

Discussion Paper-I

The Destruction of a Refugee Camp in Greece: A Report by the Movement for the Rights of Refugees and Immigrants in Patras *

The consequences of the war by EU and US in Afghanistan are more than apparent in Greece. This war created thousands of refugees who are trying to survive by traveling to “democratic” Europe. Thousands have died on this “journey” and those that arrived alive face a “fortress Europe.” The following is a report about the destruction of a point of arrival, a refugee camp, in the third biggest town in Greece, Patras.

The Patras refugee camp was destroyed on July 12, 2009. It had a lifetime of approximately eight years. Located in the north of the city, next to a small river Milichos, behind Iroon Polytechniou Avenue, it consisted of about 150 small huts, in an area of 5 to 6 acres, with a mosque in the center and a few improvised shops. It hosted and protected 1000 to 2000 refugees from Afghanistan. Though it was an improvised camp, under miserable hygienic conditions, it was the last refuge, the last hope for refugees in Patras. At least 300 of them had applied for asylum and had managed to get a “red card,” while 200 others wanted one, but could not apply, since the authorities that are responsible for accepting and processing applications did not have a translator.

Several Attempts to Demolish the Camp were made by the Authorities

On the 23rd of January 2008, for example, with the use of a demolition protocol that was composed by the Prefecture and characterized the camp as “an arbitrary construction,” another effort to tear down the camp was made. This effort was preceded by an extensive operation that took place in order to arrest and remove from the city 1500 refugees. Both the arrest and the demolition activities were prevented after organized actions by the Movement of the rights of Refugees and Immigrants and a huge demonstration (of 2000 people) that took place with the participation of the refugees themselves in the end of January.

A year later, a second attempt was made on the 21st of January 2009, when a fire burnt down about 40 huts. Authorities accused the

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Afghans themselves as arsonists. The fire was put out and the camp was saved once more.

The solidarity movement supported this “miserable camp” and insisted to the end that before demolishing the already existing refugee camp, a new one should be built within the city limits, where people could move freely whenever and wherever they wanted.

This claim was widely accepted and adopted by some official members of Mr. Karamanlis’ government, such as the Minister for Home Affairs, Mr. Pr. Pavlopoulos. The Support Movement to the Immigrants and Refugees and other organizations defending refugees rights also demanded that asylum and travel documents should be issued to the refugees, the under age should be protected, and activities aiming to the social integration of the refugees should be supported.

After the recent European Union (EU) elections, along with the rise of the right-wing party of LAOS, the (supposedly) socialist party of PASOK acceded to the ruthless EU measures against refugees: “No tolerance to illegal immigrants.” Those were the words used before the elections by the leader of PASOK, Mr. G. Papandreou. These are the immediate reasons why the plans for building a new refugee camp were abandoned and instead cruel police measures were adopted, including the fortifying of the harbor and the launching of police invasions on the camp. In addition several arrests were made under terrorizing circumstances. The refugees who were not arrested (especially those who had a red card) were threatened to prevent them from going near the camp again.

Under these circumstances – and especially because of the police actions - the number of residents in the camp dramatically declined during the past two months. The refugees stopped sleeping in the camp and dispersed within the city. Some of them fled to other places. Police authorities and the local political leadership were satisfied by the effectiveness of these measures and the decrease in the number of refugees, claiming that these measures helped to solve the “problem” of the camp without the need of creating a new host place.

Sunday morning of the 12th of July 2009, however, was the time of the “final solution.” At 5:30 am, police forces reinforced by six MAT squads (with blue and green overalls) - who came from Athens – surrounded the camp, under the presence of the local political leadership and a public prosecutor. Never before in Patras there was there a such “operation” by the police. And this “operation” was against people that are the victims of a war; that is, it is an “operation” against refugees that are created by the war of US and EU.

This operation found the parties of New Democracy, PASOK and LAOS, in agreement and in favour to the tough measures of the police forces. It was intended to solve the refugee problem in the city by military means. An official statement concerning this measure was released on Saturday evening, but it was not clear what it meant. Along with the remaining refugees, only 15 members of our organization and a few other

people in solidarity were present. Other people, including young members of anarchist groups, either failed to approach, got arrested or were detained for identification.

Some police forces encircled the camp while others invaded it. About 200 refugees who did not manage to escape were arrested. The leaders of the operation didn't permit to the members of our organization to have any access to information or to the refugees. Only after two hours of pressure did we see a document by the Prefecture that permitted the destruction of the camp. However its legality was questionable.

Bulldozers, trucks and buses (one double-decker bus and three normal ones) arrived. Bulldozers made the final attack on the camp, while the buses gathered the refugees. Under-age children were taken and left at a shelter in Konitsa (400 km north). The red card possessors were taken away to a hotel, since they had applied for asylum. Those who did not have the appropriate papers and were not under age (always according to the decisions made by the police) were driven to an unknown destination and detained, without anybody being informed about their whereabouts. At 8 am, when Afghans disappeared from the camp, the bulldozers and the trucks began demolishing the huts, excluding the mosque in order not to be blamed for disrespect to the religious place. A few minutes later flames appeared in the campsite, completing the demolition quickly and without exceptions. The mosque turned into ashes.

According to the police, the fire was started by the Afghans and as proof of this claim a videotape belonging to local TV stations showed three Afghans running in the camp. According to some uncertain sources by this time those three Afghans have had already been tried in court for committing arson.

Later the same morning, a second operation started, this time against the Sudanese who live in the south of the city. The Sudanese have no huts, only blankets and cardboard shelters. For the authorities, it was a good opportunity to "clear" Patras of all foreigners.

The Movement for the Rights of Refugees and Immigrants states, "It is a failure of policy to resort to military solutions as a response to social problems. It is a failure of policy to be unable to design a long-term immigration plan. It is a failure of policy to make decisions while ignoring the causes that produce refugees. Tomorrow, in one week or in one month refugees will be here again."

Doctors Without Borders (working inside the Afghans' camp since May 2008 providing primary medical care and psycho-social support) expressed its deep concern after the police operation in the camp of Patras: "Most of the people are forced to leave their country because of war or extreme poverty and face an uncertain future and a possible detention for an unknown period of time. This can have very negative effects on health and psychological state." The Communist Party and SYRIZA (left parties) made statements, condemned police operations against the Afghans' camp and called it brutal.

While police forces and political leadership seem satisfied by the outcome of the operation, the Movement for the Rights of Immigrants and Refugees and several other movements of solidarity with the refugees are planning the following actions:

- Supporting and offering solidarity to refugees and immigrants wherever they are found within the city, where they are hiding under the fear of arrests and deportations.
- Taking all the necessary legal actions in order to find out the legitimacy of the break down of the camp.
- Pushing the authorities to accept new applications for asylum.
- Demanding that the asylum seekers are treated with dignity and have their rights protected.
- Publishing the brutality, since 'hunting refugees' is cruel barbarism.

We demand:

- The release of the arrested.
- The issuing of asylum and travel documents to the refugees.
- The protection of the under-age with social inclusion measures.
- The social integration of the refugees.

As one of the asylum seekers told us yesterday "Even if the house of animals is destroyed, people permit them to build their house somewhere else. We don't even have this right."