

# KARA TEPE MORE THAN A HOME 2016 - 2021



A young boy smiles at the camera inside the Kara Tape accommodation site in Lesbos island. © UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

**UNHCR Greece Operation**  
April 2021



## Kara Tepe at a glance



**4,760** people found shelter and protection since 2019



**83 %** were women or families



**261** accommodation units installed by UNHCR



**30** organizations operated in 2020

Kara Tepe operated since 2016 with the generous support of the European Union.



## Creating a home



### SITE PLANNING & SHELTER

Since 2016, UNHCR – with funding by the European Union – supported the Greek Government with experts and technical advice to design a model and dignified site offering appropriate living conditions with accommodation capacity of up to 1,500 places.

The camp was designed to accommodate families and vulnerable people, such as those with medical conditions, elderly, survivors of shipwreck and pregnant women.

To transform the camp from an emergency transit centre to a longer-term accommodation site, UNHCR and partners undertook extensive infrastructural works, such as levelling of steep areas and gravelling, concreting main roads, fencing, placement of shading structures. To ensure appropriate living conditions, UNHCR replaced the temporary housing units of the emergency period with 261 prefabricated containers. They were all insulated and equipped with heaters and air-conditioning. Measures were also taken to ensure that families could enjoy

privacy, that people with disabilities had access to key facilities and that risks related to gender-based violence were mitigated. In 2020, 24 UNHCR-seconded staff to the Municipality of Mytilene on Lesbos assisted in camp management and overall coordination.



### WATER, HYGIENE & SANITATION

UNHCR and its partners established four communal facilities with toilets and showers and ensured regular maintenance, cleaning and necessary repairs. UNHCR supported the local Municipality in waste management and water supply. In addition, UNHCR and its partners organized activities and informational sessions to encourage good hygiene practices among the population.



### ACCESS TO ENERGY AND HEATING

UNHCR covered power and heating needs for the entire camp during its operation and undertook a technical assessment for the upgrade of the camp's electricity grid. UNHCR also installed 82 solar-powered streetlights and provided solar panels equipment to help address power needs.



*Every morning, Abdul, a 71-year-old asylum-seeker from Afghanistan, voluntarily cleaned the streets and planted flowers at the municipal centre of Kara Tepe in Lesbos where he lived with his family.*

*As he says, "I enjoy taking care of and contributing to the home we share".*

UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

“We lost our lives, we need to start again to see a good future” said Mohamed, 44, a father of four from Al-Sabinah, south of Damascus. “We don’t want to wait without anything to do. We need to work, we need to be something in this world.”



#### FOOD

Asylum-seekers and refugees in the camp received meals three times a day. UNHCR also piloted the use of three communal

kitchens in collaboration with the Municipality and community volunteers. In addition, with the support of the European Union, UNHCR provided cash assistance to help residents cover their daily nutritional and other needs.



#### CORE RELIEF ITEMS

UNHCR created storage space and one distribution point for core relief items that was used by all operational actors in the camp. The distribution point facilitated the organization, coordination, and smooth delivery of core relief items, such as blankets, clothes, shoes, hygiene parcels etc.

## Syrian electrician lends time and skills to benefit others



UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

From the moment he set foot in Kara Tepe, Mohamed Dhib volunteered his expertise to make it a better place for all. Even months after he and his family moved into a nearby apartment, the Syrian electrician returned to the site every day to help, as UNHCR and its partners, improved accommodation for the other residents.

You can read the rest of Mohamed’s story [here](#).

“The sea is scary” Khansa observes in the safety of Kara Tepe. “It was very hard when the boat was being hit by waves. We thought we were going to drown.”

## More than shelter



### PROTECTION

**Information provision.** UNHCR established a hub at the entrance of the camp where residents could address queries, seek help, and receive information in a language they understand on the available services and on-site activities. People with specific needs, such as pregnant women, single parents, and people with medical issues were referred to service providers for help. The protection hub served on average 1,000 people each month in 2020.

**Child Protection.** UNHCR and its partners identified children at-risk and offered them legal aid, cultural mediation, and psychosocial support. Individual or group sessions were organized with psychologists and lawyers. Among other benefits to the well-being of children, these sessions facilitated the early identification of human trafficking victims. Between 2017 and 2021, 417 children received support.

**Legal aid.** UNHCR provided legal assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees, including giving information to asylum-seekers about their rights, the available services and asylum procedures. This eased asylum-seekers' applications and access to their rights. Approximately half of the total population received legal aid while all asylum-seekers residing in Kara Tepe had regular legal information and counseling.



**Gender-based violence (GBV).** UNHCR worked to prevent, mitigate, and respond to GBV by identifying survivors, including LGBTI persons and people at-risk. With its partner, UNHCR offered case management, legal information, counselling, psychosocial, medical attention, and, when needed, emergency safe accommodation, to 415 survivors between 2018 and 2021. UNHCR also organized awareness sessions and discussions on specific topics, such as sexual and reproductive health, trafficking risks, sexual exploitation, and abuse.

**Community Empowerment.** UNHCR created an encouraging environment for asylum-seekers to establish discussion groups, share insights and challenges and propose solutions to their concerns. Among the most widely discussed issues were childcare, opportunities for continuing education, and prospects for employment.

“Kara Tepe was more than a shelter or a services centre. It was a village, a model of its kind in Europe”, Astrid Castelein, Head of UNHCR Office on Lesbos



### NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

As almost half of the camp's population were children, UNHCR helped create an area dedicated to children where partners and volunteers provided educational and recreational activities. Refugee children and youth had access to safe learning space, allowing them to continue their education; ease their fear, trauma and anxiety and that of their parents. Most importantly, children were supported to make the transition from non-formal to formal education and access regular public schools alongside their Greek peers. Over 1,500 children attended UNHCR-supported classrooms between 2018 and 2020.



### HEALTH & PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Camp residents – many of whom were vulnerable – had access to primary healthcare and psychosocial support on-site. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these health services proved ever more essential and helped the local healthcare system at a critical juncture as it led to the decongestion of the local hospital and other health structures. UNHCR deployed specialists to provide medical screening and care and established a quarantine and isolation area for new arrivals which helped mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the camp.



*In November 2019, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi met in Kara Tepe with 43-year-old Syrian widow and asylum-seeker Ibtisam (right, in blue scarf), and her three children and niece. Ibtisam who arrived in Lesbos after fleeing war-torn Syria, lost her husband, sister, brother-in-law and two nephews in a bomb attack in Deir Es Zor. After being internally displaced, she fled with her remaining family to Greece hoping to get treatment for her 15-year-old son Mostafa who is blind and needs a cornea transplant. Her younger son Imad is also autistic and needs specific care.*

## End of a journey

The Government announced that Kara Tepe would close in April 2021 following the request of the Municipality of Mytilene who wished to recover the land for other purposes.

In the months leading up to the closure, UNHCR worked with the authorities to identify a tailored solution for each of Kara Tepe's residents. UNHCR assessed the needs of every family and recommended the most suitable option for their accommodation elsewhere.

The departure of recognized refugees from Lesbos to Germany as part of the Europe-wide relocation scheme was one of these solutions. By the end of April, 855 recognized

refugees had left the island to continue their lives in Germany. Amongst them were 272 Kara Tepe residents. In addition, a total of 543 people were temporarily moved to nearby Mavrovouni reception and identification centre and 60 to ESTIA apartments in mainland Greece.

UNHCR also transferred 50 accommodation containers to Mavrovouni to house former Kara Tepe residents or provide improved accommodation to others in the temporary RIC. This helps with housing and privacy needs until authorities, with EU support, complete the new reception and identification centre on the island.

The site was emptied on 29 April.





“Seeing that an inclusive learning environment is achievable in a refugee camp was empowering for children and teachers alike”, Konstantinos Karakouzidis, teacher at METAdrasi’s informal school in Kara Tepe

## Working with partners: a big thank you!

The operation of Kara Tepe was made possible thanks to the concerted efforts of central and local authorities, UNHCR, NGOs and volunteer groups with co-funding by the European Union. Over the course of the years, more than 30 organizations offered crucial assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees in Kara Tepe. Their work made a real difference in the lives of the men, women and children who stayed there. In 2020, the Municipality of Mytilene and UNHCR worked with:



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