

## The detention camps on the Greek islands of Kos and Leros

### Episode 7/7. The new detention camps

Podcast: <https://audioblog.arteradio.com/blog/197819/podcast/200531/episode-7-les-nouveaux-camps-d-enfermement>

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- **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 ? The European Union is financing 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 7 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 last episode is about the new camps recently built on the islands on the islands of Kos and Leros, camps that are even more closed and controlled.

- **Speaker 2** : All this is new. When you open Google earth, you cannot see this camp in construction.

- **Interviewer** : It's like there is nothing ?

- **Speaker 2** : It's like things of the armee, they don't want everybody to see what they do inside.

- **Speaker 3** : You cannot avoid it, the first thing you see arriving on the boat are the lights of the « Guantanamo bay prison » in Lakki. They destroyed one of the nicest place in the bay. It overlooks the whole bay, dominating the place.

Actually with the money they spent, I think it's something in the region of 26 million euros, they could rebuilt some of the very nice old italian buildings, have them there, and then actually something would remain instead of containers.

The naval base of the Italians can host more than 8000 armee personnel. The building capacity I think was good for actually housing the refugees there, instead of building an atrocious « Guantanamo bay » style prison.

- **Voice-over 2 (in french)**: The Greek islands, renowned for their landscapes, hide the construction of huge and high-tech camps designed for the detention of exiles. Following the

announcement of the European Commissioner for Migration on March 2021, the European Union has invested 276 million euros for the construction of five new camps.

They will have a total capacity of 15 000 places, intended for asylum seekers or people with rejections, who will then be detained in a closed section of the camp pending their removal. If Europe describes them as "multifunctional reception and identification centers", the Greek Ministry of Immigration speaks of "closed structures with controlled access". And for good reason: surrounded by barbed wire, equipped with a panoramic 24-hour video surveillance system and magnetic gates, they will be closed at night and completely secure. Entrances and exits will be controlled by electronic badges and fingerprints. They are real prison-like structures.

The first camp of this kind opened in September 2021 on the island of Samos and has a capacity of 3 600 places. Kos (2 000 places) and Leros (1 800 places) opened in November 2021. But in April 2022 only the Leros camp was functioning.

Chios (with 1 800 – 3 000 places) and Lesbos (5 000 places) should open in 2022. Construction of these new camps was not without difficulty, the local populations and authorities being strongly opposed to them. On at least two occasions, boats carrying machinery for the construction of the camps were blocked by locals in Chios and Lesbos. But work continued despite the tensions.

With the resurgence of tourism and the resumption of economic growth, authorities want to remove migrants completely from the public landscape, and the camps are often located in remote areas.

For this reason, in Kos, the new camp under construction is in the same location as the old one, next to the village of Pyli, away from the tourist areas. That of Leros, on the other hand, stands out on a hill clearly visible from the bay of Lakki, to the dismay of locals.

If official discourse refers to camps that are more dignified and respectful of human rights, the silence that reigns around the construction and operation of these new detention camps rather suggests the worst.

Many questions arise. Who will be locked up there? How long will the confinement be? Will NGOs have a right of access? By whom will these camps be managed? In Kos, few really know what will happen inside these new detention centers.

We asked Wayne, a refugee who works in Kos.

- **Wayne** (in french) : The only thing I heard was that it will be completely closed with all facilities inside. Instead of coming to the hospital here, you will be consulted inside. Instead of coming to the supermarket here, there will be a mini market inside. So completely closed. The only thing that can get you out is to get asylum.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : In the offices of Glocalroots, an organisation that helps exiles in Kos, Jessica and Irine are worried about this lack of information as to how the camps will actually function, revealing a policy of excessive control.

- **Speaker 4** : What is strange for me too it's like, since yesterday, every people I met, and not only locals, also people who are involved with refugees, everybody say: "We don't know about the new camp". "We don't know why?" "We don't know what it will be like?" Nobody knows.

- **Jessica** : But there's a lot of money invested, right ? I mean it's expensive to build a high-security camp like that. There has to be a reason. A political agenda. I don't know if it's a new way of control, and maybe the refugees are being used as guinea pigs. And maybe they will apply it to local people afterwards. You know with the fingerprints, etc.

- **Interviewer** : And you think what you are doing now will be relevant in the future with these big new camps totally closed ?
- **Irine** : I think it's really difficult to say, I think no one knows what's gonna happen with the new camps, how it's going to operate, if it will be closed or open somehow, how much freedom they will have. But for us we intend to stay and we intend to support in the same way that we are supporting. As much as we can. As long as we can. I think there will always be the need for this. We are trying to fill the small gaps and we are happy to adapt if we need to as well. I hope we'll be useful.
- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Ali, a Togolese refugee who has entered the construction site of the new camp several times, thinks that the European institutions are the decision makers behind this very harsh detention system.
- **Interviewer** (in french) : Have you heard that they are building a new camp, with 3000 places, and that everybody is going to be locked up ?
- **Ali** (in french) : Yes, I even visited the camp, the work is almost done.
- **Interviewer** : For the European Union and for Greece, it seems that the solution is to lock people up. But when you see this huge prison they are building, it's scary.
- **Ali** : Yes all of that is scary, because I have refugee status, but I think of others because the conditions in Greece are not good, with the closed camps like that. It's going to be hard. It's really sad.
- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Members of Kos Solidarity talk about the interior of the camp. According to press reports, there will be schools, shops, doctors. But behind this facade, the information remains scarce and partial. Essentially, they say, all this is false and it is "less of a small village than a big prison".
- **Speaker 5** : The government advertises the new camps, saying that the situation will be better for refugees.
- **Speaker 6** : They also say the camps will be closed. This is what they say. So the refugees are afraid.
- **Speaker 5** : Today or yesterday I saw on the internet that the situation inside will be better than before.
- **Interviewer** : You think this is a greek decision what's going on ?
- **Speaker 5** : No, european.
- **Interviewer** : Only european or both ? It's the government that really wants to do that or it's mostly european ?
- **Speaker 5** : For sure, the greek government now is a right government.
- **Speaker 6** : I think that the decision that the camps should be closed is a greek decision. Europe, at the beginning, they wouldn't allow this, they wouldn't give the money to do close camps, because it's against the human rights.
- **Speaker 7** : Nobody knows what exactly happens now, why they decide all that. They say now of course it doesn't rain, we fix this. Of course I don't believe that, nobody believes that. They don't spend so much money. There is a lot of money. And it's central I mean, Kos, and Samos,

Chios, Leros, and Lesbos. Now... All summer they released (people). And also they think about bringing people back from Europe.

- **Voice-over 2 (in french)** : In Leros, the same opacity and same rumors dominate. Who will be locked up? For how long? How will this camp work? No one can confidently answer these questions. Asylum seekers who were at the time of our mission in the former camp did not know if they were all going to be transferred to the new one and what would happen regarding detention. Ramy a Kurdish asylum seeker tells us what he knows.

- **Interviewer** : Did someone in the camp, maybe like the police, explain to you what was going to happen to you with the new camp? If you would go there or not ?

- **Ramy** : The camp above the mountain, one of the police that is very good told us that it's a closed camp, and there is a stadium and market inside, and after you enter the camp you can't go outside. That's what they told us.

- **Voice-over 2 (in french)** : In Leros, the context is different. The camp is huge, and sits at the entrance to the port of Lakki. The island had 75 asylum seekers in June 2021. In view of the continuing pushbacks to Turkey, there is reason to wonder about the reason behind creating a camp with 1800 places. Who will be locked up there ? Members of Leros Solidarity and Catharina from Echo100+ tell us about the rumours circulating.

- **Interviewer** : I want to ask you this question... [And I want to ask it !] Who do they want to put inside ? Before if they continue the pushbacks like that everyday, nobody arrives !

- **Speaker 7** : I'm thinking, maybe...I don't know, maybe they will put people from other places, from Athens maybe, who are without asylum. Those they want to send back but cannot send back. Maybe they would put them in there for a long long time, like prisoners.

- **Catharina** : The new camp that they are also building like on other islands is almost finished. The official date now is 1st of November : they're going to move them up into the new camp, and then we'll see what happens. It's a multi-purpose camp. The idea is that people who have an asylum transfer, the camp will be semi-open for them, they can exit some times of the day. For others, they will stay, remaining in detention there. So we don't really know what expects us when they move to the new camp. Basically all the past years we couldn't run any activities for the camp population, we just did distributions of clothes, hygiene items, covid protections, material things like that. So we are waiting for what will happen now, waiting for the permission to do a winter clothes distribution in the next weeks.

But these new camps are also built in a different way. They tried to give them a bit more infrastructure. Before it was just containers where they can live, the food distribution was happening there and the asylum service and a medical team was in the camp. But for the rest, if they needed hygiene items, or food, or whatever, they would go out and buy it in town. But they plan now these new centers, to have a mini market, to have a coffee house, to have a bit of an infrastructure so people are not encouraged to go out.

- **Interviewer** : But to compare with Kos, because I don't know if you have seen some pictures, but the old camp and the new camp are really combined.

- **Catharina** : Yes it's different, it's a new location, you will see when you enter this port of Lakki, where the old camp was based. It's just a bit further up on the rocks. With an incredible view overlooking the bay, but very exposed to sun, cold weather there, no trees, no shade, a lot of

concrete. Of course the double fence barbed wire around it. What I so far consider more a symbolic architecture, because what we've seen over the years how easy, how quickly they cut a whole in the fence to just go out and go for walks.

We'll see with the new camps. I think they are technically much better equipped than the old ones, with surveillance cameras and things like that. It will be more difficult for them. On the other hand this is the plan of the central government to run them like this. But it's one thing what the central government decides, and how those things are implemented on the islands. And this is very specific.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Nikos, another member of Echo100+, also mentions the new camp.

- **Interviewer** : Is it an option for Echo100+ to go inside in the future camp ?

- **Nikos** : No that's a different issue and that's a problem. Because although in the old camp we are free to go in and out, we go there, they open us the doors. People opening, closing the doors...We have valet service in the camp... But the new camp is going to be a controlled entrance camp. They officially started saying it's going to be a closed camp, but because the EU doesn't pay for closed camps, it will be a « controlled access camp », where everybody will get a special card to get in.

So officially we are not yet among the organisations that will be allowed to enter for the time being, but we are trying. They announced officially that it will not be a totally closed camp, it will be a controlled access camp. Meaning that the people that are there for deportation will be in the closed section of the camp, the others will have cards that will give them the controlled access into the camp. They will be allowed to go out of the camp between 8 am until 8 pm.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french): Even the mayor of Leros seems to have been bypassed by European decisions. He says that a small island like Leros cannot cope with this. Municipalities have tried to oppose European decisions on many occasions. Government Ministers had promised to help them but nothing ever came... He expressed his distress when he saw that the camp was being built on a historic and natural site. It's also the first thing you see when arriving by boat in the port of Lakki. Even the mayor doesn't see the point of the camp.

- **The mayor of Leros** : First time after 2015, we have only 150/200 refugees in Leros. So we are very glad for that. We hope it stays like this. For the new camp, we never wanted, we never agreed to have in Leros a big camp like this. I don't know really why they make such a big camp. I asked the Ministers many times why, why they must build this camp. For the municipality we really did not want a camp of this size and volume here in Leros.

- **Speaker from the municipality** : He is saying that he is worried. We're all worried because we haven't been told exactly what is to come, and we don't want it to be something of 2000 refugees to come to Leros at this time. So we're just under a little bit of stress because we're wondering what will happen and what can happen. I'm doing my best, because there are certain words I am not sure about so I apologize.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : The creation of the new camp was far from unanimous within the population of Leros. The city lawyer explains the various arguments that he raised to challenge the creation of this camp.

- **The lawyer of Leros** : Having the experience in the past that arguments like the fact that the local population was being altered and the refugees were seen as some kind of a threat for the

greek population, we found out that it was ineffective, with my colleagues. We said that we should change our focus and our strategy. We said that we should focus on environmental matters, and on the greek legislation for the protection of traditional settlements and settlements of historical value. This new structure is actually being built on a territory which is under protection from the greek state. The only difference was that the ministers' decision for having the protection status came a couple of months later than the first decision to have the structure built. That was the counter argument from the state. So we argued on the ground that this kind of structures are not allowed on historical settlements like Lakki. We argued on the ground that a big part of this area is under forest legislation. We argued on the ground that there was no adequate study for the environmental repercussions, for example there is the prospect of having almost 2500 people hosted there, and there is no study about what they are going to do with the waste water, the clean water supply system, this kind of stuff. These are the main arguments, because we wanted to separate Leros from the rest of the hotspot islands. And if they void the decision for the construction of the hotspot it will be treated like any other illegal construction on the island. Demolished. Yes. This is a standard procedure.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : The new camp on Leros opened in November 2021. In April 2022, Nikos, from Echo100+ explained that none of the things that had been promised ever came into existence. No supermarket or cafe, no indoor activities, very complicated access for NGOs, very difficult for exiles to leave the camp, almost impossible, relying on the discretion of the police.

It is difficult to obtain information on the current functioning of this camp which remains very opaque.

- **Voice-over 1** (in french) : Whatever the stage of the exiles' journey, everything is done to make their lives impossible. Far from the dignified welcome foreseen by international texts, Greece, like other European states, is implementing ultra-repressive policies. These states lock down mobility, criminalize, reject and lock up exiles, regardless of the consequences.

This report adds to the long list of reports documenting the rights violations they suffer in Greece. To put an end to this deadly system, the Gisti and the Migreurop network continue to demand the closure of the camps and the effective implementation of freedom of movement.

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