EU under fire for response to plight of asylum seekers on Greek islands

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A special online meeting of Parliament’s petitions committee heard there had been a “lack of a coherent response” to the “appalling” conditions facing asylum seekers and refugees during the Coronavirus crisis.

The committee was told it is not known how many, if any, cases of Coronavirus there currently are on the islands but that the conditions for migrants and refugees are “terrible.”

The meeting was arranged at short notice on Thursday to give MEPs a chance to discuss citizens’ petitions related to COVID-19. A Parliament spokesman said it had received a “large number” of petitions from the public about this and other issues relating to the pandemic.

A recent wave of anti-migrant violence on the islands has also left refugees without food and medical
A UK-based petitioner, Jonathan Beedell, appearing via a video link, told the committee, “Just when we need solidarity individual EU countries are retreating into their own shells.”

He said the situation on the Greek island of Lesbos was particularly “severe” with up to 30,000 refugees currently held there.

“My son has worked with the migrants and asylum seekers on Lesbos and he was left with a profound sense of an inadequate response from the authorities including the Greek government, the EU and internationally.

“The EU is not to blame but, rather, Member States who don’t appear to want to deal with this issue. So, please blame those who are responsible” Margrete Auken MEP

“He felt that the suffering of the migrants is immense but also unnecessary. The thought of the virus spreading and going unchecked is also quite appalling.”

Beedell, who described himself as a “proud European”, noted the “uncaring attitude” of the UK government but also said others were “not addressing any of the urgent practical needs of the people in these camps.”

He added, “The situation on the islands is a microcosm of the EU’s future. If we don’t act now we will regret it.”

Condemning “unacceptable” overcrowding on the islands, he said this made it impossible to respect social distancing.

“EU countries are responding to the crisis by building hospitals in record time but where is the political will to do the same for the asylum seekers on the Aegean islands? Where is the love for them?”

“So far, there is no evidence that the virus has entered any of the refugee camps on the islands but that is not to say that there will not be an outbreak” Monique Pariat, Director General for DG Home
He told MEPs, “The EU needs to show a practical response. The virus knows no boundaries so we must separate all boundaries between people.”

He added, “I am very concerned that the EU appears to be doing things behind the scenes but that this is not apparent on the ground. The EU is not seen, felt or heard on these islands so more support should go to the NGOs. I am also worried about the rise of the Far Right and attacks on NGOs.”

Responding to the comments and his petition, Monique Pariat, Director General for DG Home [migration and home affairs] at the European Commission, outlined the “help we are providing to protect both residents and refugees.”

She also said, “So far, there is no evidence that the virus has entered any of the refugee camps on the islands but that is not to say that there will not be an outbreak.”

Also appearing via video link, she told MEPs, “We are fully aware of the difficulties and the overcrowding on the islands as are the Greek authorities and we are in constant contact with them about this.”

“We have agreed on an emergency plan to deal with any potential outbreak of the virus on the islands. This includes the transfer of vulnerable people into empty hotels to avoid a transfer of the infection and provision of extra capacity in case of an outbreak.”

This would include, she said, deployment of doctors and medical equipment and people being put in quarantine.

She added, “Extensive support is being given by the EU and the Greek government to improve conditions and a substantial amount of medical equipment has been provided.”

“This problem is not something that is new or that was not there before the health crisis started but we are trying to be supportive and help.”

She pointed out that the EU had already provided some €2.2bn in supporting Greece in its management of the migrant issue, both on the mainland and islands.

“Conditions are clearly very bad and the risks for refugees and inhabitants are also very high” Radan Kanev MEP

Further contribution came from Bulgarian EPP member Radan Kanev who said, “Conditions are clearly very bad and the risks for refugees and inhabitants are also very high.”

Spanish MEP Sira Rego, of the Group of European United Left, noted, “We are talking about human rights here and these people are in an extremely vulnerable situation. That is why I fully support this petition.”

Meanwhile, Margrete Auken, a Danish Greens member, told the meeting, “This is an important petition and I also support it but let us be clear about one thing: the EU is not to blame but, rather, Member States who don’t appear to want to deal with this issue. So, please blame those who are responsible.”

Elsewhere, a letter signed by presidents of 20 CPMR (Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions) regions from France, Germany Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Sweden,
expresses concerns about the welfare of migrants and refugees on the islands and other places.

It says the COVID-19 pandemic is “putting the health of migrants and refugees at risk especially in camps and reception centres.”

The letter goes on, “It is also indirectly slowing down asylum procedures and putting migrants in situations of great vulnerability.”

Annika Annerby Jansson, chair of the CPMR’s Migration Task Force, said, “It is more urgent than ever to adopt the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum to overhaul the current system and provide sustainable joint responses. Europe cannot afford to put off these decisions any longer.”

About the author

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Tags
Refugee crisis [8]
Justice and Rights [9]

Categories
Public order, justice and rights [10]
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World
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