

The detention camps on the Greek islands of Kos and Leros

Episode 2/7. The confinement on the island of Leros

Podcast: <https://audioblog.arteradio.com/blog/197819/podcast/198306/episode-2-l-enfermement-sur-l-ile-de-leros#>

Photographic report: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/legisti/albums/72177720305810297>

Presentation of the report: <https://www.gisti.org/article6950>

Video editing (audio + slideshow + subtitles): <https://indymotion.fr/w/f7ciRZtMFWt3GBvfcfZKV9?subtitle=en>

- **Speaker 1** (in french) : All I can say about this whole system is the fault lies with Europe because all European countries are well aware of what is going on here because where do you think the money is coming from ? It's the European Union that finances the new camps.

- **Voice-over 1** (in french) : “Detention camps on the islands of Kos and Leros in Greece”, a podcast from the Migreurop network and the Gisti, edited by the radio studio la Parole errante. You can listen to the episodes with subtitles on the migreurop.org and gisti.org websites.

After two visits to the hotspots of Lesbos and Chios in 2016, then to Samos in 2019, the Migreurop network and Gisti went to the islands of Kos and Leros in 2021. This podcast gives voice to exiles stranded in these islands, and to those who work or stand alongside them, in order to highlight and denounce the hotspot system.

This second episode focuses on the confinement of exiles on the island of Leros.

- **Speaker 2** : Inside the camp, you never know what happens there. When we worked inside, we have experienced things like domestic violence, and things like that. Inside the camps, it's like a black box. The police doesn't really go in, they are rather there to guard the fences, and control exit of people and who is going in. But what's going on inside the camp nobody wants to get involved there.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : In the streets of Lakki, on the island of Leros, we see exiles out and among the locals, especially around the port. The first camp, which is in the process of being closed, is located a few hundred meters away. It is more open than the one in Kos and people can come and go during the day, sometimes with some restrictions. A second and new camp is located in the middle of the bay, pushing the exiles further away from the center of Lakki.

Leros is a small island of 74 square kilometers, and a population of 8000. In 2015 there were over 3000 exiles present. At that time, registration of asylum claims was relatively quick and people could then move on to Athens to continue their asylum procedure, or carry on their migration journey.

In October 2021, at the time of our presence, there were barely 40 people in the camp. The current camp on Leros is very delapidated ; exiles live in containers. After their asylum claim is rejected, they are sent to the closed camp on Kos. On site there is a doctor, a nurse, and a psychologist. There are no lawyers and no NGOs offering legal aid in the camp. Until recently, the police also used the Leros police station to detain asylum seekers. What happens inside is shrouded in secrecy. No one can go in and see who is there. The exiles who have been there say that detention conditions are extremely poor and legal assistance is non-existent. Nobody on the island could tell us if exiles were still locked up in there.

We met two organisations helping exiles : the Leros solidarity collective and ECHO 100PLUS. Nikos, member of ECHO 100PLUS, showed us around in the organisation, which offers material

support to the exiles and also a number of activities, for example greek and music classes. Catharina, from ECHO 100PLUS, explains to us the situation on the island since the covid pandemic.

- **Catharina** :We have had a new government in Greece, and different policies. The new Government really wants to put an end to what they call the failures of the previous government, and show that now they control the border. A part was also covid regulation. Borders are closed, nobody can come. The pushbacks started, all over the islands. People wouldn't be let through. Even if they managed to cross the borders or arrive on the islands, they would be taken back.

In march 2020, there were 3 300 people on Leros, for a camp that officially had 800 to 1000 places. So we had more than 2000 people staying outside. That was a horrible situation. From march 2020 until decembre, not a single boat arrived on Leros. At the same time, they were trying to evacuate most of the people that had arrived after a transfer of their asylum request. And now, in october 2021, we have left 157 people in the hotspot camp.

Some of them are families, that were already here from previous times, but don't have a chance for asylum, and are stuck in limbo, because they can neither move forward, nor go back to Turkey which doesn't accept them. For the rest, they are people that arrived from 3 boats in Farmakonisi, another island close to Leros. That is where most of our arrivals come from in the Leros hotspot. A few boats really go directly the Leros hotspot because it's simply in between. Another boat arrived in Leyitha, and there were transferts from other places also. Now we have 13 families, most of them are families that are here for two years. The new ones are mostly kurdish men from Iraq and Iran. Some are Africans.

When you arrive on Leros now, you don't have to stay in quarantine but you stay stuck in the camp because you have to go through the registering process. They can detain them for 25 days, they stay in the camp and cannot leave. We are not sure whether they will let them go out after that because officially the camp is still « under quarantine », which also has to do with the fact that none of them is vaccinated. Maybe some of the new arrivals, but I doubt it. They haven't really been given a chance to receive the vaccination. You have to be registered in the greek health system. If you don't have a chance for asylum, you can't be registered, and then you can't receive the vaccin. As long as people in the camps don't get vaccinated, they use this as a pretext to keep them in quarantine. Maybe they let some of them go out at certain times during the day. But you will see on Leros at the moment, it's pretty quiet, you don't see many refugees in town. The majority stays in the camp.

The new camp that they are building, like on the other islands, is almost finished. The official date is set on the 1st of november : they will move people to the new camp and we will see what happens. The idea is that for those that have an asylum transfer the camp will be semi-open, they will be allowed to exit sometimes during the day, while the others will remain in detention.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : We meet exiles around the port and around the premises of Leros Solidarity, an activist collective that offers precious material assistance to exiles. They come looking for clothes and hygiene products, in particular.

Ramy, a Kurdish asylum seeker, talks to us about how asylum seekers are treated. He also testifies from the police violence he suffered with other Kurdish nationals.

- **Ramy** :We started our journey from Turkey, from the 27 of August, and our boat arrived on the Attica island, in the middle of the Aegean sea. First, we stayed on the island. One day later, the greek marin guard took us to Leros. We saw many dangerous times, on the boat to Greece but also when they took us to Leros. The guards were driving the ferry very fast, we were outside without clothes, we had water all over our bodies. At the beginning the behavior of the police guards was bad, but later it was a bit better.

We were 70 people, some returned voluntarily to their country because the situation in the camp was very dangerous. Many things are broken : the toilets are not good, there is no electricity. Sometimes we didn't have water to clean our faces in the morning. There are many problems with electricity and water inside the camp. At the beginning they didn't even let us go outside. So some people tried to escape from the camp. That's how life is in the Leros hotspot.

Sometimes the police guards beat those who tried to escape, they really beat. Why do you beat people who didn't do anything? Who are just trying to have a better life? That's the police's behavior with us.

Some of my friends got a rejection of their asylum very fast. They have a problem in their country, but nobody can get asylum in Greece. To iraqian kurds, they say our country is safe and ask us why are we coming here... They don't care that we have a problem in our country. How can they do that with us? If I didn't have a problem, I wouldn't have left my country. They need to prove that they don't believe us. Nobody can get asylum. You can only wait and see what happens. You either go back, or stay in that horrible camp. Two bad options. Which one do you choose? Both are horrible. We don't know what will happen with us. 6 months, 7 months, one year. How long do we stay here? So... what happens to us? We don't know.

-Voice-over 1 (in french) : In episode 3, exiles living on the islands of Kos and Leros, and people who try to offer assistance, bear witness to the difficulties faced when claiming asylum.

“Detention camps on the islands of Kos and Leros in Greece”, a podcast from the Migreurop network and Gisti, edited by the radio studio la Parole errante.

You can listen the episodes with subtitles on the migreurop.org and gisti.org websites.