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2.3.3 Pressure on the Greek borders and islands

Existing pressures on Greek borders and on the islands, as well as the 'hotspot' model were discussed throughout 2020, with a common acknowledgement that more resources were needed to assist Greek authorities in managing the situation, while addressing the needs of migrants and asylum seekers. In an open letter to the leaders of European institutions, Greek authorities, UNHCR, the Council of Europe and the WHO, 121 organisations expressed their concern over the situation of asylum seekers in the country.[191]

At the end of February 2020, pressure started to mount at the Greek-Turkish border, with thousands of migrants arriving following active encouragement by Turkish actors to take the land route to Europe through Greece.[192] To respond effectively, the European Commission presented an action plan for the EU and Member States to provide critical support to Greece in managing the extraordinary situation at the borders *(see the detailed description of measures in Section 4.1.1)*.[193]

To ease pressure on the Greek islands, in March 2020, Commissioner Johansson – along with the Greek Minister for Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachi – announced the creation of a special temporary assisted voluntary return scheme for 5,000 migrants from the Greek islands to their countries of origin. The scheme would be implemented jointly by the European Commission, Greek authorities, the IOM and Frontex.[194]

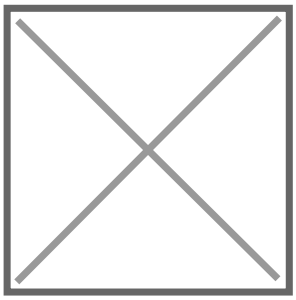
On 8 and 9 September 2020, fires destroyed the Moria reception camp on the Greek island of Lesvos, leaving more than 12,000 people without shelter. Following the devastating fires, the European Commission announced the creation of a dedicated task force to improve the situation on the island in a sustainable way. The task force works in close collaboration with Greek authorities, EU agencies and international organisations on the ground. With new reception facilities being a main priority, the task force will also take actions on:

- Ending overcrowding through the transfer of vulnerable people to the mainland and continuing to relocate unaccompanied children and families with children to other Member States;
- Improving the link between key processes, including asylum and return or integration, supported by EASO and Frontex;
- Increasing voluntary returns through the implementation of the ongoing assisted voluntary return scheme that was stalled due to COVID-19; and

- Improving safety and security for migrants and asylum seekers, fully supported by Frontex and the EU Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol).[195]

In November and December 2020, the European Commission and Greece agreed on a joint plan for a new reception centre in Lesvos, as well as the construction of three smaller reception centres on the islands of Samos, Kos and Leros, all of them to be completed by September 2021.[196]

To ensure protection for the most vulnerable among the migrant and asylum seeker population in Greece, the European Commission launched a voluntary relocation exercise from Greece to other Member States for unaccompanied children and children with severe medical conditions and other vulnerabilities accompanied by their families. The European Commission coordinated the exercise in cooperation with the Greek Special Secretary for Unaccompanied Minors and provided financial and operational support to Greece and participating Member States. EASO, the IOM, UNHCR and UNICEF also provided support to carry out the mission.[197] By the end of 2020, over 1,600 persons in total were relocated from Greece to 13 Member States and 3 associated countries.[198]



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