

Greek Syriza government orders clearing of Idomeni refugee camp

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The final stages in clearing the Idomeni refugee camp on the Greek-Macedonian border began Tuesday morning. Macedonia closed its border at the end of February, preventing tens of thousands fleeing to Europe from war and poverty from continuing their journey.

The pseudo-left Syriza government intends to transport all refugees from the camp to controlled centres within a week. In recent days, 2,500 refugees had left the camp. The remaining 8,500 are now being deported by a large-scale police operation.

In the early hours between 6 and 7 a.m., police woke the sleeping refugees and demanded they board buses to Thessaloniki. Police only informed the refugees about the operation the night before, meaning they had to pack their belongings in a hurry.

1,400 armed police officers and dozens of armoured cars surrounded the camp. Ten units came from Attika, the Athens region, and a helicopter flew over the area. The police presence was also increased at other detention centres in Greece to suppress protests.

The Idomeni operation was conducted at breakneck speed. First, police systematically cleared the western portion of the camp, then the railway tracks, where refugees have blocked freight trains for weeks, and then the main camp. The empty tents were destroyed by bulldozers.

By 3 p.m. on Tuesday, 32 buses with over 1,500 people set off for Thessaloniki. When they arrive there, they will be separated according to their country of origin into six tent camps on land formerly belonging to industry and businesses, including an old factory, a former logistics firm and an old supermarket. They are located in small towns near Greece's second-largest city.

The Syriza government ordered the entire area to be

sealed off and refused access to national and international press. Only Greek state television was permitted to report inside the camp. All other journalists were forced to leave and could only follow events from 2 kilometres away. The Greek union of photojournalists condemned the attack on press freedom and called for free access to the camp.

According to reports from state broadcaster ERT, there had been no resistance from refugees and no violent clashes with police. The attempt by the government to use the public broadcaster to present a picture of a well-organised and peaceful evacuation stands in stark contrast to the massive police deployment, the press ban and the manner in which the refugees and volunteers have been dealt with in the area.

Already on Monday evening, nongovernment organisations (NGOs) and journalists were forced out of Idomeni. Only a few selected NGOs were permitted to remain on location with five workers each. Police have been ordered to detain other volunteers and journalists if they stayed in the camp.

Some journalists sought to continue reporting from inside the camp. Paul Ronzheimer, a reporter from Germany's *Bild* newspaper, was forced to leave the camp at 3 a.m., but returned secretly through the forest. He concealed himself and filmed mobile phone videos of the camp, before he was rediscovered by the police and arrested.

His Greek colleague Liana Spyropoulou was able to remain in the camp after posing as a Muslim. She managed to speak with two refugee families from Syria who said they wanted to remain at Idomeni, and interviewed a volunteer doctor who reported on the unbearable conditions in the camp. Because virtually all NGOs had been forced out, he had been one of the

last medical assistants on site along with his colleague. If there had been a medical emergency among the thousands of worn-out people, they would have neither had the personnel nor the medication to respond. They no longer had any access to their clinic and were therefore relying on basic medical supplies and instruments from their medical tent.

The volunteer criticized the government's repression, which was inhumane and aimed to intimidate refugees. They were trying to blackmail and force the people to leave the camp. It had become increasingly difficult to distribute food. The refugees were to be virtually starved, according to the doctor.

The NGO Border Free Association for Human Rights operated a kitchen in the camp, which was removed by the police on Tuesday. They were forced to dismantle everything and leave the camp.

From the outset, the government refused all state assistance to the refugees in Idomeni. Their survival depended on the solidarity of local residents and volunteer organisations. Last week, the police even attacked protesting refugees with tear gas and smoke grenades. This served as a warning shot that anyone resisting the clearing of the camp should expect brutal treatment. Many women and children living in Idomeni were victims of the police assault.

A spokesperson for German refugee aid organization Pro Asyl told *Tagesspiegel* that the Idomeni camp was a symbol of the EU's failed refugee policy. Ramona Lenz from Medico International denounced the actions of the Greek government, saying, "It isn't about improving the conditions of those stranded, but rather to make them invisible."

Officially, it is being stated that the refugees will be able to apply for asylum in their new accommodation. But according to Doctors Without Borders, the authorities are so overwhelmed with asylum applications that refugees will potentially have to wait years. In addition, a growing number of refugees are suffering from depression, anxiety attacks and suicidal tendencies.

The criminal refugee policy of the pseudo-left Syriza government is based upon the refugee deal struck between the EU and Turkey, which confirmed the sealing off of the Balkan route and the closure of Europe's external borders in April. When on Tuesday the worn-out people in Idomeni were driven out of their

tents, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras defended the refugee deal at a UN conference in Turkey. He applauded the "successful cooperation" with Turkey on the migration issue, which "could become a "model for international efforts to deal with humanitarian challenges."

The attacks on refugees go hand in hand with a new assault on the living standards of the entire Greek working class. On Sunday, the Syriza government rushed an austerity package through parliament that eclipses all previously imposed austerity measures in the country and contains plans for tax hikes, spending cuts and layoffs.



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