needs. Afghans, more than other migrant and refugee groups, rely on information provided by smugglers and have fewer social networks in destination countries that they can trust (UNHCR 29/02/2016). This lack of reliable information increases their vulnerability as they are more likely to make decisions based on inaccurate or deliberately misleading information.

Evolution of smuggling: Small smuggling networks are likely to be taken over gradually by larger criminal networks, linking the smuggling of migrants and refugees to drug activities, human trafficking, property crimes and forgery of documents (Europol 22/02/2016). A recent IOM survey reports that 7.2% of migrants and refugees answered positively to an indicator of the presence of human trafficking and other exploitative practices along the Balkan migration route (IOM 17/03/2016). This percentage is expected to grow, as migrants and refugees are increasingly dependent on smugglers, become less visible, and require more protection monitoring – especially unaccompanied minors. Albania is increasingly reported as a likely alternative route that migrants and refugees could take, partly due to its trafficking history, extensive organised crime network and proximity to southern European countries (IOM 17/03/2016).

About this report: This report is the last situation analysis on the refugee/migrant crisis in Europe published by ACAPS and MapAction and funded by the Start Network. Provision of regular comparative analysis of the situation in these countries has been intended inform both strategic and immediate operational decision-making. The analysis is based on a review of secondary data and discussions with key informants from (I)NGOs, UN agencies and Governments. ACAPS and MapAction would like to thank all organisations for supporting the project. For additional information or questions, please e-mail: analysis@acaps.org