

Thousands of Refugees Likely to be Evicted from their Homes in Greece



File Photo

Hundreds of refugees in Greece will be removed from their homes by the end of March, with thousands to follow later in the year, according to a report by Rory O'Keeffe, founder and manager of Koraki NGO.

The report says that after a Ministry of Migration Policy decision, certain refugees who participate in the UNHCR ESTIA program will be evicted.

UNHCR works with the Greek government, local authorities and NGOs to provide urban accommodation and cash assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers.

Refugees are provided with shelter and money for essentials including food, water, and clothing. The accommodations ESTIA covers include houses or apartments and refugee camps. Those who stay in camps are part of the program too.

So far, the refugee accommodation plan was providing shelter for six months. After the end of the six month period, the program was automatically renewed, O'Keeffe says.

The program is funded by the European Commission's Directorate General of Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) and has seen money come into Greece, which is spent by the UNHCR on rents to building and apartment landlords, and by refugees in local stores.

Currently, there are 22,811 refugees in the 4,506 apartments and 19 buildings the UNHCR rents but more than 63,051 people receive ESTIA-provided cash, the report says, citing UNHCR figures.

Of those, 600, who were recognized as refugees by the Greek government on or before July 31, 2017, will be removed from their apartments - or from their places

in refugee camps, where they have been living for at least 19 months – by March 31.

They have been informed by UNHCR that if they agree to leave, their cash payments will end three months later. If they refuse, the payments will also end on March 31, meaning that the refugees now face a choice: attempt to keep a roof over their heads, but be left without money to survive, or leave their homes, and continue to have money for food and water until June 30, O’Keeffe says.

UNHCR has confirmed that about a quarter of the people currently included in the scheme – roughly 15,750 men, women, and children – have so far been officially recognized as refugees by the Greek State, meaning that they can stay in Greece. The remaining 47,288 are at various stages in the application process.

But this also means that these 15,750 people will also face eviction from their homes or container boxes. The eviction process is set to continue indefinitely until the program ends.

O’Keeffe says that he has tried to contact the Ministry of Migration Policy on the issue for a week but never received a reply. He contacted UNHCR Greece spokesman Boris Cheshirkov who confirmed that the decision on this matter lay with the Greek government, and made clear that the international refugee agency has serious reservations about the plan.

“Asylum-seekers who are recognized as refugees while in ESTIA are given a six-month grace period, after which they need to exit the program. Until now, the grace period was continuously extended. The Greek government has recently taken a decision to stop extending the grace period, starting with recognized refugees who have been in the program for over 19 months,” Cheshirkov said.

“It will take time for all refugees to become self-reliant and fully integrate in Greece. The ongoing economic hardship for many Greeks and the still-nascent economic recovery create additional difficulties. UNHCR continues to call on the Greek government to strengthen safety nets for refugees and speed up the adoption of integration measures, including meaningful access to the labor market and to the national social solidarity schemes,” the UNHCR official continued.

“We also urge Greece to accelerate the implementation of critical national

programs outlined in the 2018 National Integration Strategy which promote the self-reliance and integration of recognized refugees, including Greek language classes, vocational training and access to gainful employment,” Cheshirkov said.

Families with children attending Greek schools will be allowed to remain until the school year ends in the summer, though almost 25 percent of children in the ESTIA scheme have still not been able to start school, so they and their families will be evicted.

At present, there are 600 people facing eviction from their homes, in a state which already has a serious problem with homelessness. It is likely that the 600 refugees will end up homeless as well, with many more to follow in the next 6-12 months.

Cheshirkov commented that “We call on the Greek authorities to ensure that obstacles are removed, in law or practice, for the inclusion of recognized refugees in social solidarity programs such as the Social Solidarity Income and the Housing Allowance.

(Source: Rory O’Keeffe, founder, and manager of Koraki, a Humanitarian Communications Organization)

Source: <https://greece.greekreporter.com/2019/02/23/thousands-of-refugees-to-be-evicted-from-their-homes-in-greece/>

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