

## **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.



*Leman (l) and Nesrin (r)*

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

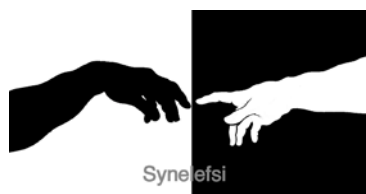
Leman asks to be given a moment, turns her face away, cries, then dries her eyes and says: 'It's so hard for me to be a mother like this.

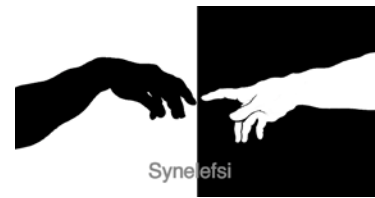
'It's so hard even to think about or talk about.

'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.'

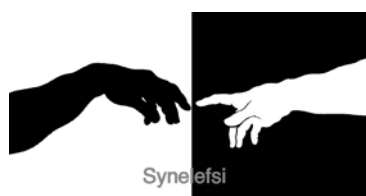
Bilal Shukri, 39, is an Iraqi Kurd from Mosul. In 2014, he, like many others, fled when Da'esh (IS) entered the town and started killing Kurdish people.

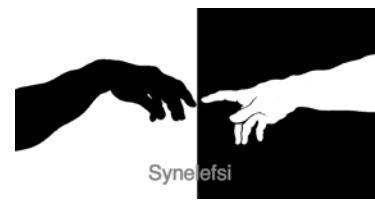


*Bilal Shukri*

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.'





'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'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, 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 and Leman's families' 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.

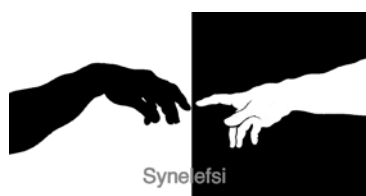
This is perhaps particularly harshly felt today, 10 December 2021, International Human Rights Day, which marks the 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration's 25<sup>th</sup> Article states: 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living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

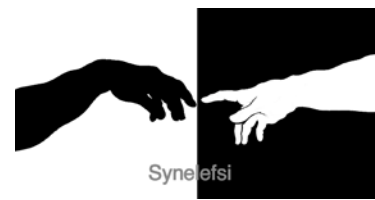
Aid organisations **IHA**, which runs a community centre with a space for young children, language and other lessons, daily coffee afternoons, and carries out food and other distributions for people in Lagadikia, and **Northern Lights Aid** in Kavala are trying to cover people's most basic needs. But 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.'

In Kavala, 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 challenges are also faced by people who *have* been granted asylum: they are now provided with support for just *one day* after the decision is made. 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.'

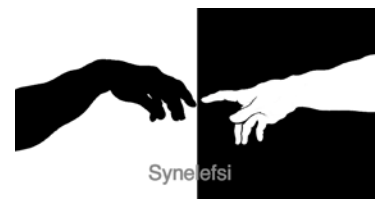
Like Leman's family, Homaida's relies on what **Northern Lights Aid**, a small organisation based not far from Kavala camp, can provide.

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.

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), **Northern Lights Aid** 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 they *also* assist 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 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.'

**IHA**, too, are working hard to cover the serious shortfalls created by the gap in *ESTIA* payments. 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.'

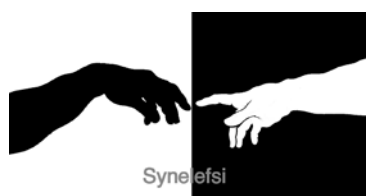
For Bilal, however, while the services **IHA** provides are welcome, there are far greater problems to be addressed.

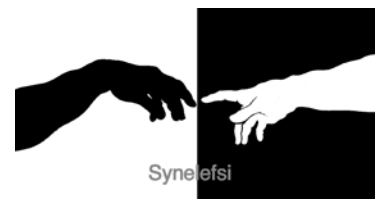
He said: 'In the camp, some families receive food, and if they have more than they can eat, they give it to us. And **IHA** provides some things, which is good. When that happens, we do have enough food. We are often hungry, but not every day. But the real problem is that it's so cold. There is me, my 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 anymore. It means we cannot go inside buildings because we are not fully-vaccinated. So on Sundays 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 Zigridou, 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.'

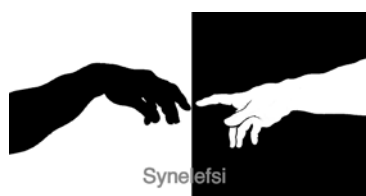
'And instead of buying things, people are asking if they can have the things we will have to throw away. It's heart-breaking because that's such a hard thing for them to ask, and they were coming here buying things and helping the whole economy.'

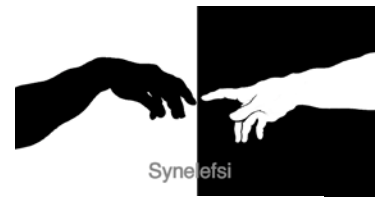
'They certainly made a difference to us. Not just economically, but in those terms too. We were going to leave Greece altogether. We didn't want to, but we were in such a bad situation. But we had this shop open a little before the camp opened and it made such a difference to us. We are still here, employing 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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