

Turkey warns refugee crisis could return with a vengeance in 2020 as Greece struggles with overcrowded camps



A Syrian family flees fighting in the country's northwestern Idlib region CREDIT: AFP

Five years after Europe's migrant crisis eased, Turkey is warning that it may no longer be able to handle a growing flood of refugees from Syria on its own.

Tens of thousands of Syrians have moved towards the Turkish border in recent weeks because of attacks launched by Syrian regime and Russian forces on rebel positions in Syria's north-western Idlib province.

The situation could exacerbate severe overcrowding and dire conditions in migrant camps on the Greek islands, which have already seen an uptick in arrivals from the Turkish coast since the summer.

If Syrians start to pour across the Turkish border, "Turkey will not carry this migration burden alone", said President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose country is hosting 3.7 million Syrian refugees.

"The negative effects of this pressure on us will be an issue felt by all European countries, especially Greece," he said, warning that a repeat of the 2015 migration crisis would become inevitable.



A Syrian boy held by his mother in a convoy of vehicles fleeing Idlib province CREDIT: AFP

In just the last few days, at least 100,000 Syrians have had to flee their homes in Idlib, according to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian organization, as fighting intensifies.

An additional half a million people could be displaced over the coming weeks if the violence escalates, said the IRC.

That would represent the largest displacement since the war started eight years ago.

Greece is already struggling with a crisis on its Aegean islands, where 40,000 asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere are stuck in miserable limbo.



Smoke pours from a building bombed by pro-Syrian government forces in Idlib province CREDIT: AFP

On Lesbos, the notorious Moria camp officially has capacity for 2,000 people but now holds an estimated 20,000. Thousands of men, women, and children are living in a vast overflow area outside the camp's wire fence, sleeping in tiny tents surrounded by mud and piles of rubbish.

They include around 1,300 unaccompanied minors. Children as young as 10 have tried to commit suicide, doctors report.

"There are some very vulnerable people. It is totally, overwhelmingly shocking," said Dr. Jessica Hanson, a British doctor who is working in Moria over Christmas. "We have people coming into the clinic every day who are suicidal or self-harming. There's no electricity, no sanitation. It's utterly grim."



Moria camp on Lesbos is now dangerously overcrowded CREDIT: AFP

Under a €6 billion deal struck between Ankara and the EU in 2016, migrants with

no right to asylum were supposed to be deported back to Turkey while those accepted as refugees were to be settled in the EU.

But the accord is not working, with transfers away from the islands happening too slowly and new arrivals coming too quickly.

Greece's conservative government, which was elected in the summer, has pledged to speed up processing and to relocate 20,000 refugees from the islands to camps on the mainland, where there are already 80,000 migrants and refugees. But the plan has been hampered by red tape and opposition from local communities.

A hotel owner near Thessaloniki in northern Greece received arson threats after agreeing to house asylum seekers.

The government has resorted to housing some migrants in disused ski lodges and even an abandoned Orthodox monastery.

"The transfers from the islands are ongoing but have slowed significantly compared to the number of people arriving on the islands... These are very short-sighted policies and they are not working," said Renata Rendon, Oxfam's head of mission in Greece.



Despite winter rain and cold temperatures, many refugees and migrants are in tents CREDIT: ANADOLU

In Moria, a 20-year-old Afghan man said: "It's so hard to live... They give such a small amount [of food] that you cannot feel full. In the food queue we sometimes wait for two or three hours."

He says he had to leave Afghanistan because his brother was an interpreter for the US army and the Taliban suspected he might be too.

A 25-year-old Somali man said: "I don't like to say it, but Europe is not doing anything. Every person has a right to seek asylum. Even British people could face this problem, they could be refugees one day. I wonder whether they could handle this."

Source:

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