

# A Place of Refuge

Sunday, 28 June 2015

## A drop in the ocean

Lesvos is a beautiful island and Molyvos is perhaps it's most picturesque town. With the castle standing high at the top and narrow, winding streets that snake down toward the harbour. If you ever visit do make sure you start at the top and work down as the climb up is brutal! A volcanic island Lesvos has high sloping hills and at times mountainous terrain. But it's stunning. "Crisis in paradise" - this isn't my term it was how a representative from the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) described it - but we will come to him later.

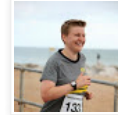
Thursday we rose earlier than normal and made our way to the 9am shift in Molyvos. Not sure what to expect or even if we'd be needed. But keen to see what we could do. Awkwardly waiting at The Captains Table not sure who would appear - Melinda arrived. Melinda coordinates all the work that takes place in the harbour. And The Captains Table has become a stopping point for tourists with bags of clothes or supplies, longer term volunteers as well as journalists and representatives from any agencies exploring the situation. We stood waiting for any instruction as there was a flurry of phone calls and activity. Fami could be seen walking with a small group and it emerged we had arrived on the same day as the UNHCR. They were exploring the camp and current provision.

The group from Afghanistan we had met a couple of days before were still there. With an additional 27 and 60 people down at the bus stop in Molyvos. What happens is those who are rescued in the water are taken to the harbour by the coastguard. They then use the small camp there. If people arrive on land they make their own way to the bus stop and large car park where they gather before beginning their walk. So with people we know there will be something for us to do. It's a question of what. But before any of this I'm quite interested to hear what the UNHCR is going to do. Their rep is from Armenia. He's been moved to come and help his colleagues based in Greece and "assess the situation". As he sits and starts to explain what he's there to do, it's clear it isn't much more than make notes. He has two colleagues with him and you begin to sense they're quality checking the set up in Molyvos rather than offering practical solutions. Keep the camp clean, don't serve them pork, give them instructions. They fail to see that Melinda, Fami and others have been working non-stop for weeks. They are being told nothing they don't know. And when they start to list what they need for help there are awkward looks. The UNHCR rep explains that the financial situation is "difficult" as Greece is an EU country the EU has a responsibility to find any relief effort. Many at the UN don't think global funds should be used to offer help. But it's being "worked on". It's okay though as sleeping mats are on procurement.



The main thing that's needed is manpower. People to volunteer. Help out in all the things that need doing. Especially when they have large numbers. The UNHCR is "considering" what volunteers they can provide. How they don't see that the current position is unsustainable I'm not

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sure. Melinda manages a list of volunteers. But it's decreasing - down at the moment from 14 to 8. And most of these people have jobs and businesses to support at the same time.

In order to store the necessary food and drink that's used to feed arrivals the locals have rented a small apartment where they can prepare sandwiches and load up the cars to take food down to the bus stop. Today it takes some time for Melinda to locate a car (how I wished we had a hire car!) but once she does she leads the way to the store. It's a dark, cramped space with a bed that's been propped up against the wall to make room for boxes of bread, water, fruit and milk. Alongside nappies and sanitary items for women. We're joined by Hannah from Holland - a regular volunteer. And of course the UNHCR want to make sure the food prep is hygienic. Happy with what they've seen they leave us to go and speak to local officials. We load the car with plenty of nappies (the 60 at the school has many young children and babies with them) and sandwiches, water, fruit and milk. The car is so full there isn't room for everyone but as more food is needed we agree to stay behind and make Nutella sandwiches.



140 sandwiches later we are relieved when the others return! Being left we can see how organised everything is. This "spontaneous camp" isn't just a random undertaking. It's been thought through and worked out. How to maximise resources, provide vital nutrition, respect religious and cultural observance. All without support or guidance.

It's now time to feed those at the harbour. This involves carrying the supplies along the back streets of Molyvos and round to the camp. When some of the men see us approaching they come to help carry. It's a well organised approach. Handing out cups and then providing a glass of milk, a sandwich and an apple. Everyone is polite and grateful. We aren't the only ones at the camp - new visitors Doctors without Borders have also chosen today to "review". They have sent three reps from Mytilene. Apparently Molyvos is lucky and they've seen a lot worse in terms of arrivals and conditions. But they too can't offer much help. Melinda and Fami again explain their worries about no medical support. Molyvos has no health centre. They have no Doctor or first aid. Access to this would be a relief as well as essential. You feel that as this written down in yet another notebook no one quite hears them. But also what they see is so organised and well maintained that in the end they don't need to act. They can offer support to less fortunate sites. Yet it will only take one catastrophe for this approach to be found wanting.

As we finish breakfast some good news filters through a call from the coastguard to say the bus is coming to pick them up. Gather them all in the harbour! These are the lucky ones. If luck is having to be rescued from cold seas which means you get a bus rather than a walk. As we leave the camp the message is gather your belongings you're being moved. Everyone begins to clear up any rubbish and fold the blankets they've been sleeping on. They will leave it as they found it. Already out in the harbour we can see the coastguard boat coming in - there are more people on board. New arrivals who've been plucked out of the water. What we can't see is how many.



The coastguard unloads 14 wet and weary men, women and babies in arms. They make their way up to the camp and begin to hang up their wet clothes. There are shouts of anger from the coastguard as he sees the others gathering along the harbour wall. "Why are they here and not still in the camp". Explaining we were told to move them there to wait for the bus just leads to more shouts. Everyone is tired and stressed. This is not what any of these people ever expected to be doing.

More shouts and suddenly I'm asked to move them all back into the camp and line them up. The bus is coming but they will need to walk out of the back of the camp to reach it. I do as I'm asked but am unsure really where we are going. Keeley realises help will be needed and comes to support. The coastguard reappears. Still shouting. Still stressed. He tells those in line we're going to walk 200-300 meters to the bus. They must stay in line. If they don't stay together, if anyone goes missing then no one will get on the bus. His voice is angry but I suspect it's simply a sign of how near breaking point this whole town is. The walk begins. I smile at those in line and laugh "we'd best all do what he says. He's very grumpy today!" Some understand me and laugh too. Others just look tired and confused. We don't get far. The gate he wanted to lead them out of is locked. No key. So back we go.



Which means a clamber down a drop with no steps. Old people, women carrying children. It's not ideal. But this bus is the best way to Mytilene. It's a small price to pay. Until we realise that his 300 metres is more like 2 miles. And no one has checked the health of those walking. The group begin to string out as an older woman struggles up the hill. Her daughter is worried, telling me her mum has heart problems and can't walk. I give her my arm - which she takes and we slowly climb the hill. She stops to sit and I start to worry. "Is there no other way" her daughter asks. "No, look you have to get this bus. Really. You do. Otherwise you will have to walk much much further. Please it's so important!". Whether it's the tone of my voice or she understands the woman stands and we start to walk again. Keeley appears worried as we are going slowly and the coastguard

isn't pleased. She heads off to tell him someone is struggling. As we turn the corner there is a car parked. Suddenly a voice says "can we help" - before I know it the woman and her husband are bundled into the car. But wait - we don't know where we are going. They don't speak English. This won't be good. I see Keeley by a gap in the wall - this is where they've passed through to walk across the fields to the bus. I realise there is no way this woman can make that walk. But we can see now where the end point is. So I sprint up the hill after the car. It take a few streets for the car to realise I'm running along behind. He stops. Throws his wife and kids out and asks me to get in! I'm frantic at this point as I know this shouldn't be happening. But we must get them to the bus. We round a corner and suddenly are at a dead end. But can see the now apoplectic coast guard across the fields. He shouts and shouts - I can only imagine what he's saying in Greek! But I do also hear the words "castle castle". The man driving our car turns out to be Turkish and doesn't know Molyvos. But at least I do know where the castle is. He is trying to load his sat nav and I'm pleading - we just have to go, we must hurry! A phone call to Keeley and finally I'm talking to a calm member of the coastguard team who says it okay. Just head to the castle and meet them at a turning point mid-way up. Finally I start to feel okay. We snake upwards to the castle and can see the bus heading from the army point on the hillside. Relief is overwhelming as I watch the couple climb onto the bus. My Turkish driver having sped off quickly. I assume never to offer to help again!



A lift back to the harbour with the coastguard reveals that in 15 years this is the worst they've ever known. Their stress levels are high. They're tired. And they're ill prepared for the challenges they face. Let alone two crazy English women nearly losing two refugees!



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