



Thousands in Greek government-run accommodation will go to bed hungry tonight

On International Human Rights Day, today, at least 10,000 men, women and children in Greek government-run accommodation mark their 71st day – well over two months – without food or money. Despite small aid organisations' best efforts, most if not all, will go to bed hungry tonight.

And as winter sets in, these increasingly desperate people have serious fears for their lives and future.



Leman (r) and Nesrin (l)

Nesrin looks at you: 'She will cry,' she tells you.

Leman asks to be given a moment, turns her face away, cries, then dries her eyes and says: 'It's so hard for me to be a mother like this.

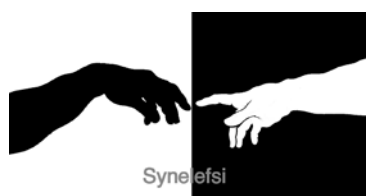
'It's so hard even to think about or talk about.

'I am old. I don't want anything. All I want is for my children. I just want them to be happy, to have the things they want and need. It's what any mother wants for their children.'

Leman, 47, is a Kurdish mother of four children. She lives with Nesrin, 20, her oldest daughter, her three other children (twin 15 year olds, a boy and a girl, and an 18 year-old boy) and her husband at Kavala refugee camp on the edge of the North-East Greek city.

She wept because you asked her about her life today, and what she wants for the future.

Leman, Nesrin and their family fled Mosul, in Northern Iraq, because Da'esh (IS) had taken the city and was killing Kurdish people like them. Leman's sister was attacked and





injured by Da'esh members. Leman said: 'They were killing people. When my sister was hurt, we escaped because we didn't want the same to happen to us. We had to save our lives.'

They have been at Kavala camp since February 2019, having been moved there from Filakio camp, close to the Evros border. But after several years in the asylum system, Leman and her family's application was earlier this year rejected for the second time by the Greek government. They did not explain why.

Leman said: 'Life here is difficult. We have nothing, and the government has given us a second negative decision for asylum without saying why. As a result, we have no money. We have no food, nothing, no water, and we can't go to work to get money.'

Leman's family's situation is not unusual. Changes to Greek law which came into effect in September mean that from October, around 60 per cent of the men women and children at government-controlled refugee camps and accommodation – around 11,800 of an estimated 19,600 in mainland camps alone – have been cut off from all financial and other support. They also cannot work, because they are officially removed from the Greek tax and social security system.

This is perhaps particularly harshly felt today, 10 December 2021, International Human Rights Day, which marks the 73rd anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration's 25th Article states: 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.'

Though aid organisations, such as **Northern Lights Aid** in Kavala, are trying to cover people's most basic needs, what they can do is severely limited by their size.

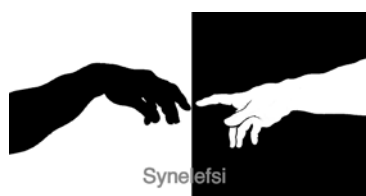
Leman explains: 'We need so many things. We don't have enough food. Everyone is always hungry. I want to buy things for my children. Not big things, just things like clothes. **Northern Lights Aid** helps us, but we have no money, we can't even get vegetables to eat. We can't get meat. We can't get good food. Everything is expensive. Too expensive for us, because we cannot get money.'

'The kids need clothes. But we can't buy anything. We want to work and earn money for this but we cannot. They have to go without. But people need clothes, and they are children.'

At this point, you ask her how she feels about her situation, and the future. It is then that Leman breaks down. 'I don't want anything. All I want is for my children. I just want them to be happy...' Nesrin adds: 'We just don't know what will happen next.'

The same difficulties are faced by those who *have* been accepted for asylum. They are provided with support for just *one day* after asylum has been granted. Not only is this insufficient time for them to enter the Greek system, or find new accommodation and a job to pay for it, they also have to wait, often for several months, to receive the new ID they need to work, open bank accounts and prove their status for finding a home.

Homaida Hairi, 36, is a Hazara, part of an Afghan Shi'a Muslim tribe who have been consistently persecuted, attacked and killed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. She, her four children (two girls aged 12 and 10, two boys aged 7 and 5) and her husband fled after being directly threatened by the Taliban.





'It was no longer safe for my children to be at school or any of us to go outside. We left because I love my husband, I love my children, and I love myself. I didn't want us to be killed.'

The family were accepted for asylum by the Greek government, but that decision meant that they were immediately cut out of the government's support programme ESTIA, under which men, women and children are supposed to receive cash, but because of a breakdown in the system are now being provided only with food.

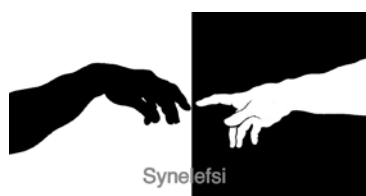
Homaida explained: 'They immediately stopped our money but have not issued us yet with identification cards. Without it, we cannot get a job, cannot open a bank account to be paid if we get a job, and cannot even ask for help to survive while we look for a home and a job.'

The family survives for now on what is left over when those at the camp who *are* given food hand-outs (though those people have not been provided with other essentials including soap and diapers for babies for 71 days) have food left over.

Homaida says: 'Many days we do not eat. My family is hungry very often. It is very difficult for me to see my children hungry, and it is very difficult for them to go to school, and go to bed hungry. They try hard to learn, they are good children, they like school. But it is so hard for them because they are so hungry, and at school they must try hard to concentrate. They are too hungry to learn. It upsets them so much and it saddens us as well.'

'It's all about money. I don't mind so much for me. I do not like to be hungry but I am an adult. But what I can get, I want to spend on food for my children, that is all.'

Like Leman's family, Homaida's also relies on what **Northern Lights Aid**, a small organisation based not far from Kavala camp, can provide.





Northern Lights Aid's Clothing Store, stocked entirely with donated clothes

Along with services such as language lessons, employability support services and its standard clothing store (at which people can come and exchange 'credits' for clothing items every six weeks), the organisation has started giving people sanitary pads, diapers for babies, milk, dry food items such as pasta, flour, sugar and rice, and vouchers for fresh food at supermarkets.

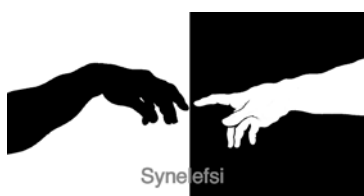
But their capacity to do so is limited by the level of need – and **Northern Lights Aid** also assists Roma and Greek people who are referred to them – funding, and donations.

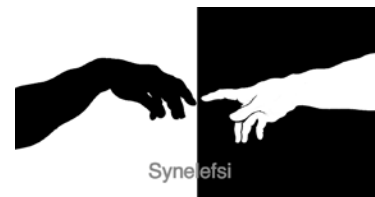
The organisation's General Manager Alexandra Zosso explained: 'The needs are certainly much greater now. The ESTIA cash programme was not just for food, but also for essentials like hygiene equipment. So our providing sanitary pads to all women is a response to that, as is the diaper provision. The food and vouchers we provide are because the law has changed for people who have received second rejections or been granted asylum. They really need assistance right now. We have funding for this until Christmas, but after that, we shall see what we can do.'

Homaida added: 'I can at least come to **Northern Lights** to get some clothes, as we cannot get any of them either.'

'I don't know what to do. I know I want to leave the camp. But I don't have money to do that. So, I have to stay. But if I stay, I won't get any money. There is nothing for us there, but nowhere else we can afford to go.'

'I want to make money for my daughters and sons, to get what they need so they don't have to be upset any more. I want a good life. That's all. It's not very much to ask.'





On International Human Rights day, it is reasonable to ask that solutions are found to these families' hardship and distress, and to help them live, learn, work and contribute to their own – and everyone else's welfare and success.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

- The *ESTIA* initiative, under which men, women and children in government-controlled accommodation received money once per month to spend on food and other essential items, was taken over by the Greek government on 1 October 2021. Since then, no payments have been made.
- The Greek government enacted new legislation in September, according to which all material reception support (Article 114 of Law 4636/2019 as amended by Article 111 of Law 4674/2020) will be ended to beneficiaries of international protection and people whose asylum applications have been rejected twice.
- For more information about ***Northern Lights***, contact Alexandra Zosso at alexandra@northernlightsaid.org or on
- For more information about the situation, contact Rory O'Keeffe at roryfrokeeffe@gmail.com, or on 0030 6955452939

This communication has come from ***Synelefsi***, a group of organisations, observers and analysts, experts on people movement, and our responses to it. You can contact us for more information, with questions or with comments, at: roryfrokeeffe@gmail.com

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