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Coronavirus crisis: emergency operation to evacuate refugee camps on Greek islands

Diakonie makes urgent appeal to EU institutions

Diakonie Österreich, along with 200 church and civil society organisations from all over Austria and Europe, has issued an urgent appeal to the EU's leading politicians and the head of the Greek government: "We urge you to evacuate the refugee camps and hotspots on the Greek islands immediately in order to prevent a catastrophe in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic."

"COVID-19 makes evacuation, something Diakonie has repeatedly called for, even more urgent. Europe must now act as swiftly as possible and conduct an emergency operation to transfer refugees on the Greek islands to appropriate accommodation - not only to protect the refugees themselves, but also the local population and humanitarian aid workers. The consequences of a COVID-19 outbreak in the camps would be unthinkable," said Diakonie director Maria Katharina Moser, echoing Médecins Sans Frontières. The prominent aid organisation has reported that there is only one water tap for the 1,300 inhabitants of Lesbos' Moria camp, and that soap is unavailable. Families of five or six have to sleep crammed into three square metres.

Diakonie is convinced that on-site aid cannot contain an outbreak under these circumstances. Rather, a joint effort by the EU member states is needed, on the one hand by helping Greece to establish appropriate accommodation on the mainland, and on the other by accommodating asylum seekers in vacant accommodation in other EU countries. Asylum seekers should be flown directly to countries willing to accept them, confined initially to quarantine and given medical and psychological care while their asylum applications are processed. "Greece cannot handle this alone," Moser stresses, "and Austria cannot simply stand by and watch."

Austria should join the effort by taking in children

Recalling the announcement by German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer that, despite entry restrictions due to the Corona crisis, he will make good his promise, together with other EU countries such as France, Ireland, Portugal and Finland, to accept refugees from the Greek camps, Moser says: "Even if Austria has so far been backwards in coming forwards, we should now follow Germany's example and show solidarity with European initiatives."

Asylum must remain a human right

In their appeal to the EU's leading politicians, the civil society organisations say they are confident "given our long experience in caring for and advising refugees, that it is well within the EU's capacity to cope with the current crisis on its external borders."

The organisations also demand the immediate restoration of the human right to seek asylum. "This includes accepting asylum applications and considering them in fair asylum procedures, not punishing people who cross borders in order to make an asylum application, and fully respecting the principle of non-refoulement, which is currently being circumvented by illegal pushbacks," they say in the appeal.