

The detention camps on the Greek islands of Kos and Leros

Episode 1/7. The confinement on the island of Kos

Podcast: <https://audioblog.arteradio.com/blog/197819/podcast/197820/episode-1-l-enfermement-sur-l-ile-de-kos#>

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/6Y7YYQ5uCBjTTCUVvx9j3W?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** : "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.

Starting in the spring of 2015, tens, then hundreds of thousands of refugees, especially Syrians, arrived at the borders of Europe, mainly in Greece and Italy. The asylum policy of the European Union has been overwhelmed. And within this context came the idea of creating hotspots on the Greek islands. The aim of the system of the hotspots is to prevent all of those who arrive by sea on these islands from moving on, and to sort them out.

Meanwhile, exiles are held in different types of camps, open or closed, and where living conditions are deplorable.

In March 2016, an agreement was signed between the European Union and Turkey, which represents one of the main points of entry into Europe and an important transit country. This agreement aims to return everybody who lands on the Greek Aegean islands to Turkey, including asylum applicants. In return, the European Union pays Turkey billions of euros. As a result of this agreement, many refugees, including Syrians, Afghans, Somalis, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, can no longer obtain asylum in Greece, which considers Turkey to be a safe country for these nationalities.

But in 2020, Turkey suspended the agreement and, since then, nobody has been sent back. Even though there are fewer exiles on the islands of Kos and Leros today. This is mainly due to the tightening of migration policies, and the practice of pushbacks, which consists in sending people back to Turkey without registering their asylum applications, cramming them into makeshift boats.

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. All interviews were recorded in October 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, which made circulation even more difficult.

-**Speaker 2** (in french) : It's a pity, it's a pity but that's the way it is. You come, you live in conditions that others can't stand because I saw crazy people, people who became crazy in prison, including children. I knew a syrian family, all the children were walking in dirty water on the ground in the corridors of the containers. The toilet pipes were leaking, the water became all

mixed up and children were walking in it. You have to be really tough to go out in the jungle. Really, you have to be tough. If not, it's very hard here on Kos.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : On Kos, most of the exiles who arrive by boat are placed in a massive camp located in the center of the island. During our mission, when we arrive by car, we see this huge prison in the middle of nowhere. Surrounded by barbed wire, walls and cameras, the camp is frightening. It is divided into two blocks made up of algecos: the first, completely closed, serves as a pre-deportation center. The second, semi-open, is dedicated to the identification of people with a right to leave during the day. Even though the law foresees detention only in exceptional circumstances, 90% of exiles who arrive in the Kos camp are placed directly in the closed part of the center for "illegal entry" on the Greek territory.

In March 2020, there were up to 2.000 people in the camp. In October 2021, when we were there, there were fewer than 250. This reduction is the direct consequence of 'pushbacks', which we will talk more about in episode 5.

The majority of exiles speak Arabic : they come from Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia. Others come from subsaharan Africa, Cameroon, Congo, Ivory Coast. Part of them are minors.

- **Interviewer** : Have you seen or have you heard that some minors were in detention ? People under 18 years old ? 18 ?

- **Speaker 3** :Yes, I have a friend of mine. He's, I think, 17. And there were people coming from Turkey, they went to Italy, and something happened on the boat in the sea and many of them died inside the sea and some of them came to the closed camp. Speaking about this age, I saw a very little baby, she's maybe 3 years-old. But now she has been deported to Kurdistan, she was with her mom. The father of this little baby had died in the sea.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : During our visit, when we arrive in the city of Kos, something strikes us immediately: we do not see exiles in the streets. They are invisible. Indeed, the camp was built right in the middle of the island, next to a village called Pili, far from the seaside touristic spots.

- **Speaker 4** : I believe also that the Government says that now the Greek economy is rising. They are selling everything : energy, water, everything. It was public, most of it, also the airport, everything. So, even some people, believers of the Government, they are saying that better days are coming, after all these years of crisis, it's time to work better, to earn more money. So it's better for the refugees to be locked in a camp, otherwise we would lose the tourism product we have.

- **Voice-over 2** : We met three members of 'Kos Solidarity' an anti-racist collective, greeks who have been campaigning alongside exiles for many years. We set up in their base for our interview, amidst all the posters and leaflets.

- **Speaker 5**, « Kos Solidarity » : They buy everything, new hotels... I don't know if the island can have so many people.

- **Speaker 6**, « Kos Solidarity » : No they can't, the Island can't.

- **Speaker 5** : This is seen as an extra reason not to have refugees. These people agree with the government and think it is better to lock up the refugees in the camps, because this way we can work better with tourism.

- **Speaker 6**, « Kos Solidarity » : They want to send a message to people, since now people are connected, saying : "Don't come, it's only prison here ; this is your future ; prison or the sea ; prison or Turkey"

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : In a cafe on the marina where Greek police boats are moored, we meet Laura. She lives on Kos. She knows only too well the situation of exiles who are locked up

in the detention centre. She explains to us that certain nationalities, like Palestinians, or some Somali people, get asylum easily. But that is not the case for others, who are kept in detention.

She tells us a story of one woman from Cameroon. A victim of human trafficking, Amina arrived with her baby and had her asylum claim rejected simply because she comes from Cameroon. And yet she remained locked up, because even if there is a fast-track asylum procedure, Greek law allows for people to be detained for up to 18 months. Amina was released with a document saying that she had to leave the island. The deadline could vary between 15 and 20 days. But when you have no money, and in Covid times, no possibility of being vaccinated, there is no way to leave the island. After a police check, Amina was again detained for another 18 month period.

For many people this detention is experienced as a punitive measure, but they do not understand what they have done to deserve it.

- **Laura** : Exactly. This is what they are asking : "Why am I in prison ? Why ? Why am I here ?". I don't have any answer to give them, especially for Syrians. No answer at all. I think that, under the table, the Greek government has made an agreement to keep people detained, and maybe cut one fourth of the debt for Greece. I'm just saying a number, but I think there might have been such an agreement, maybe.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Even the people who are not in the detention centre within the camp are not free to come and go. One section of the camp is semi-open. There is a system of tickets, which allows people to go out for a few hours.

Ali, a young refugee from Togo, who we meet in a cafe in the city center, tells us.

- **Interviewer** : At this time, you were living out of the camps ?

- **Ali** : In March, we all have been lock up inside the camp due to Covid. Even though we were still sleeping in tents, at that time you could only go out for 2 hours per week. For that you had to wake up really early to get a ticket, as only 100 were available each day. 100 people per day. We would wake up at 3:00 am to get a ticket. The queue started at 6:00 am, but you needed to wake up at 3:00 am in order to be among the first 30 or 40 people. Then you had to wait until 6:00 am for the police to give out the passes. Whoever turns up to give permission comes around 10:00 am, sometimes 9:00 am. You can go out for 2 hours, or even sometimes during the week, you don't get to go out at all. And did the ticket just give you the right to leave the camp ? Indeed, the right to go outside and return within a 2 hour period.

- **Interviewer** (in french) : So it's like an exit permit. If you don't manage to get this ticket, you stay locked in ?

- **Ali** : Yes, and it is still like that today. Even though there aren't many people left in the camp, it is still like that.

- **Interviewer** (in french) : /And when you were over there, how many tickets did they hand out each day ?

- **Ali** : In March it was 100. As time went on, the number of tickets was reduced to 40 or 50... Depending on the police.

Voice-over 1 (in french) : Ali arrived in 2019 at a time when there were many exiles present on Kos. At that time the camp was full and not all exiles could stay there. They had to camp : first in a slum just next to the camp, and then, when places became free, in tents within the camp.

- **Ali** (in french) : I came to Greece on the 24th September 2019. I came by sea, there were 10 of us in a little paddle boat. We arrived in Greece around 1:00 am. We were taken to the camp by the police. The police took us to the camp. We were locked in a container, the next day we started the registration procedure, and when that was over we were told to sort ourselves out because

there were no spaces in the containers. We had to go and build something ourselves, outside. We slept in the open air for a week, and then we had the idea to use cardboard boxes to build something. This was during the month of december. The rain displaced us. We shared the UNHCR tarpaulins, we rebuilt, but the same thing happened.

- **Interviewer** (in french) : And at that time, what was the most difficult thing for you ? Was it being locked in ?

- **Ali** (in french) : Yes – it was being locked in. The conditions were really not good. To be locked in like that was something I had never before experienced in my life, it was a stressful time. You need to be really tough to go outside. It's like the jungle.

Voice-over 2 : Most people that we interviewed spoke to us about medical problems and significant difficulties in accessing care, especially in the closed section of the camp. In the detention centre, there was only one nurse Then following the visit of the European Commission, they brought in another nurse, a doctor, and a psychologist, which is still very little for so many people. Also, to access the medical centre you have to be accompanied by police. Once you arrive there, the reception from medical staff is usually not good enough, as are the answers to the medical problems presented by exiles.

Wayne, a refugee who works on Kos, is in touch with people in detention.

- **Wayne** : For example, someone comes in to the clinic. The person is sick, and in pain. You know the person is really sick and that the nurse is just trying to fob them off by saying go take a painkiller and rest up. But you know full well that person doesn't just need a painkiller, they need to go to the hospital. So there are some moments where you have to be a human, and try to convince the nurse to refer the person to the next level. And to tell the director that the person doesn't just need a painkiller, they need to see a specialist. This happened very often. Also, a woman on her period, she bleeds, she needs sanitary products, and she gets given 2 or 3 pads even though she needs more. So even when they have them in stock, it's not something you buy or for eating, but these are necessary. So you spend 2 or 3 hours waiting in line for these little things even though they have plenty in stock and could give more. On the health side, it's the thing that people really need. Because there is no hygiene.

Voice-Over 2 : Like others, he told us about a person who died as a result of the lack of care in the detention centre. He said that the police is aware of what is happening, but they don't really understand how distressed people are.

- **Wayne** : One person had appendicitis when he was in Turkey, and he was operated near Turkey. When he arrived here, he started having seizures, for one week, each day. The police saw him. Every day he was getting weaker. His roommates repeatedly called for the police to take him to the doctor, but they never did. He died of his illness.

Voice-over 2 : Many people suffer from being locked up. They are very isolated and do not know why they are detained. Many suffer from psychological or psychiatric problems which go unrecognised.

- **Speaker 7** : This times we are living now are the worst. In 2015, 2016, even 2017, the hotspots were open. You could help someone and see a smile, because there was always something to do, and something to dream, for a passport for example, or to find a brother... They were feeling fine and we had good conversations. Now, all of them are depressed, with serious psychological problems. You can see in their eyes how tired they are. They don't go to school, even in the open camp there is nothing to do, it's all only cement and containers. Cement and containers. It's crazy.

- **Interviewer** : There are no doctors inside ?

- **Speaker 7** :No psychologists or psychiatrists, and they cannot give medication. Only one comes from Rhodes once a month, but now because of Covid-19 he comes only once every two months. For me, many things are illegal. Because the people who arrive now, nobody sees them, the psychologist doesn't see them. They don't see lawyers, they don't even open the cases. It all goes very quickly. They put them directly in the pre-deportation center.

Voice- Over 1 : Ahmed a Syrian asylum seeker, held in detention at the time of our visit, spoke to us via telephone. Locked up for 18 months when he arrived, then undocumented, he was re-arrested and locked up again for 18 months. We read his testimony.

- **Speaker 8**: Nobody respects us here. We are treated like criminals. We are locked up in a prison. We cannot see a doctor. The food we are given is not enough, it is not good, and it is expired. I am sick because of all that, and so are some others. I lost my entire family in Turkey, and yet Greece continues to say that Turkey is a safe country for me. That's the reason I am locked up, waiting for my expulsion. I have been here 1 year and 8 months. They want me to leave Greece ; then they should give me my papers to leave, then I would go. We want freedom. We didn't come to Europe to be locked in prison. Not even animals could live here. No-one is helping us. If we return to our countries we will die. If it wasn't for that, we wouldn't have come here. In the camps on Kos they smash the cameras on phones because they don't want us to collect evidence of the condition, because nobody could live here like this.

Voice- over 1 : Exiles who arrive in Greece via the Aegean do not have a choice in their precise destination. We have just heard testimonies from those who arrived on the island of Kos.

In episode 2, it will be about the conditions of life and confinement on the neighboring island of Leros.

“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.