

I went to Lesbos Island, Greece, from the 24 December 2015 until the 2 January 2016. It was a very moving and exciting experience. To give you some background, in 2015:

- Over 1 million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe by sea.¹
- Of these, 750,000 arrived via Greece through the Aegean Sea, with 500,000 coming via the island of Lesbos.
- The average daily number of arrivals in Lesbos in December 2015 was 1,900; in November 2015 it was 3,400.
- Over 85% of all arrivals in Lesbos were from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan: three countries in which there is armed conflict.
- 46% were men, 34% women and 20% children.¹

Lesbos is therefore the main entry point for refugees into the European Union. Refugees go to Turkey and make contact with the smugglers in Istanbul who will arrange their sea crossing to Lesbos (or other smaller islands such as Chios, Kos, Samos). After spending a few days on the island, they are transported by ferry to Athens. From there, Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans travel northwards towards Germany, Sweden, etc. The others are stuck in Greece.

Boats arrive on the Lesbos coast mostly at night and in the early hours of the morning. Refugees travel at night, not because they want to, but because the smugglers tell them to. They travel in inflatable dinghies, packed to the brim. Ordinarily the sea crossing should not take more than 2 1/2 to 3 hours, but refugees in one boat told me they'd been in the sea for 6 to 7 hours. Over 800 drowned trying to cross the Aegean Sea last year.

Groups of volunteers and NGOs cover the whole length of the coast. They assist in receiving the boats safely onto the shore. UNHCR staff, buses and a mobile unit of Doctors Without Borders are on 24-hour shifts. A UNHCR bus takes most refugees to Moria Refugee Camp to be registered. Syrian and Iraqi families are accommodated at Kara Tepé Camp. The camps are less than 5 km from the capital Mitilini.

The conditions at the two refugee camps are not ideal, and in the case of Moria are plainly appalling. There were sufficient refugee housing units (RHUs) in Kara Tepé, but not enough in Moria, where many slept in tents bought by volunteers and NGOs or rough, with only a sleeping bag. The RHUs did not have mattresses, electricity or heating.

I stayed in Panagiouda, located between Moria and Kara Tepé, and spent the first night on duty at Kara Tepé Camp with two other volunteers. We welcomed a group of 40 to 50 refugees who had just landed, gave them a bite to eat, blankets, shoes, etc, and showed them to the RHUs. They were exhausted and happy to get something warm and a place to sleep after a treacherous journey.

I spent the remainder of the nights keeping watch for boats at the Katia Lookout point on the southernmost part of the Mitilini coast. A number of other volunteers covered the area from the airport to St George's Chapel. The atmosphere between the volunteers and the NGOs was very positive. Everybody worked with one goal, to help in receiving the refugees.

When the boats enter Greek waters the refugees start flashing their mobile phones to indicate their location, or to ask for help. Volunteers on the Greek coast flash back, pointing to a safe landing area. The volunteers communicate via *Whatsapp* any incoming arrivals or landings, need for medical assistance, etc. Volunteers get into the water and pull the boats onto the shore. The boats are packed to the brim with persons of all ages, from newborns to elderly, men, women and children. Some arrive happy and excited about having completed the journey safely. Many are traumatised and in shock. Some cry; some faint; some cannot utter a word. They all arrive cold and wet. Often they have thrown all their bags into the sea and have nothing. A book could be written about the anecdotes, some very emotional, others just surreal, all life-enhancing.

I visited Moria and Kara Tepé Camps every day and spoke with fifteen different refugees and families, from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Guinea and Morocco. They told me their stories of flight and their hopes for the

¹ See UNHCR [Over one million sea arrivals reach Europe in 2015](#) (30 December 2015).

future. They shared the same desires to flee war and violence, to find refuge and peace, to ensure an education for their children.

The most rewarding aspect of my trip was to have the privilege of welcoming the refugees to Europe; to witness their resilience, their fears, and their hopes; to hear their stories; and to feel valued for it. Meeting and working with volunteers from all over the world was an extremely enriching and fulfilling experience, particularly getting to know many European Muslims who had a special affinity and interest in helping their brothers and sisters in faith and who sincerely appreciated the help from other non-Muslim volunteers. We were brought together by our human desire to help our brothers and sisters.

There are still an estimated 4 million Syrian refugees alone living in neighbouring countries. Armed conflicts continue to destroy the civil society and social fabric of Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the serious human rights and security problems in countries, such as Eritrea, Nigeria, Pakistan, which force thousands to flee every year.

The EU has approved an EU Relocation Scheme which aims to relocate 160,000 refugees from Greece and Italy over the next two years, to reduce the burden on these two countries. Ireland has undertaken to take up to 4,000 refugees under this scheme. I hope people will not be scared by some disturbing events concerning refugees and immigrants, but will accept that 99.9% of them are peace-loving, law-abiding persons who only desire to live in peace and security and to provide a better future for their families and children.

Thank you for your generous support and encouragement.

¹See [UNHCR Lesbos Daily Snapshot Statistics](#) and also this [EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre Daily Map](#) as of 8 December 2015, made up of data from ECHO, ESRI, UNHCR, OCHA