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## Attacks against NGOs in Lesvos: Alverti (Caritas Greece) “the atmosphere is extremely tense.” Activities temporarily suspended

Physical and verbal attacks on people working in non-governmental organizations that help in the reception of migrants in the Greek islands of Lesvos, Chios and Samos. Their structures and vehicles were set on fire. Increased episodes of racial violence against refugees, who now exceed 22,000 on the island of Lesvos alone (40,000 on the three islands). "We are seriously worried: we are realizing that NGOs are not welcome here. The situation is extremely tense and frustrating. It's the result of a lack of effective policies in the last five years, the worsening of the situation was foreseeable. They are adding fuel to the fire that was about to blow up", **Maria Alverti**, director of Caritas Hellas (Caritas Greece), commented to SIR the latest developments on the Aegean islands. After weeks of tensions and protests - both by migrants living in the Moria camp in appalling conditions and by the inhabitants of Lesvos - several episodes of violence in the past few days saw far-right activists targeting refugees and NGO workers. Even Caritas Hellas, operating in the islands with a team of seven people, has been forced to suspend its activities in an attempt to figure out how to deal with this new situation, in coordination with other humanitarian organizations. There have also been attacks on NGO facilities. In addition to the arson in a UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) migrant compound, also the premises of the NGO "Solidarity", which distributes food and clothing to refugees, were set on fire. Caritas Hellas' director condemned the "shameful" and "horrible" video - released yesterday by the Turkish authorities - of a Greek coast guard boat, near Bodrum, firing rifle shots into the water on the refugees attempting to reach the island in an inflatable dinghy, brutally stopping them with a pitchfork. "This violates all humanitarian and ethical norms," she pointed out, "the coast guard should perform its duty, namely to protect people and save lives. It's despicable behaviour." <https://youtu.be/apDRWdNSwG4>



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"We are extremely worried," said the director of Caritas Hellas from the national office in Athens. "We are waiting to see how the situation unfolds since at the moment it is quite chaotic. Today all the staff has not gone to work due to the strong impact of the last few days. We need to understand how the situation will evolve. We are very worried because we see mounting anti-NGO sentiments and the atmosphere is very tense." Over the last few days, she explained, there has been a "dramatic change" in the attitude of the Greek government and public opinion towards migrants. "NGOs are being targeted because they are considered part of the problem": "Racism is increasing within the local population. There are many episodes of hatred and violence from civilians who pretend to patrol the streets". These groups operate in the vicinity of the Moria camp and identify people, asking them whether they are Greek and whether they work in NGOs. **Caritas services in the refugee camp of Kara Tepe.** Caritas has adopted a "low profile" approach, trying "to envisage the next step on a case-by-case basis". They offer social, psychological and psychiatric support to migrants. They have been present for years in Kara Tepe's camp, run by the local municipality. "Here the situation is a slightly

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better than in the Moria camp", Alverti said. "We created two different areas for men and women, to help them keep busy with various activities: cosmetic workshops, sewing, English and Greek language classes." At the request of the camp managers they also provide hygiene packages, blankets, sheets, and clothing. In Chios, to make up for the lack of ambulances, they accompany refugees in need to the local hospital every day.

**Yesterday Caritas workers "could not bring people to the hospital because some citizens blocked the roads".**

**War against NGOs?** Even though it would be wrong to speak of a war against NGOs, according to the director of Caritas Hellas "that's the intention. In fact they consider NGOs a part of the problem and are suspicious about our activities. It's not what most people think, but this attitude is spreading very quickly." Last month several clashes broke out in Lesbos when the government announced plans to set up a detention centre for refugees. "Neither the government, nor civil society, have launched initiatives to engage in dialogue," she said, "we see only opposing stances: either on the side of the refugees or on the side of the island's population. Instead, it would be necessary to take into account the needs of both." **9,000 people stranded on the border between Greece and Turkey.** As a result of pressure at the Greece-Turkey border - 9,000 people were blocked and 68 arrested - the Greek government decided to suspend asylum applications for one month. "I have doubts as to the legitimacy of this decision," Alverti said, calling for the phenomenon to be considered "not just a Greek problem but a European one. If Greece is left alone," she pointed out, "mounting anger will spread among the Greek population." *"We need European solidarity in the management of this phenomenon, in redeployments. After all, it's easier to criticize. A balance must be found and the rights of people must be upheld in accordance with international treaties and conventions."* **Caritas Italy** commented today on the "feeble reactions of the EU and of European States" both "in the management of the tug-of-war between Turkey and Greece and in supporting Countries along the Balkan route". "No one wants to take responsibility for this umpteenth humanitarian tragedy - Caritas denounced in a statement -, which did not happen overnight but is the result of a war that has been dragging on for 9 years and has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of refugees in Syria. The EU-Turkey agreement of 2016 is the setting for this tragedy that was meant to alleviate the burden at the borders of Fortress Europe thanks to pledged funding to Turkey, but which in fact rather than stopping the inflow, handed it over to traffickers."

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