

SAMOS

What is happening today in the refugee structures on the Aegean islands



Photo: Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum

Samos CCAC

There were increased flows of people recorded in Samos in the last months of 2022, as were in the first months of 2023. The Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) of Samos was inaugurated in September 2021 after the closure of the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) in Vathi and despite the reactions of local actors and civil society. It is located in the location "Zervou" of the Municipality of Eastern Samos, in a mountainous spot, in the area of the old slaughterhouses, about 9 km from Vathi (the capital of the island). Within the structure, office infrastructure has been created for around 400 jobs, to meet the needs of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, the Greek Police and other stakeholders. According to the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors of the Ministry for Migration and Asylum^[1], on March 9, 50 unaccompanied minors resided in the CCAC of Samos, 44 of them inside the "safe area", which has a nominal capacity of 320 children.

Samos CCAC

Distance from the island's urban center (km)	8
Transport ticket cost per person per route (euro)	1,6€
Taxi transport cost (euro)	14€



NGOs operating on the island provide accommodation outside the structure to a very limited number of people. According to the UNHCR^[2], as regards alternative forms of housing, there is only the transitional accommodation structure for unaccompanied minors by METAdrasi and a limited number of self-accommodated people, supported by the NGO Space Eye for renting apartments in an urban environment.

METAdrasi offers non-formal education courses for adults within the CCAC, while outside the CCAC, Greek courses are provided by volunteers. According to the RSA research, in mid-March a significant proportion of the children residing within the CCAC attended the public schools. However, there is a shortage of space in the halls of the Gymnasium and Lyceum's reception classes, due to the lack of rooms. The Centre for Homework and Creative Activities by ARSIS operates in Samos, providing evening tutoring services for refugee children attending the public schools of the island, teaching Greek and English language and mathematics for unaccompanied minors, as well as providing life skills courses for all children^[3]. At the end of March a total of 98 children attended.

Arrivals January 1 to April 2	620
Nominal capacity	2040
Residents on March 31, 2023	876
Men (%)	68%
Women (%)	18%
Children (%)	14%
Palestine	30%
Sierra Leone	27%
Democratic Republic of Congo	14%
Afghanistan	6%
Soudan	3%
other	20%
“Safe area” for children - nominal capacity	320
Unaccompanied minors	50
Children residing in the “safe area”	44

UNHCR (weekly snapshot 2/4/2023), Ministry of Migration and Asylum, March 2023, Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors in Greece, March 2023

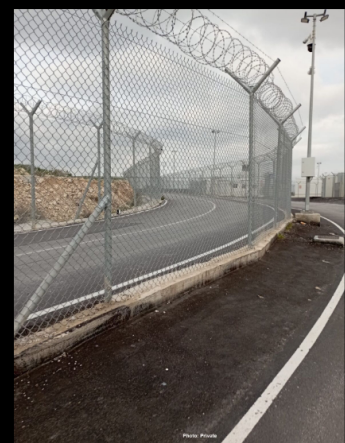


A Flourish table

Isolation and strict guarding conditions

The structure is guarded by the Greek Police and by a private security company 24 hours a day, with at least 50 uniformed people present on each shift. As refugees and lawyers told us, some of the main problems facing residents are isolation from the local community, disproportionately strict guarding, and even the use of force by the authorities. In a publication earlier this year, refugees complained that police officers – border guards had ferociously and unfairly beaten them, after taking them to a darkened part of the structure. The North Aegean Police Directorate has announced the launch of a Sworn Administrative Examination (EDE) on the incidents. Regarding the severe guard and surveillance conditions, employees were complaining about the violation of privacy experienced by residents and themselves as early as the beginning of 2022⁴⁹. According to publications, even children are forced to undergo strict controls every day, i.e. in their school backpacks.

Samos' CCAC was the first structure in which such strict control and surveillance measures were applied. The Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) had warned as early as 2021 that this regime “violates the right of residents to private individual and family life” and that “the imposition of all manifestations of these people’s lives within a closed structure, within strict planning and control, implies the absence of private life, the destruction of their identity and dignity”. Médecins Sans Frontières have described the new structure as a “dystopian nightmare that will contribute to isolation and further re-injury” and have noted that the high-security infrastructures affect people’s mental health.



By talking to residents, it emerges that some people feel a sense of security in the presence of security and surveillance measures; others, however, feel that these are excessive and do not make sense: “They are strict and we do not feel their effectiveness, since there are still property losses, damages and quarrels” says Mohamed*, a Palestinian asylum seeker⁵⁰. It is also doubtful whether data collected from the cameras can also be used when the residents themselves need it, for example for legal reasons. “As lawyers of the organisation HRLP, we have received dozens of complaints regarding police violence within the CCAC of Samos and we have also filed a complaint for one of our principals. To the best of our knowledge, no CCTV cameras have been yet used to investigate the complaints. We also know from principals convicted by the Samos’ Criminal Court for their alleged involvement in incidents within the structure, that they were asking both the police authorities and the Court to use the video footage of the CCTV cameras in order to prove their innocence, which however never happened. Having now undertaken their defence, we will request the reception of the material for the Court of Appeal” as lawyers Ioanna Begiazi and Dimitris Choulis from the organisation Human Rights Legal Project (HRLP), point out to RSA.

It should be noted that in Samos there has been recorded a case of illegal and arbitrary detention of eight asylum seekers of Palestinian origin in a police station on the island for a month, when they entered voluntarily to register their asylum request. Among them was a 20-year-old woman who, for 26 days, was held in a cell enclosed by bars – akin to a cage – inside the cell where the seven men were kept.

Shortages of services

RSA spoke with refugees that reported significant shortages of basic goods. “There is a lack of shoes and soap. Previously, there were volunteers who gave us such items. Now volunteers in Vathy give us these items, but again they are not enough” points out Samuel* from Sierra Leone, who has been living in the CCAC for several months and is waiting for an answer to his subsequent asylum application⁵¹. “The decision is ready (...) but they don’t tell me anything. The lawyer won’t let me know either. I’m very stressed. I don’t know what will happen” he adds.

Of particular concern is the information of planning to limit the availability of Wi-Fi access to the structure only to persons with a valid International Protection Applicant Card, from the beginning of the year. This would practically mean that access to the internet would not be given to other groups of persons, including those subject to reception and identification procedures, applicants awaiting a preliminary assessment of a subsequent application and those rejected. This measure has not yet been implemented, but if so it would bring an even greater isolation for these groups of residents in the CCAC. “This is essentially a plan for [mental] exhaustion of these people” as a member of a group of people who act in solidarity with the refugees characteristically told us.

Problems in legal support and medical care

Problems in the access of lawyers within the structure had been observed since the summer and until recently in Samos too, similar to those in Lesvos. Lawyers of the Avocats Sans Frontières, HRLP and I Have Rights organisations who do not work within the CCAC signed a report to the Ombudsman on the problems they face with access to the structure. As lawyers Ioanna Benizi and Dimitris Choulis from HRLP told RSA, lawyers of these organisations must ask for permission and state the reasons



Regular and binding checks with their legal representatives of these organisations must ask for permission and state the reasons why they want to enter the structure and with whom they want to speak, and they must also have an authorisation from this person. Upon entering the CCAC they have their (political) identities kept, while until recently their lawyers' identities were enough – which should normally allow them to enter any public service¹⁷. Further, they are accompanied everywhere by a private security officer (G4S), from November 2022 until today.

According to the UNHCR¹⁸, legal support within the structure is provided by METAdrasi with a lawyer, and by PRAKSIS for unaccompanied minors with a part-time lawyer. In addition, there are other legal assistance providers that provide legal assistance without a constant physical presence in the CCAC, namely Avocats Sans Frontières, HRLP and I Have Rights.

In the CCAC of Samos there was no doctor of the National Public Health Organisation in mid-March. A mobile infirmary by Médecins Sans Frontières is located outside the structure. The hospital on the island has no interpreters. An Arabic-language interpreter of the National Public Health Organisation from the CCAC and interpreters from organisations assist the hospital when necessary. Also, according to reports, donated medical devices have not been put into service. As publications report, National Public Health Organisation employees have come to the point of giving money from their own pockets in order to buy medicines for residents who needed them.



Significant shortages of human resources and equipment are also observed in the Samos hospital, with all that this implies for the inhabitants of the island and the residents of the CCAC. There are organisations that were active within the structure, but due to non-registration to the Ministry's Registry, they no longer have access, and offer their services in places outside the CCAC, providing, inter alia, food and clothing.

*Names have been changed for privacy and security reasons.

Notes

1. Written response to RSA on March 16, 2023. The discrepancy between all unaccompanied minors and those living in a safe area refers to minors separated by a temporary custody act. [↑](#)
2. Information from the UNHCR written response to RSA on March 16, 2023. [↑](#)
3. The Centre for Homework and Creative Activities operates under the programme "All Children in Education", which is an initiative of UNICEF co-financed by the European Union and implemented by a number of partners, including ARSIS – Association for the Social Support of Youth. [↑](#)
4. See [here](#) and [here](#). [↑](#)
5. Interview by telephone on March 17, 2023. [↑](#)
6. Interview by telephone on March 17, 2023. [↑](#)
7. Article 34 L 4914/2013, FEK A' 208/27.09.2013. [↑](#)
8. Ibid. footnote 2. [↑](#)

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