



## **This Human Rights Day, thousands in Greek government-run accommodation will go to 'bed' hungry and cold**

*(embargoed to 00.01 on Friday 10 December 2021)*

On International Human Rights Day, today, at least 10,000 men, women and children in Greek government-run accommodation mark their 71<sup>st</sup> 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, even if they have beds to sleep in.

As winter sets in, these increasingly desperate people have serious fears for their lives and future, while Greek people whose employment and incomes increased thanks to the money those people received and spent are now facing serious economic threats.

'One frustrating thing is that the lawyers and the court claim to believe us. They say they know we are in trouble and cannot go home. But still, we have been refused asylum.'

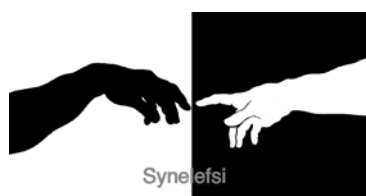


*Bilal Shukri*

Bilal Shukri, 39, is an Iraqi Kurd from Mosul. In 2014, he, like many others, fled when Da'esh (IS) entered the town and started killing Kurdish people.

He travelled north, and settled in a small town close to Iraq's border with Turkey, where he met and married his wife, and had a daughter, now five years old.

But in 2019, he was forced from his home by a conflict between Kurdish groups, each of which believed he belonged to the other – 'Three times, I was caught by different armed groups. I wasn't involved with any of them,' he said. 'But this meant each of them suspected I was involved with one of the others. Then, they started threatening me, and attacking my home. They broke my windows. We were terrified and thought we would be killed. We had to leave.'





Bilal's young family arrived in Lagadikia camp, a refugee camp on the edge of the small North-East Greek village of the same name, in February 2020. Because they had not been registered as refugees, they were forced to sleep in a tent.

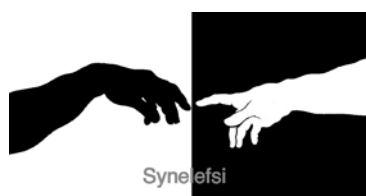
Almost two years later, they are still there. But things have got much more difficult for him.

Bilal's young family – he, his daughter and his pregnant wife – have been turned down for asylum twice by the Greek government, and they are as a result not allowed food, money, or other services, including shelter.

He explains: 'There were 90 families living in this camp when I arrived. Eighty families were given ID. We got a negative decision. We are forced to live in a tent at the camp. We have a five-year-old daughter. And when we wake up, we are not allowed to stay inside the camp. Every day, we are told we must get out. We have no food, no money, and nowhere else we can go.'

Bilal'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 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration's 25<sup>th</sup> 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.'



The **IHA** community centre, in Lagadikia

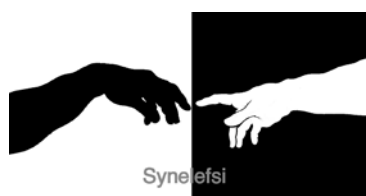
Aid organisations, such as **IHA**, which runs a community centre with a space for young children, language and other lessons, daily coffee afternoons, and carries out food and other distributions for people in Lagadikia, are trying to cover people's most basic needs. But what they can do is severely limited by their size.

Laira Phylactou-Bastow, **IHA's** Project Coordinator, explained: 'We've started doing food distributions every week, because the basic needs of people at the camp right now are not being met. Around half of the people at the camp are not even able to access food. Today, we are distributing cauliflowers, sunflower oil, peas, beans, milk and flour to 95 people.

'Previously, we focussed on supporting those staying in the camp who had not yet officially entered the asylum system, and so were unable to access services at the camp or receive cash assistance. Now, the focus has shifted to people who have actually been granted asylum.'

People who have been approved for asylum are now 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.

And in a further complication, on 1 October 2021, the Greek government took over the **ESTIA** programme, under which men, women and children were given cash, provided by the European Union, to pay for food as well as other essential items such as soap, toothpaste, other essential hygiene items, and baby products. Instead, because the





government was not prepared properly to make the payments, it has since 1 October provided only pre-prepared food. This has been the situation for 71 days.

And here, too, **IHA**, like other small organisations across Greece, are working hard to cover these serious shortfalls. Ms Phylactou-Bastow said: 'We've always distributed diapers for kids aged 0-3 years, but now we are also doing hygiene distribution for everyone, because of the cash programme problems. It would usually be for only those not receiving cash, but now, because nobody is receiving cash, it's for everyone.'

For Bilal, however, while the services **IHA** provides are welcome, there are far greater problems to be addressed.

He said: 'In the camp, some families receive food, and if they have more than they can eat, they give it to us. And IHA provides some things, which is good. When that happens, we do have enough food. We are often hungry, but not every day. But the real problem is that it's so cold. There is me, my daughter and my wife. My wife is pregnant, and it's so cold. But I have had two negative decisions, so I can't do anything about it.'

'It's so cold, and the camp is empty. There are 40 containers with no-one inside. I asked if we could have one, my family, and the camp manager said no. He said if I got one, people would come from Germany and Switzerland to take one. But the court accepted we come from a dangerous place, and we can't return to Iraq. I would die there.'

Nor can the young family even warm up in the daytime.

He said: 'I am not allowed inside the Community Centre because I have only had one COVID vaccine. My wife, too. We had the first, then we had our second negative decision and we were stripped of our presence in the system, so when we went to get the second injection, we could not, because we do not exist here any more. It means we cannot go inside buildings because we are not fully-vaccinated. So on Sunday's when there is the **IHA** women's space, my wife cannot go inside. We are always so cold.'

Nor can Bilal go elsewhere: 'I have no ID,' he said. 'Without it, I can't get a job, open a bank account, rent accommodation. All I want is to get a job, work, earn money and provide for my family. I want my children – my daughter and when it is a child, my baby – to go to school. I want a job. I want to work. But it is impossible. It is winter. We are not even allowed to go inside a building to get warm after sleeping in a tent.'

In Lagadikia village, Greek people, too, are facing challenges because no-one at the camp has received money from the **ESTIA** programme for 71 days.

Valentina Zigiridou, the manager of Loutras' Market general store, said: 'Certainly we have made money from the camp being here. We are much better off. People come here from the camp, and buy things they need and want. We have many customers coming in, and they are a big source of income for us.'

'For the local people as well, we have seen them buying and liking products we first bought because the refugees liked them. And it has benefitted everyone in a lot of other ways. We had three stores, this one, one in Vagiochori, and one at Loutra Volvi (where two other nearby refugee camps operated). They employed people. People had jobs because of the refugees, and the money they were spending here.'

'Everyone benefitted. The refugees got things they needed, the people got jobs, businesses like us made money and the local producers we buy from did too. We were





selling 1,500 cartons of locally-produced eggs per month. Now, it's maybe 100 cartons per month. The cash problems have certainly affected everyone.

'Families were spending €100 on the things they needed, but now they can't. They are weighing each separate egg to see which they can afford.

'And instead of buying things, people are asking if they can have the things we will have to throw away. It's heart-breaking because that's such a hard thing for them to ask, and they were coming here buying things and helping the whole economy.

'They certainly made a difference to us. Not just economically, but in those terms too. We were going to leave Greece altogether. We didn't want to, but we were in such a bad situation. But we had this shop open a little before the camp opened and it made such a difference to us. We are still here, employing people, buying local produce and part of what has been a thriving place because of the refugees.'

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 *IHA*, contact Hector Ferrer-Vidal Garcia at [hector.ferrer-vidal@iha.help](mailto:hector.ferrer-vidal@iha.help) or on
- For more information about the situation, contact Rory O'Keeffe at [roryfrokeeffe@gmail.com](mailto: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](mailto:roryfrokeeffe@gmail.com)

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