

THE SEA THE ONLY ROAD FOR THE REFUGEES

A crime in development in Aegean sea



What can you say that hasn't already been said? What can you show that hasn't already been shown? In only one day nearly 6000 people reached the shores of Mytilini. One can only guess how many arrived in Rhodes, Kos, Samos, Hios...

2.5 million are waiting their turn to make the crossing to Greece with the intention of moving on to Northern European countries. The same number again are in the process of fleeing their homelands; Syrians, Afghans, Kurds, Pakistanis. Wounded peoples who have truly suffered from the politics of western "civilization".

How many have lost their lives on the way?...How many have uprooted themselves and suffered so much on their long journey only to drown a few metres from the Greek shores?

The Turkish authorities are turning a blind eye, with a view to their own profit, while a crime of unimaginable proportions is unfolding, at the centre of which are innocent people, victims in a “game” involving millions. The Greek government look on with indifference. Instead of concentrating on ensuring the refugees a safe passage through their territory, all they do is to sound the alarm across Europe. They cannot block the path of the refugees. The least they can do is prevent it from becoming a graveyard.

Where should the line be drawn? After how many deaths? People have become numbers. Their past drowned in the Aegean and the future they had wanted to gain in a foreign land of security has been buried alongside their hope.

For it is hope which drives someone to abandon their homeland, to load their children onto a rubber dinghy, to pay a trafficker 1200 euros for themselves and 800 for their child in order to cross the water, to risk their whole family’s life at sea in Force 8 gales.

When you have nothing to lose, when everywhere around you is piled high with corpses, when on the one side you have Assad and on the other Moslem Extremists, when the interests of other countries govern your country and drive

it to civil war forcing you to abandon your home, then the only road open to you is the sea. The overland route is blocked with fences.

Is there anything more tragic than losing your life when you have reached so-called safety after escaping death in your homeland?

8 KILOMETRES OF LIFE JACKETS



The first thing you see on arrival in Lesbos is life jackets. Particularly on the north side of the island, the closest to the Turkish shores, over the 8 kilometres which connect Molyvos with Skala Sykamias, the eye can only see life jackets and “little mountains” of clothes which the refugees take off when they change into dry ones as soon as they disembark.

Shoes, ID cards, passports, photographs, bags, remnants of a past life snatched up in haste, the joy of setting foot on dry land, apprehension about the future. Scala Sikamias.

Refugee village. The village of Stratos Myrivilis. The descendants of the 1922 refugees welcome the new refugees. Between 10 and 60 boats a day, depending on the weather and the mood of the traffickers.



The volunteers who arrived from Athens few month ago are trying to organize a situation of solidarity for the people who are arriving in their thousands, with only their conscience to help them and the support of all those who cannot be present but help in whatever way they can; with clothes, food, money.

These volunteers consist of people from all over Greece and abroad, coming either in groups of friends or organizations or even as individuals. Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, Spaniards, Portuguese, even a Malaysian have taken the step and left their computer screen behind, going to where they are needed. The local people, too,

who have been living this drama for years now, help all they can without rest.





They help people out of the boats, they distribute blankets, make sandwiches, sort out and give clothes to the refugees who arrive wet through. They give them what they have need of most, a welcoming hug. Few hours later they will arrive at the transit camp, where they are registered before leaving the island. The only state involvement on the island is in the form of the police who register the refugees.

In the selfsuported “reception” and doctors’ first aid area which the volunteers have set up in Platanos in Sykamia, thousands of refugees have been provided with warm clothes and something to eat as well as basic medical care, if necessary, after such a dangerous journey.





“Why dangerous?” one might ask, looking at the distance between Lesvos and the Turkish coast. It’s not even $\frac{3}{4}$ hour away.

However, the traffickers no longer accompany the refugees. They make one of the refugees themselves steer the boat, usually someone without enough money to pay

their way. Or they simply allocate anyone to do it, irrespective of the fact that they know nothing about the sea, so the trip could take them 3 hours. Should there be bad weather, they may even give up. Who can blame them? And this way lives are lost.

And those who are saved will owe their life to the fishermen who rush out as soon as they realize a boat is adrift, or as soon as they see torch signals in the sea at night. They will owe their life to the Spanish lifeboat men who scour the sea for people in need of rescue. They will owe it to the coastguards. So many capsized boats, so many children; it haunts their sleep. They will owe all those whose spirit cannot endure the sight of such pain; those who cannot keep back their tears when they realize children have lost their lives; those who are laboring alone with their compassion as their only ally; those who stand by night and day, waiting, along those 8 kilometres of shoreline, to welcome and assist those who have been forced to abandon their homes.

Somewhere in all this misery, however, joy can be found.

The joy of those who arrived safely; for whom the weather was good and whose lives were not endangered; who travelled by day and could easily be spotted by volunteers with binoculars; who are now able to use the volunteers' phones to send photos and call loved ones who remained behind, to let them know of their safe arrival; who are soaked to the skin but do not care because it is sunny and they have reached the shore intact.





But after a while the joy gives way to sorrow, tears and lament. Because it is night, there are waves and the boat is adrift. Because the traffickers do not take the weather into account and force people to embark, regardless. Because some people fell overboard, perhaps never to be found again since they came alone without family and no-one will ever look for them.

HOW IS HUMAN LIFE MEASURED?

Someone came with a broken arm. He told the volunteer doctors that he had been tied to a tree for three days because he refused to board a boat out of fear of the bad weather. He was made an example of.

They pressurize people to risk their lives. They offer bargains on the Internet: cheaper at night, infants free. For this reason the shores of Lesbos are dotted with children's life jackets, fake ones, the kind that children take to the beach for a swim. Not the kind that will help them stay afloat and save them from drowning at sea. You get what you pay for. That is how human life is measured.



As it is measured by the need of the man who from the knee down has no legs but whose hope makes him run; by the family that has a handicapped child and gets on the boat to look for a better future, so too it is measured by the smile and tears of the father who, after hours at sea with his wife and two children, reaches the shore in a state of shock and cries when the volunteers take his children to change their clothes.



It is measured by the children who become happy with a croissant and a doll and forget what they have been through.



It is measured by the look of gratitude on someone's face; with the embrace of a refugee child wrapped in a blanket to keep him warm while he waits for his turn to change clothes.

It is measured by the sobs and empty gaze of the man who came face to face with death as he steered a boat through a tempest and reached the jetty at Skalas without losing anyone on the way.

It is measured by the exhaustion of the young man carrying a large terrified child, who was forced to ask for a

volunteer's help as he had been pushed beyond the limits of physical endurance.

It is measured by the first aid given by the volunteer doctors to whoever needs it; with the paediatrician who, with a smile, allays the fears of the little children. So many doctors in the country and so few volunteers in a place where their presence is more than necessary. Why?

It is measured by the dignity of the children and the women who silently await their turn to put on dry clothes, who with renowned politeness and dignity ask for something a bit longer to wear as Allah can see them.



There is no logic to war. But logic makes you wonder.
Don't all those who leave their countries know that they
are putting themselves in potential danger?

They know, but behind them they see and smell the death
that is their fate. Before them lies hope.

Which would you choose?

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*The solidarity activists in Skala Sykamias request that
whoever wants to send clothes should do so according to
age and size and sex, in bags which are labeled with their
contents , in order to make the sorting process easier.
Mainly, however, they invite whoever has time, even if it is
only a couple of days, to go to Lesbos to help. They need
people.*

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