

Written evidence submitted by Peaceful Borders (CHA0046)

Introduction

1. This evidence is a transcription of the relevant parts of a conversation Juliet Kilpin had with Dr James Jakob Fehr in the presence of 5 listeners/witnesses on a zoom call on Sunday 20 September 2020. Juliet Kilpin is the co-founder and coordinator of Peaceful Borders, a peacemaking charity that grew out of work accompanying peacemakers in the Calais 'jungle' 2015-2016. J. Jakob Fehr leads DMFK, the German Mennonite Peace Committee (www.dmfk.de) and has supported the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams based in Lesvos since 2014. He has spent the last 3 weeks on the island of Lesvos with a Study Group of visiting German students and witnessed first-hand the aftermath of the destruction.

2. This evidence concerns primarily the conditions of migrant camps on the Greek island of Lesvos since the destruction of the Moria camp – officially the “First Reception Centre” – by fire on 9 September 2020 and also references concerns about future arrangements for safe, legal routes for family reunion and claiming asylum in the UK, and the effectiveness of current Government initiatives to re-unite families

3. The testimony addresses:

- The conditions people have faced since Moria camp burned down
- The conditions of the new camp
- The lack of processing of legal cases for asylum or Dublin III reunification cases

Testimony of J. Jakob Fehr:

4. I'm a Canadian who has been living in Germany now for 28 years. I came to Germany to do my doctoral work in philosophy, was an academic researcher for a while and then a pastor for the Mennonite Church. And for about the last 11 years now, I have been leading DMFK, Deutsches Mennonitisches Friedenskomitee (German Mennonite Peace Committee). We are involved in a variety of activities. We have a peace prize. We hold seminars and different kinds of teachings for people within our church, but also engage in dialogue with other churches that are interested in peace issues here in Germany. And as well, we have now been accompanying the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams on Lesbos since 2014, when we were invited as European CPT-ers to accompany a local organisation called Lesbos Solidarity. That was my first experience of working together with people here on the island. And initially, that was a project that ran for several months of the year. For the last three years we have had a stable team, permanently on location. Currently, we have four people on that team.

5. The study visit this month was supposed to be a pretty normal trip, like the one last year, just meeting with partners and talking, observing the locations. And then shortly after my study group arrived, Moria burned down and that put the entire island into emergency mode. The major road running north from Mytilene was blocked, simply full of migrants and

refugees, so that it became impassable and everyone was obliged to take long detours to get around it, which of course was very taxing for people going to work.

6. The people in the island have now been burdened with caring for these people [migrants and refugees] since 2015, when the first major influx of people come. It was, so to speak, the last straw that really broke the camel's back here, because so much work had been done helping these people. [Since the EU-Turkey deal of March 2017] these people have been frustrated by the fact that most of them were stuck here, seemingly in a prison and unable to move further. The local population was, in a way, glad that Moria burned down because it had become a burden and a problem for the population here. It was also something that the people [that is, the refugees and migrants] inside Moria were glad about because they were living in a hell-hole. There are these two sections of Moria. The area contained by a barbed-wire fence had room originally for about 2500 to 3000 people; something like 5000 people were packed into it. And then all the rest of the people, - in the last while there were 13,000, but last winter there were 21,000 people living in tents in an olive grove. And this area which expanded way beyond the actual limits of the camp itself, had terrible living conditions: without any proper heating, without any proper sewage, without water, without electricity, just camping in the worst parts of the year when it was cold and wet. We're talking about a really large camp of people who are suffering under horrible conditions, queueing for food for hours, having to walk through cages that had been constructed in order that people would queue properly. And this of course, since March, has been under the Covid-19 conditions, where it was simply impossible for people to maintain any proper distance from one another.

7. So they were all glad that it burned down. Anything would be better than living under those circumstances. And the right-wing radicals were glad that it burned down because they didn't want these refugees on their island.

8. The exception was, of course, the few [employees] who were given the proper authority to enter the camp and to work there and who of course, were paid by the Greek government to work inside there. I'm thinking of organisations here like EuroRelief, and the people who worked in conjunction with EuroRelief. Excepting those organisations, everyone was glad that this place had burned down because we just see the inhumanity of it and the confining of people in subhuman conditions.

9. So now they've constructed a new camp. I'm sure most of you have seen [images of it]. I'm sure it's been in the British news as well. Looks lovely, doesn't it? All the white tents in lovely rows. ... Must be a great place to live! Except for the fact that they're putting 200 young men in confined quarters in one large tent, in spite of the Covid-19 conditions. If you've seen the drone footage you can see that there's one place where there's seven or eight very large tents. And that's where those young unattached men without family have been put.

10. None of these tents have any floor or foundation, they're just right on the soil. And they have been built on a former military shooting range. They did very quick sweep of this whole area, to try and get as much ammunition out as they could, but you know, there's

children's still playing there. And under these circumstances, I can imagine, not only is there still ammunition in the ground, but the ground itself has been poisoned by different kinds of ammunition that might have leaked into the soil. So that's where this new camp has been set up. And, you know at first, we were very afraid that the people would not be able to leave it and that's why most of the refugees were not willing to go into that camp. But right now it's still possible to go in and out. So there's a Lidl supermarket just a few hundred metres down the road, and people can go out and buy their food if they want, and whatever else they need, and then bring it back inside. But we're fairly certain that just considering the manner in which it's been built, with two rows of barbed wire around the entire circuit, that it's fairly certain that they're going to close it at some point in time and prevent people from entering or exiting.

11. I've been right in front of the gates and looked inside. I didn't make an attempt to walk inside, but I've talked to people who were actually allowed to go in. One German journalist was telling me about her experiences there. The people don't have food supplies yet. They've allowed people inside but they haven't yet organised the structures enough to be able to do any kind of food service. They've been promising electricity and WiFi and water, none of which has yet actually taken place. And so that's one of the reasons why they're also just keeping the gate open so that people can buy the things that they need. But presumably, the plan is to actually provide those things and then to confine people inside. This is the expectation of all the NGOs that I've talked to up till now.

12. So far people don't have to give their fingerprints when they enter, but most of these people have already been registered. And those who have not, perhaps having lost their identification in the fire, can enter the grounds without any problem for now. However, of course, there is the requirement to do a Corona test before entering and then people are isolated if they've been detected as having COVID-19. And so there's also a separate section right at the beginning for people who have been tested and found to have this illness. We were able to observe the camp from the roof of a house immediately in front of the new camp, an NGO called One Happy Family. And from there you could observe very clearly and very precisely the movement of people inside. We saw people who are just arriving, queuing to be registered, queuing to find their tent. These tents are actually built for six people, but 10 people are being put into each one of them. But given that there's only 200 of them, that's going to be 2,000 people. [Official sources say that there is room for 5,000 persons.] You can imagine how confining that's will be. But there are 13,000 refugees on the island. Are they going to pack 13,000 people into that area? That question has not yet been clarified. If they do, then it's going to be just another hell-hole like Moria was.

13. Most of the people had in fact refused to go inside. And so there's been a concerted effort to try and get them to go inside. I can read you a bit of a post from an someone who observed what they were trying to do:

Many people didn't want to go in to this new camp, they were afraid for what this camp represents, and how it would affect their lives. Greek government first tried the friendly approach, asking people to "move in" to their new "homes", that their everyday needs would be cared for and it would be a safe and good place to live. When that didn't work

they started handing out flyers, and sending out text messages to people in the area, saying that they were the only one they could trust, an outrageous statement, basically saying organizations, NGOs, volunteers, journalists etc is just using you.

“Dear asylum seeker, if you are in Lesbos, the only safe place for you and your family is in the new camp. There, the Greek State guarantees your safety and provides you with electricity, water, medical care, wifi etc. Inform only from the official authorities. Do not trust anyone else, they are using you.”

When this also failed they used something they called “friendly force”, it’s a contradiction in terms, it’s actually not possible to be considered friendly and use force at the same time. They made corridors in the streets where people lived, blocking off the street with police buses in both ends, and moved in a massive police force to “persuade” people to move. Riot police with shields, batons and guns ...

14. I saw a video of people in their tents refusing to move. And what did the police do? They threw tear gas into their tents to motivate them. You know, this is friendly force. And they make it difficult to report these things. They restricted journalists from entering the area. But there were some reports that got out. So they were forcing people to go into the new camp.

15. In the Moria camp there was a section, which is usually called the prison. The official name is the Pre-Removal Centre. This is reserved for people whose asylum claim has been rejected and are therefore, according to official procedures, intended to be returned to their home countries or to a so-called safe third country. And there were about 200 people in the pre-removal section of this Moria camp when the fire happened. Fortunately the guards did unlock it during the fire and so the [imprisoned persons] ran away from the fire in different directions.

16. We met a group of six men [from the prison], four Egyptians, one Syrian, one Palestinian. And among those Egyptians, at least one was a Coptic Christian. We just met them on the beach and they asked us if we could help. ... They did not have food, they did not have anything to drink. They had no papers with them, presumably left in the pre-removal centre, or confiscated from the police in some way or other. And so basically, they're in a hopeless situation. We provided them with some food and water and talked with them. We brought them some clothing as well because of the strong wind on the beach. It was a heart-breaking situation because they asked us if we could help them to get off the island. You know, they said, we have been in this prison for all these months, some of them said three months, some of them said six months, and they hadn't done anything wrong. They hadn't committed any crimes and wanted to simply leave the island. And this situation where they are in on the beach, they feared for the EASO. They are still unwilling to go into the new camp because they think as soon as they get to the gates, they'll probably be arrested and put into some new prison. The first evening that we talked to them, one of them was saying: I just want to swim across to Turkey. It's only six miles across,

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but as you know, [attempting to swim there is] a death sentence. He's not going to make it. The next day the same guy said: I just want to go back home to Egypt.

17. It's very frustrating. Here we are with our luxury, the privilege of these papers that allow us to travel anywhere. And they would so greatly love to be able to move in the way that we can move from country to country, but they're confined on the island. The island really is a prison for all of these people, they're not allowed to leave, you can't get on a ferry, you can't get on a plane, you're stuck there. And so it's heart-breaking. And at the same time, they were very grateful for the very little bit of help that we could bring them with these meals, food and water. And they were saying: if you come and visit us someday, we will treat you like kings and queens for saving our lives, for helping us in this way. I'm sure many of you have also experienced that with people whom you've shown some assistance to, that they're so grateful.

18. We have been able to [find someone] to get in contact with their lawyers. The situation is such that since the fire at Moria, there have been no further dealings with these cases. All cases have been on hold since then. There's an EU agency called EASO, European Asylum Service Office. It's the place where people get registered and where cases are treated. And it's closed. It's been closed now since the fire and all cases are on hold. So no-one is able to make any progress on their court cases at the moment. Also, any other court cases pending that ought to have been dealt with in the courts this week have been put on hold for another reason: one of the judges has come down with the COVID-19 virus. And so that has also postponed cases until next week.

19. Most of [the refugees and migrants] do not want to have asylum in Greece, most of them want to move to Germany, or Norway, or Sweden or France, or, I don't know, maybe even the UK. Very few of them actually want to stay in Greece. And that's why those who have the opportunity to learn Greek or to let their children go to a Greek school refuse, because they don't want to be stuck in this country. That's not their goal. But as you know, the Dublin III agreement is such that your asylum claim can only be processed in the country in which you actually first reach European soil. And for most that is [Greece]. Greece has been trying for years to try and get some of these people to be transferred to other European countries, and this is a part of the European foot-dragging since 2006 and also since the EU- Turkey agreement in March of 2017.

September 2020