

UNHCR chief says Greece needs EU help to manage its refugee crisis

Filippo Grandi says the Government continues to face serious challenges, particularly if EU countries do not step up relocation and family reunion programmes.

By Tania Karas | 24 August 2016 | [Français](#) | [عربي](#)



UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi (centre) talks with a Syrian family at the Lagkadikia site in Northern Greece. © UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

ATHENS, Greece – Greece still faces great challenges in managing its refugee crisis, particularly if European Union countries do not step up their relocation and family reunion programmes, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said on Wednesday during an official visit to the country.

Greece's shores were the gateway to the EU for more than 856,000 refugees and migrants last year, according to UN Refugee Agency figures. Flows have slowed significantly this year, but some 50,000 people remain in the country, with a small number still arriving daily.

Although conditions in reception centres are slowly improving, many people still live in overcrowded and inadequate sites as they await solutions for their future.

“The challenges are very serious, and we need to continue to address them together,” Grandi said. “Especially the living conditions, security in the refugee sites, and overcrowding on the islands. These are all issues for which we continue to be at the disposal of the Greek government.”

“The challenges are very serious, and we need to continue to address them together.”

Grandi’s visit to Greece is his second since he took over as head of UNHCR at the start of the year. He stressed the need for EU member states to speed up legal options such as family reunification and relocation through the EU’s official relocation programme.

So far 3,054 refugees have been relocated from Greece to other EU member states, while another 3,606 are scheduled to depart in the coming months. Still, support lags as member states have pledged only 8,003 spaces out of 66,400 committed.

“I will continue to advocate for these programmes to be bigger and accelerated,” Grandi said. “It can and must work.”

Meanwhile, adequate housing is difficult to secure as refugees’ stay in Greece becomes long-term. UNHCR and its partners, which include six NGOs as well as the municipalities of Athens and Thessaloniki, have provided accommodation in apartment buildings and hotels for more than 10,300 relocation candidates and vulnerable asylum-seekers. There they are provided with food and healthcare together with psycho-social and legal support in a programme funded by the European Commission.

On Wednesday morning, Grandi met with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and President Prokopis Pavlopoulos. Grandi then

visited a shelter for unaccompanied children run by Praksis, a Greek NGO supported by UNHCR. He also met with a Syrian family spanning three generations, living in an apartment within the UNHCR/Athens municipality accommodation support scheme.



UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi visits a children's shelter in Greece.

At the Praksis shelter, Grandi met Waris,* a 14-year-old boy from Baghlan, Afghanistan, who fled to Europe four months ago. Though the boy set out with his family – his father, mother, and three younger brothers – they were separated at the Iran-Turkey

border when shots were fired. Waris continued onward through Turkey and to Greece alone, at the urging of a human-smuggler.

Since he arrived, Waris has not been able to reach his parents or siblings, and worries that they may have died.

“It felt terrible. It is very difficult not knowing if my family was alive,” Waris said of his journey. “But in the past few days my lawyer found my uncle in the United Kingdom, and we will do family reunion. So now I can look forward.”

Unaccompanied children in Greece are a high-priority concern for UNHCR. Some 1,472 are on a waiting list for a safe shelter. UNHCR has so far provided 345 temporary shelter spaces for children alone. Another 245 spaces are planned.

“We lost everything in our home country, so we are looking forward to being somewhere safe.”

Grandi called the Praksis centre a model for care of unaccompanied children. It is home to 21 boys aged seven to 17 from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. They receive round-the-clock care, and some attend a neighbourhood school. All arrived in Europe without their parents or relatives, and several spent time locked in detention centres in Greece or living in the streets before coming to the shelter.

Afterward, Grandi visited a three-generation Syrian family who fled Aleppo in February, after their home and bakery business were bombed. One family member was killed and another kidnapped.

Half the family will be relocated to France, while the others await reunion with their father in Germany. “We lost everything in our home country, so we are looking forward to being somewhere safe,” said 58-year-old Mohamed Wafa Barri, the family patriarch.

Ahead of his meeting with President Pavlopoulos, Grandi spoke to the media and expressed his gratitude to Greece for the example it has given the world.

“I want to thank the people of Greece but also the Greek institutions: the Greek government, the Hellenic Coast Guard, the police, the municipalities, the volunteer organizations that have and continue to help people arriving on the shores of Greece as refugees and sometimes very vulnerable migrants. In a world and in a context that has become very closed and hostile to refugees, Greece has been exemplary.”

** Name changed for protection reasons*

Related news and stories
