Evidence submission- The International Development Committee enquiry into the effects of COVID-19 on developing countries and those hosting refugees:

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This submission focuses on asylum policy, ‘burden sharing,’ public health, camp conditions, and international aid and support. We are submitting evidence for countries hosting refugees - Greece, Serbia and Bosnia - they are linked in terms of being a 'route', and there is some mobility of populations between these places. In the short term the effects on refugees hosted in these countries will be potentially devastating if a COVID-19 outbreak occurs in formal and informal housing. In the longer-term policy changes impacting the international right to asylum need to be challenged. This situation requires international involvement and should be a key priority for the International Development Committee.

The authors of this report have been researching conditions facing refugees along the ‘Balkan Route’ since 2015, with a particular focus on Greece, Serbia and Bosnia. This submission draws on that experience as well as discussion of current conditions facing refugees in these countries as a result of the COVID19 pandemic.

Relevant published material by the authors, and of broader interest to this inquiry, includes: (a) The ‘badlands’ of the ‘Balkan Route’: policy and spatial effects on urban refugee housing 1(b) Rethinking refugee support in South East Europe, (c) article documenting systematic EU border violence2, (d) articles documenting deteriorating camp conditions3 and the fundamental role of NGOs on the Aegean Islands, and (e) An environmental health assessment of the new migrant camp in Calais4. These publications provide background information about the conditions already facing refugees prior to COVID-19 and are including for context.

We would be happy to provide further evidence to the committee on request including the provision of oral evidence.

1 Bird, Gemma, Obradovic-Wochik, Jelena, Beattie, Amanda Russell and Patrycja Rozbicka, (in print and available on request) The ‘badlands’ of the ‘Balkan Route’: policy and spatial effects on urban refugee housing
2 Davies, Thom., Obradovic-Wochnik, Jelena and Isakjee, Arshad, 2019, ‘On the edge of Europe: the violence and filth of a camp in Bosnia defines the EU’s legacy on refugees’ The Independent https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/eu-refugee-camp-croatia-bosnia-schengen-germany-asylum-immigration-a9033081.html
The current situation:

People who find themselves on the ‘Balkan Route’ have in the majority of cases travelled via Turkey, either via the sea borders of the five islands (Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros, Kos) or via the land border of the Evros river. Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan are responsible for the largest number of refugees worldwide, whilst Turkey hosts the largest refugee population (over 3.6 million).

Many camps, Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) and informal settlements along the ‘Balkan Route’ were already facing severe overcrowding (see publications) as well as insanitary and inhumane conditions.

Public health concerns around infectious diseases and sanitation have previously been raised but not addressed as a priority.

**Greece** currently hosts 118,000 people, 5,200 of whom are unaccompanied minors and lone children, and around 35,000 of whom are in RICs on the Aegean Islands of Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Leros and Kos. The RICs were built to accommodate only 6,000 which has led to mass overcrowding and reliance on makeshift shelters. Amongst the 35,000 currently stuck on the islands are around 1,600 unaccompanied minors, many of whom are suffering from poor mental health and are at risk of violence, exploitation and trafficking. Conditions in the RICs in particular have become unbearable in recent years with long queues for food, limited access to running water and outbreaks of scabies and other skin infections. Public Health in these camps was already a major concern. International agencies, humanitarian organisations, and academics⁵ have highlighted the failure of the authorities in Greece to provide healthy living conditions in formal refugee centres.

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⁵ Bird, Gemma, 2019, 'More refugees arrive on Greek islands amid overcrowding and water shortages' The Conversation https://theconversation.com/more-refugees-arrive-on-greek-islands-amid-overcrowding-and-water-shortages-123494
Bosnia & Herzegovina currently hosts 7500 registered people living in seven official refugee and asylum centres, with the eighth centre starting to accept new arrivals. As in other countries along the ‘Balkan Route’ a number of informal camps also provide shelter for displaced people, especially in Una-Sana Canton, in the North West of the country. Prior to the ongoing pandemic, environmental health conditions in a number of refugee camps were already far below minimum health and safety standards set out by the UNHCR and the Sphere Project. The United Nations described such camps as ‘unsuitable for human habitation’\(^6\). International agencies, humanitarian organisation, and academics\(^7\) have highlighted the failure of the authorities in Bosnia & Herzegovina to provide healthy living conditions in formal refugee centres.

Serbia currently hosts around 9000 refugees in its reception centres; all 9000 are now under some form of lock down. Reception centres in Serbia are generally less crowded than those in Bosnia, but have become overcrowded during the pandemic with reports of soap and food shortages\(^8\).

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\(^6\) UN Country Team in BiH, 2019, ‘UN Country Team in BiH: Joint Statement on Relocation of Migrants and Refugees to a location near Bihać. https://bih.iom.int/pbn/un-country-team-bih-joint-statement-relocation-migrants-and-refugees-location-near-biha%C4%87\(^6\)

\(^7\) Davies, Thom., Obradovic-Wochnik, Jelena and Isakjee, Arshad, 2019, ‘On the edge of Europe: the violence and filth of a camp in Bosnia defines the EU’s legacy on refugees’ The Independent https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/eu-refugee-camp-croatia-bosnia-schengen-germany-asylum-immigration-a9033081.html

Only Greece has reported Covid-19 cases amongst the refugee populations in formal accommodation, with less than 200 cases known to have been reported across 3 locations. The overall death rates stand at 23 per million population in Serbia and 24 in Bosnia, and 14 in Greece. Testing rates per million population are at 12,185 (Serbia), 10,758 (Bosnia) and 7,767 (Greece).

All three countries are emerging from lockdowns in some form, though this does not yet apply to camps, where freedom of movement is still limited, with additional limits imposed on camp residents to those faced by local populations.

The current coronavirus outbreak will likely exacerbate pre-existing public health issues in all three countries, and expose refugees to health systems that are already struggling to protect the health of displaced populations.

**Direct and indirect impacts, specific risks and threats:**

A key impact of the pandemic is in highlighting the inadequacy of housing for refugees. Overcrowded camps not only fail to meet basic human rights they also lead to increased tensions amongst populations. This has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**General: accommodation and aid**

Formal camps in all three countries are run by partners - such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the military, private or public management companies or local government - usually in receipt of EU funds.

- There is a general lack of transparency as to how camp management funds are spent. For instance, the EU has provided EUR 36 million assistance to Bosnia since 2018, most of which supports the work of official RICs managed by IOM. However, it is not clear whether these funds had previously been used to address public health concerns, sanitation and healthcare in camps.
- In Bosnia and Serbia, the pandemic has been used as a rationale for barring volunteers from entering camps, and it has been difficult for journalists to report on conditions.
- A new camp, Lipa, was opened in Bosnia to accommodate people during the pandemic, but reports suggest this camp does not differ from previous, tent-based dorm accommodation with no possibility of self-isolation.

For people on the move and/or stuck in the region, the pandemic is one in a long list of problems they are still facing.

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Most refugees would have already been exposed to infectious diseases (including recorded cases of tuberculosis); however, public health concerns about conditions in refugee camps have largely gone unheeded. Despite long-standing warnings from researchers and NGOs about camp conditions, public health and the improvement of sanitation and access to medical care (whilst incorporated into basic camp management) does not seem to have been made a priority.

Refugees are routinely left to live in conditions of neglect and without any sanitation facilities, including the former Vucjak camp in Bosnia that was located on a landfill site. [see figure 2]. Although that camp has now been demolished, it represents a fairly typical living situation for refugees in transit countries, both in formal camps and informal accommodation.

Access to healthcare is varied and patchy. In some better resourced and less crowded camps such as Krnjaca Centre near Belgrade, there are doctors and medical staff on site, and referrals are made to local hospitals. In others, such as the camp on Samos island, there is a single doctor per 6,000 people.

Generally, however, even the better resourced camps often lack washing facilities and sanitisers and reports from Moria suggest that there is currently 1 working tap to supply running water to 1300 people.

As concerns about the pandemic have escalated meal provision in the Greek island camps has been reduced. For the 19,000 people in Moria on Lesvos, for example, provision has reduced from 3 meals a day to 2, which has led to extremely long queues, heightened tensions and no social distancing).
Violence in the formal camp system

People on the move experience different types of violence routinely. Despite the pandemic and emergency legislation, there is evidence to suggest that this type of violence continues unabated:

- Border police at EU’s external borders are still being accused of denying asylum claims and using violence to push people back from the Croatian border into Bosnia (this is the most frequently recorded type of incident, though similar reports have been made about Hungary, Serbia and Greece).
- Private security guards, police, and other camp staff have been accused of violence against camp residents (most recently in Bosnia, and Knjaca in Serbia), to the point that refugees often refuse camp accommodation in fear of violence, leading many to remain living on the streets.

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10 Border violence reports, 2020 https://www.borderviolence.eu/violence-reports/
• Moria in Lesvos, has also seen reduced freedom of movement within the camp spaces, with a limitation of one family member leaving the camp per day and having to queue for the correct paperwork.
• On the islands of Chios and Samos there are increased levels of detention, alongside the lack of access to food, water and the possibility for proper distancing has led to fires and as such even less opportunity to socially distance accommodation as tents are erected in every available space. Following three fires in the week of April 2020 many people on the Island of Samos are now sleeping in tents along the side of a main road.
• Indirect impacts include increased tensions between local populations and refugees. A transfer of 300 people from Moria to mainland Greece in the first week of May was met with hostility as the local population refused to let the transferred refugees enter the hotel designated to house them.

Informal settlements

• Despite both Serbia and Bosnia attempting to remove people off streets and into camps as a result of the pandemic, there are still people who live destitute in derelict buildings and other sites.
• They have no access to sanitation, medical aid nor food. The only form of assistance they can access is provided by volunteers, whose movements have also been restricted.
• Informal settlements, such as squats, were already being evicted in Greece prior to the pandemic with people being moved into unfinished camps in remote towns with reduced access to education and healthcare. Not all camps have isolation areas and as such any cases of COVID19 have led to the camps rather than the individuals being quarantined.

Impact on aid delivery

• The pandemic has also exposed a major flaw linked to aid delivery - the emphasis has always been on large donor funds (e.g. EU) being channelled directly to governments for supporting aid delivered to people residing in official camps only. However, large numbers of people do not live in camps, or live in various informal arrangements. They have little or no recourse to any form of aid, and often struggle to access medical treatment.
• The aid previously supplied to people living outside of camps, as well as those in overcrowded camps on the Greek islands, came from local residents, NGOs and other grassroots aid groups. They can no longer move around to deliver food and medical supplies.
• The number of international volunteers providing support has drastically fallen as people returned to their home country as the pandemic took hold. Similarly social centres supporting refugees and providing plug sockets for charging, hot food, water and tea have had to close to abide by lockdown requirements. This has meant that an already vulnerable population has even less access to resources and support. A priority needs to be in supporting the reopening of these spaces as quickly as possible through increased available funding for grassroots NGOs.
Local volunteers have continued to provide food and basic aid to people living destitute in derelict and informal settlements, but local restrictions on gatherings and police enforced curfews have severely impacted these less formal aid delivery efforts.

Security, asylum and human rights

Covid-19 has been used as a rationale for increasing security practices, militarisation and emergency laws in Serbia and Bosnia, both towards refugee populations and local residents.

Bosnia

- In late April 2020, The Minister for Security, Fahrudin Radoncic, ordered the deportation of up to 10,000 ‘illegal immigrants’ from Bosnia, and has tasked the Service for Foreigners with compiling lists of names for deportation. A new law was proposed in which people without identity documents would be imprisoned or deported; however, there are oppositions to the proposal elsewhere in government. 12

Serbia

- The government is using the pandemic as a means of becoming more authoritarian with NGOs warning about restrictions on freedom of speech13. There have been nightly protests against the government, and reports of resurgent far-right activity during the lockdown.
- Camps that previously allowed people some freedom of movement now enact security practices that ‘clearly amount to a deprivation of liberty’14; the legal basis is an emergency law adopted to prevent the spread of infection specifically relating to asylum reception centres. Although no cases have been reported in the centres, and despite the lockdown easing elsewhere in Serbia, camp residents have not been permitted to leave the premises since 15 March15. During this time, many have been unable to initiate the asylum application procedure16.

Greece

- Suspension of the right to claim asylum in March set a worrying precedent for the protection of human rights and the Geneva Convention. Protecting both needs to be a key lobbying focus going forward.
- Protection and rights of refugees need to be a priority as the country plans to release lockdown procedures. There is a lack of consideration for future solutions in Greece for refugees. The government has reduced some of their lockdown measures, including

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14 Ibid
15 Ibid
opening some businesses (4-11 May), shops at a reduced capacity (15 June) with
limitations based on square footage but this has not been linked to movements for
refugees. Even discussion of health checks associated with travel- temperature checks
in ports, and the opening of some of the educational facilities do not address conditions
facing refugees.

- There is a backlog in asylum cases that need to be addressed but this should not be at
the expense of thorough procedure carried out by asylum experts. The move to rely on
the police to carry out asylum meetings at times of extreme pressure on the system
already risks additional failures in the system.

**Recommendations:**

Due to existing health inequalities, refugees are particularly vulnerable to the worst health
outcomes from catching COVID-19. As such, displaced people should be protected and not
viewed as threats to the health of others.

The UK Government could play a larger role in international campaigns to relocate
unaccompanied minors and lone children from camps and informal settlements by pledging to
welcome them to the UK.

It is important that emergency measures leading to ‘closed detention’ during the pandemic do
not remain in place long term and that rights to claim asylum, enshrined in international law are
protected. The UK Government should challenge closed detention both in the UK and
internationally.

More international scrutiny of organisations (such as the IOM in Bosnia, or other public and
private actors in Serbia and Greece) running camp facilities.

Prioritise DFID funding to support public health projects aimed at the most vulnerable locations.

Application of UNHCR Standards for Emergencies in camps, as well as new protocols for
covid19 containment, focusing on self-isolation and single unit family accommodation types.

The protection of Human Rights and adherence to international law must remain a priority, in
particular the Geneva Convention and the Right to Claim Asylum. The UK and its partners in the
EU must recognise and criticise increasingly anti-democratic practices in all refugee receiving
countries (including EU members).