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Regulating Flow of Refugees Gains Urgency in Greece and Rest of Europe

Making the Crossing to Lesbos

Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

MYTILENE, Greece — On a recent day here on the Greek island of Lesbos, hundreds of asylum seekers squatted on ragged hillsides or rested in a warren of tentlike structures, clothes drying on leafless trees, as they waited to be registered and sent by ferry to the European mainland.

Just a few yards away, a reception center, long promised by European Union authorities to help Greece manage the number of migrants overwhelming these islands, remained under construction. “We will be finished, I believe, by mid-December,” Stratis Manolakellis, a 37-year-old engineer overseeing the work, said as a Greek soldier in a bulldozer systematically battered an old military mess at the site. “And then, it will be very different here.”

In the wake of the Paris attacks, just how different — and how soon — has become an urgent matter not only for Greece but for all of Europe.

The unsettling knowledge that at least some of the Paris attackers whose Nov. 13 assaults killed 130 people entered Europe by infiltrating the throngs of migrants who have inundated Greek islands has now made security as much of a priority as humanitarian relief.

Afghan migrants outside temporary dormitories this month at a camp on the Greek island of Lesbos where a "hot spot" processing center is to be set up. Credit Mauricio Lima for The New York Times

Under Europe's system of open internal borders, this thinly patrolled, easily accessible coastline, within sight of the Turkish coast, might as well be the frontier of France or Germany or Sweden. Even as countries between Greece and those destinations farther north snap in place temporary border controls, the absence of a speedy plan to secure this coast threatens to collapse the agreement on freedom of movement, known as the Schengen accord, that has been at the heart of Europe's integration.

The center here, or "hot spot," as such sites have come to be called, is the first of several planned on Greek islands near Turkey — on Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros, where it is believed that at least one of the Paris attackers first entered Europe.

But the completion of those centers is still weeks or months away. And whether even that number of facilities will be enough to safeguard hundreds of vulnerable Greek islands is far from clear.

Nor is it clear that the European Union, already under heavy criticism for its sluggish and uncoordinated response to the migration and terrorism crises, is devoting enough resources and urgency to the problem.

"The hot spots need to be put quickly into place in Italy and Greece," the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, said last week in the aftermath of the Paris attacks and after months of planning already.

When first envisioned, the hot spots were intended to funnel European assistance to those countries on the refugee front lines, namely Greece and Italy, to help regulate the flow and registration of the migrants and ease the pressure on groaning social service networks across the Continent.

They have now become part of a different kind of front line, Europe's perimeter defense against possible infiltration by terrorists.

Migrants, who were waiting to be registered on Lesbos, lined up for food this month. Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

But one look at Lesbos highlights the problem's scale and the seeming impossibility of culling terrorist wolves from refugee sheep.

On a recent day, just 100 yards up a steep, rutted hill, hundreds of young men from Afghanistan, Iran and other places clustered around the narrow gateway to the existing Greek registration facility, screaming, pushing, cutting in line and demanding entrance as they confront frustrated and frequently irate officials.

“It looks like the attempt to speed things up in the last couple of months is going to be redoubled after the Paris bombs, and the security arguments will come to the fore,” said Leonard Doyle, chief spokesman for the International Organization for Migration.

“An internal problem within Europe has now come under new scrutiny in the full glare of Paris,” Mr. Doyle added.

Even so, the hot spots have been discussed in Brussels since the spring, and construction on the first such center on Lesbos island did not begin until this month.

In the meantime, the Greek government, which has been grappling with a crippling economic crisis, has been overwhelmed by the arrival of more than 700,000 migrants this year. Its answer has largely been to pass the problem on to other countries, virtually waving the migrants through without properly fingerprinting them or checking for potential terrorist connections.

Although plummeting temperatures and more hostile seas have diminished the number of migrants arriving in Greece in recent weeks, an average of 5,100 were still coming ashore every day this month.

To help, Frontex, the European Union’s border protection unit, has sent 16 boats, one airplane, one helicopter and three patrol cars to five Greek islands.

In October, it also asked member nations to pledge 775 officers — fingerprinters, screeners, interpreters, debriefers and document experts — to help with the expanded border duties. So far, 420 have been promised and just 163 have materialized.

“At the moment, we must focus on registration and security,” said Fabrice Leggeri, executive director of Frontex, which is based in Warsaw.

“But the reality now is that, if you cross a border illegally or enter through a hot spot, the level of security screening is actually lower than it would be at legal crossing points,” he added. “This must be changed.”

Bureaucratic hurdles remain, though.

Under current European law, Frontex officials do not have access to the databases necessary to perform thorough security checks, leaving that task up to the Greek police and slowing the process. A proposal to expand database access to include Frontex has been floated in Brussels, but it is still a long way from being approved.

“Let us be optimistic and say it will be within 12 months,” Mr. Leggeri said. “We have a huge security problem if we do not even have people properly registered and fingerprinted.”

Anxious officials, especially in those countries through which the migrants normally pass on their way into Western Europe, say still more assistance and money from the European Union are needed.

A refugee shaved early this month at a station to recharge electronics on Lesbos. Credit Mauricio Lima for The New York Times

The man believed to have organized the attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was killed in a raid by the French police last week, appears to have moved into and around Europe more than once without detection, despite being eagerly sought by the authorities.

Such realities have done little to soothe the fears of skittish Europeans worried that jihadists are hiding among the legitimate refugees.

Since the Paris attacks, several countries along the so-called West Balkan migrant route — Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia — have instituted their own border checks.

European ministers meeting in Brussels last week voted to tighten checks on the external borders of the Schengen group of 26 countries sharing passport-free travel.

From now on, travelers must not only produce a passport but also have their names run through databases.

Greek officials say the new hot spots, when completed, will mandate stricter security checks for everyone entering the Continent.

But Frontex officials say that while Greek authorities have become more scrupulous in recent months about properly registering and fingerprinting arriving migrants, they still lack the capacity to handle large numbers on peak days.

Mr. Manolakellis, the engineer overseeing construction of the new European Union reception center here, said the site, once finished, will be able to register 1,400 people a day.

A second, smaller registration site will be ready by January and will be able to register 800 more a day. A third, on an adjoining parcel owned by the Greek military, will, when complete, raise the number to 3,500 registrants daily.

A second refugee camp not far away, at Kara Tepe, where arriving Syrian families are sent, will also be reconfigured to process 2,000 refugees a day, he said, and a third site, for unaccompanied minors and those with special needs, is on the drawing board.

Even so, Mr. Manolakellis said, the capacity will still fall short of that needed to process the 7,000 to 10,000 migrants who have arrived on Lesbos on the busiest days in recent months.

Officials said there would be a drastic improvement over current conditions, but Mr. Manolakellis was not entirely optimistic. “Next summer, I fear, the flow will continue,” he said, “and even this new facility will be overwhelmed.”

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