Refugee - Migrant Crisis in Greece

Doctors of the World Greece

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Introduction

Europe is currently facing the biggest wave of migration since the Second World War. This big-scale influx of refugee and migrant populations challenges the very cohesion, values and ideals of Europe and demands coordinated action between all its member states and the global community.

More than 90% of the arrivals in Europe come from countries involved in wars and conflicts, such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. Fleeing death, violence, oppression and persecution in their countries of origin, these people are desperate to reach Europe and do not hesitate to risk their lives in doing so. Syrians represent 55% of the arrivals in 2015, as a result of a fierce civil conflict, which has ravaged their country since 2011.¹

Greece is the main gateway to Europe, both through its land border with Turkey in the North and, mainly, through the Greek-Turkish sea frontier in the Aegean. During 2015, almost one million refugees and migrants arrived in Greece, in their majority viewing Greece as their first stop and as a transit country towards their final destination to northern European states.

The main islands in Greece that receive refugees are Lesvos, Chios, Kos, Samos and Leros, among others. Lesvos has been called to shoulder the biggest number of arrivals, having received more than 500,000 persons from January until the end of December 2015, a number that represents more than 50% of the overall arrivals in Greece.²

Doctors of the World – Greece (MdM Greece), having completed 25 years of continuous humanitarian action in 2015, is standing by all persons in need of protection and assistance. MdM has been caring for Syrian migrants and refugees since the early days of the conflict and has responded immediately to the needs of

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Syrian refugees arriving in Greece, as well as to all refugee and migrant populations arriving in Greek territory.

MdM Greece has, since the first moment, been present and active, offering its services to help ease this new humanitarian crisis, and continues to provide healthcare services and psychosocial support to Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) arriving in Greece.

During the last twelve months, MdM Greece has enhanced all activities that involve the provision of services to migrants and refugees, through its already running interventions in Lesvos, Chios, Athens, Thessaloniki, Kavala, Patras and Chania, and has furthermore extended its activities to other areas that require urgent intervention, such as Idomeni and Tilos.
MDM-Greece intervention for TCNs in Greece

MdM Greece reinforces its ongoing and already existing structures and programs to respond to the increasing and pressing needs of the high numbers of refugees arriving daily in Greece. At the same time, MdM Greece undertakes new initiatives intervening in those places where the Third Country National populations concentrate, such as the current entry and exit points for refugees in Greece. That is the Aegean islands by sea and Evros by land, as well as the exit points in the northern part of Greece, Idomeni, at the border with FYROM. Building on its experience and continuous needs assessment, MdM Greece currently continues to operate with its Open Polyclinics, its Night Shelter and Mobile Units in Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki, Patras, Kavala, Chania as well as implementing new activities in Lesvos, Chios, Tilos, Idomeni, initiating at the same time innovative and ambitious programs, such as the Ferries Project. This newly run program involves on board medical teams which offer their services and accompany the refugees in their trips from the Aegean islands to mainland Greece.
Open Polyclinics
The main objective of the Open Polyclinics of MdM – Greece is the provision of primary healthcare services, pharmaceutical coverage and psychosocial counseling to persons with limited or no access to the National Healthcare system, such as undocumented migrants, refugees, uninsured, homeless persons and others.

All polyclinics operate mainly with volunteer doctors of different specialties (internists, pediatricians, surgeons, gynecologists, dermatologists, cardiologists, ophthalmologists, orthopedic surgeons, radiologists, pulmonologists, ENT, psychiatrists, neurologists) and nurses, who provide free medical and pharmaceutical care, while patients are referred for further testing to partner institutions, when deemed necessary.

The social service and the psychological support departments are included in the framework of operation of the Open Polyclinics.

The Open Polyclinics of MdM – Greece operate in the regions of Athens, Perama (Piraeus), Thessaloniki, Chania, Kavala and Patras.

Pediatric Departments
The services of the department are available to all children with limited or no access to the National Healthcare System and include the following:

- Pediatric care, diagnostic examinations and further follow ups
- Pharmaceutical coverage
- Preventive care and health education
- Vaccination coverage
- Dental Examination and education
Social Services departments

The social services departments aim to address social problems and difficulties of both the beneficiaries of the structures of MdM Greece, as well as of the individuals that attend the Polyclinics of the organization. Specifically, following the recording of the social history of the beneficiary (social elements and requests), the social workers of the departments provide social support services and counseling such as provision of information regarding rights and accessibility to the National Healthcare and Social Support System, as well as information on education, legal rights, training and career counseling.

Social Pharmacy

The Social Pharmacy operates in an already existing structure of MdM - Greece, which works in collaboration with the program Open Polyclinic since 1997, aiming to provide free pharmaceutical care to patients attending the Open Polyclinic as well as to outpatients, as long as they have acquired and presented a prescription from a medical doctor.

Shelter for Asylum Seekers

The primary objective of this project, which is implemented by MdM - Greece in collaboration with the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), is the provision of enhanced services to Vulnerable Asylum Seekers (single parents, men and women without a supportive environment and a source of income, with or without children). Through the shelter, which has an accommodation capacity of 70 people, beneficiaries may receive primary health care services and psychosocial support, through the Open Polyclinic of MdM in Athens. Furthermore, legal assistance is provided by the Greek Council for Refugees, which includes ensuring access to the asylum procedure in Greece, as well as the relocation and family reunification programs, offering support to submitting such applications and requests as well as monitoring the progress of the requests and procedures. Finally, guests have the
opportunity to learn the Greek and English language through GCR’s Intercultural Centre for the Promotion of Refugee Integration “Pyxis”.

In addition to the above, the facility offers full nutritional coverage, sanitary items, psychosocial support, interpretation, educational and recreational activities for children.
Emergency Actions to face the Refugee - Migrant Crisis

Greece, due to its geographical location, constitutes the main entry point for thousands of refugees and migrants to Europe. The preferred way for these populations to reach Greece so far are the sea routes. During 2015, more than 800,000 refugees have arrived in Greece, mainly by sea from Turkey.³ Lesvos, Chios, Samos and Leros are the main entry points by sea. The situation in the Greek islands is critical, since the flows during the first half of 2015 have raised 850% as compared to 2014, according to UNHCR. During 2015, more than 700 people died or went missing in the Aegean Sea (including both Greek and Turkish territorial waters). So far in 2016 (as of 22 January), some 38,000, ⁴ mostly refugees have reached the Greek islands and the numbers are expected to remain at high levels.

MdM Greece offers to Third Country Nationals access to free and qualitative healthcare when they arrive on the Aegean islands. Moreover, the essential needs of refugees are covered by ensuring access to free first aid kits, and in some cases, through food, clothing, blankets and sleeping bags distribution. The main duties of MdM Greece in all its interventions include the following:

- Medical examination
- Provision of healthcare services and medicines
- Psychosocial support
- Identification of vulnerable groups
- Referral of vulnerable groups to social welfare bodies
- Distribution of first aid items
- Interpretation

³ http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83
⁴ http://www.unhcr.gr/nea/artikel/611c78f9f78c262d26995fad5e76a17d/i-ypati-armosteia-e-12.html
**Intervention in Lesvos**

Lesvos (sometimes referred to as Mytilene after its capital) is a Greek island located in the northeastern Aegean Sea. It has an area of 1,632 square kilometers with 320 kilometers of coastline, making it the third largest Greek island. It is separated from Turkey by the narrow Mytilene Strait, thus making it a priority destination for those who aim to cross over to Greece from Turkey by sea. The population of Lesvos is approximately 86,000, a third of which lives in its capital, Mytilene, in the southeastern part of the island.

**Moria camp:** The mobile unit of Greek First Reception Service in Lesvos is located in Moria, 6 km north of the city centre in Mytilene. MdM Greece operates in Moria, where they provide medical and pharmaceutical care, psychosocial support and humanitarian aid items. MdM Greece is enhancing the distribution of humanitarian aid items and provides volunteers to the camp in order to organize and help the existing team distribute first aid kits.
Kara Tepe camp: MdM Greece also operates in Kara Tepe, an unofficial camp for TCNs in Mytilene, the capital of Lesvos, which was set up in June 2015 due to the lack of space in Moria and with a view to host the TCNs in the island. MdM Greece provides primary healthcare services, pharmaceutical support as well as humanitarian aid items.
Intervention in Chios

MdM Greece was operational at the screening center in Mersinidi, Chios, from 2012 until November 2015, providing primary healthcare services to TCNs. The services provided by a doctor, a nurse, a social worker and two interpreters, included medical screening, primary healthcare, provision of medicine and medical consumables as well as distribution of humanitarian aid items. The screening center was relocated in November 2015 to Souda. MdM Greece is currently present in the new camp in Souda providing the above mentioned services.
**Intervention in Tilos**

Since June 2015 MdM Greece has established a medical team consisting by one doctor and one nurse in the island of Tilos in order to provide primary healthcare to the general population and to TCNs arriving at the island. This intervention by MdM Greece was of high importance for the local community, given the fact that, for the time being, there is no other health structure for the inhabitants in the island and, before MdM Greece’s intervention, they had to travel to other islands in order to be examined by a doctor, which was rather difficult especially during the winter.

**Intervention in Idomeni**

Idomeni is a small village in Kilkis (Macedonia | Greece), close to the borders with FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). During the last week of August of 2015, the number of migrants and refugees stranded in the shrubby forests around the village of Idomeni, on the border between Greece and FYROM, increased tenfold.

MdM Greece started an intervention in Idomeni on the 23rd of August 2015, when a medical and administrative team first visited the village. The visits have been organized by the Open Polyclinic in Thessaloniki in order to provide medical and pharmaceutical care as well as humanitarian aid to the Third Country Nationals arriving in the area.
The team visits the area on a daily basis providing medical and pharmaceutical support as well as first aid kits and personal hygiene items. Until December 2015, 10,054 persons have been examined.

Intervention in Attica

The majority of the refugees arriving in the islands will take a ferry to Attica, the region of Greece that includes Athens, as part of their journey to reach the northern borders of Greece. The existing hosting structures barely met the needs of these populations prior to the increased influxes, and are now unable to cover the current needs. This led to the establishment of unsuitable and understaffed hosting facilities, such as stadiums (see Galatsi stadium, Hockey stadium in Elliniko, etc.), the establishment of one additional structure (Elaionas centre) and finally several informal settlements that have developed in public squares of Athens (see Victoria Square).

Since October 2015, MdM Greece has established two Emergency Medical Outreach Teams (Open Polyclinic) that provide, 7 days a week, primary healthcare services and pharmaceutical support, responding to the emergency medical situations in Attica focusing on the most urgent cases in the formal and informal refugee settlements but also, whenever needed, at Piraeus port, an important arrival point for the refugees coming from the islands. Being mobile, the services are flexible to respond to the most vulnerable populations and signpost the services of the Polyclinics to those that the outreach teams are unable to meet. Along with the medical consultations, humanitarian aid kits are also distributed. From October 2015 until the end of January 2016, services have been provided to 3,395 cases.
The Medical Emergency Outreach teams are staffed by two doctors and two nurses - responsible for medical screening and consultation and specifically aiming to:

- protect and promote the primary health needs of all beneficiaries and providing primary health care early diagnosis and treatment.
- assess and address the health needs and identification of the potential incidents requiring special assistance and early detection.
- provide prioritized medical treatment and examination to vulnerable groups, such as pregnant women, minors (accompanied or unaccompanied), elderly, disabled, single parents families, victims of torture and trafficking.

The medical staff is supported by a social worker and four interpreters (Farsi / Arabic to Greek and vice versa) - responsible for providing interpretation services and cultural mediation for the medical team.

**Intervention on the Ferries transferring TCNs from the islands to mainland Greece**

The objective of this program is the provision of primary health care and psychosocial support on board of the passenger ships of the company (Hellenic Seaways) used mostly for transporting refugees and migrants from the islands to mainland Greece. The aforementioned population spends an average of 10 hours at sea during their transport to the ports of mainland Greece (mainly Piraeus and Kavala), while, until now, there was no medical presence on the ships. Each medical team of MdM Greece present since January 2016 in two ships consist of a doctor, a nurse, two social workers or psychologists and two interpreters (Arabic and Farsi).
Through this program, MdM Greece aims to deal with medical emergencies and to identify persons belonging to vulnerable social groups, to offer them immediate psychosocial assistance and counseling and advise them on further action as well as to refer them to relevant institutions.

Conclusion

According to MdM Greece’s teams, the medical problems that have been diagnosed during 2015 in relation to the so called ‘refugee crisis’ are the following: injuries because of the long trip, myoskeletal pain, high fever, respiratory problems, asthma, gastroenterological problems, tonsillitis and headaches. In addition, many pregnant women suffer from psychological disorders. The traumatic experiences in the refugees’ home countries, the difficult journey from their country of origin as well as in many cases the loss of relatives or fellow travelers during the journey, as well as the anxiety and uncertainty of the future has serious impact on the mental health of these people, which needs to be addressed.

Despite the continuous civil society, NGOs, local and state authorities efforts in Greece to undertake effective actions in order to address the refugee issue with respect to human rights, MdM Greece calls attention to need for immediate adoption of initiatives that ensure the safe entrance of refugees and migrants in the country. It is proposed that these initiatives should include: identification of the people, grant of legal statuses, provision of services especially to vulnerable groups, facilitation of the settlement or the resettlement of the population and, in conclusion, the humanization of laws and their application as well as planned and coordinated action to ensure dignified reception and hosting conditions. At the same time, we must not forget that it is not a Greek but a European issue. MdM intensifies its call for coordination with all involving actors for ensuring more legal pathways for refugees and migrants to Europe and elsewhere, so that fewer people in need of international protection will be obliged to resort to dangerous irregular trajectories.