European state racism makes Lesbos a prison camp

Robert Teller Sat, 19/09/2020 - 10:27
Robert Teller

Greek police are now moving refugees into a new camp, Kara Tepe, on the island of Lesbos. In the process they are being tested for covid-19, with the threat of being forcibly quarantined, making the new facility a virtual prison camp. Health workers from Medecins Sans Frontieres, MSF, their only health service, have had their access restricted. Sympathetic locals point out that the camp will be even worse than Moria once winter comes because it is on the north coast.

Although Germany has announced that ten EU countries have offered to take in 400 unaccompanied children, the Greek government has adamantly refused to transfer the refugees to the mainland or to other EU states, saying this will encourage the flow across the Aegean.

In fact, all the EU governments, with varying degrees of harshness or hypocrisy, are using the sufferings on Lesbos as a deterrent to people fleeing persecution, war and economic hardship.

13,000 refugees, from 70 different countries, have been sleeping rough in olive groves or on the streets with no shelter, food or drink after fires destroyed the Moria ?camp? of tents and shacks in which they had been living. In addition, they are vulnerable to the gangs of Greek fascists from the mainland that roam the island. Two Afghan refugees have been charged with starting the fires, but other reports put it down to the right-wingers.

The Greek government has certainly behaved appallingly, refusing them passage to the mainland, while the Turkish government pushed them across Anatolia with the people smugglers who are robbing and mistreating them. Ankara has at least given refuge to millions of Syrian refugees and the previous Greek government gave many free passage. Now it is sending three ships to house them.

Those most to blame, however, are the governments of the wealthiest countries of the European Union, together with ?exiting? Britain. This, in a Europe that prides itself on its democratic and civilized values and which could easily support them. Since the refugee crisis of 2015, when Germany admitted nearly one million with none of the terrible consequences predicted, apart from the rise of the proto-fascist forces, the other EU states have effectively torn up the right of asylum enshrined in United Nations and European Union treaties and charters.

The basis for the camp system on the Greek islands is the EU-Turkey deal of 2016, in which it was agreed that refugees on the islands whose asylum applications were rejected could be deported to Turkey. The "hotspot" centres were established for this purpose. Here, the inmates are obliged to stay until a decision is made as to whether they are entitled to make an asylum application. Procedures based on the rule of law were undermined by the introduction of fast-track methods. In 2019, these were applied to half of all new arrivals.
Nevertheless, the hotspots did not become deportation hubs as originally intended, but prison camps where thousands of people have to stay for years under provisional conditions. They thus form the second border wall of the European Union. Moria is the cynical message to all refugees that they must abandon all hopes for protection and security at the EU's external border.

A new asylum law, which has been in force in Greece since the beginning of 2020, has made the situation even worse. The instrument of administrative detention has been expanded, fast-track procedures have become the norm and the rights of those affected to information and appeal in asylum proceedings have been further curtailed.

This is what is meant when it is said that fugitives should not be given "false incentives". It means that the borders, the camps and the asylum procedure must be even worse than the circumstances from which people flee. To maintain this, there must be "no unilateral national efforts" to accept refugees. Apart from the discussion about symbolic measures such as the distribution of a few hundred children, the governments and the EU Commission therefore also agree that nobody should do anything to address the inhuman conditions at the external borders.

The spokesman for this "coalition of the unwilling? is Germany's Minister of the Interior, Horst Seehofer. He is happy to offer accommodation in Germany for a few hundred people, but only if the EU and its member states pull together. Seehofer can, of course, rely on the racist hardliners in Hungary, Poland or Austria not doing this, allowing him to put a humanitarian face on this evil game. In fact, he and the government are even blocking emergency aid for the reception of several hundred refugees that a number of German cities have promised to accept.

Whilst Seehofer plays the would-be helper, right-wing conservatives such as the Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz and right-wing populists, whip up the racism. They incite people against allegedly "criminal" arsonists who would come into the country as a result of the admission of fugitives, stirring up even more hatred against migrants and fugitives.

In the current discussion, conditions on the escape routes to Europe, which also represent a calculated catastrophe for those affected, are not even mentioned. In Turkey, refugees who were deported illegally and without trial from Greece across the border river Evros are held in prisons. In the Mediterranean, by criminalising the aid organisations and holding their ships, governments have made sure that civil sea rescue is now almost impossible and that the crossing has become more dangerous than ever before.

In Libya, thousands of those picked up by the coast guard are vegetating in internment camps. In order to "assist" in this, there is the EUNAVFORMED support and training mission "Operation Sophia" (EUNAVFORMED: European Naval Force Mediterranean). Meanwhile, the British government talks of "an invasion" by a few hundred people who make it across the Channel in rubber dinghies and threatens to deploy Royal Navy warships to turn them back.

Close the camps!

Refugees are not to blame for their plight, rather it is the capitalists of Europe and the USA that have plundered their countries of their raw materials (and human beings, too) for centuries. It is the Nato states, which have fomented wars in countries like Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, that have contributed massively to the refugee crisis. It would take but a fraction of the gigantic profits of Western arms sales and "aid" to tyrants like the Egyptian dictator, the Saudi Crown Prince and Israel, oppressing the Palestinians, to make all refugees welcome.

We must not let the authorities responsible for the European border regime decide who is entitled to
asylum and who is not. We must not allow new, more "humane", camps to be built, which would just give Fortress Europe a makeshift moral whitewash. Instead, we must fight the racist system that selects migrants according to nationality and reasons for flight in order to deny them the right to stay.

There can be no other solution than the immediate closure of the camps. Not only minors who are "at risk? there but all refugees must be allowed to leave the islands immediately and be housed in decent accommodation in a place of their choice!

For free medical care and voluntary Covid-19 tests at any time, against racist harassment such as unjustified and counterproductive quarantine!

Access to education, training and jobs on equal terms with the locals!
The European internal and external borders must be opened unconditionally for all refugees. No forced "distribution" of people, but freedom of movement and civil rights for all, abolition of the Dublin rules!

Across Europe, "free movement" and open borders activists have protested against the catastrophic conditions on Lesbos. They need to be redoubled.

The trade unions, all organisations of the left and the workers' movement across Europe must support the struggle for the right to stay for all, for equal working conditions and social and political rights for refugees in all European countries!

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/european-state-racism-makes-lesbos-prison-camp