

DECEMBER 2020

LESVOS SOLIDARITY

A LETTER TO YOU WHO KEEP UP THE FIGHT FOR DIGNITY



Celebrating the decision of postponement of the eviction in middle of October. Photo credits: Paul McNeill

The eviction of Pikpa Open Refugee Camp

TEXT: THE PIKPA TEAM

As you may already know, on the 30ths of October, a massive Police operation took place to evict Pikpa camp. We are writing today to share more information with you about the events as well as the impact they have had on us and on our operations. This year has been full of challenges for our team: violent attacks on NGO workers and refugees at the beginning of the year, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns and the fires in Moria camp followed by the construction of "Moria 2.0" and the announcement of the closure of all alternative structures on the island, including Pikpa. Throughout all crises, we have proved once more that Pikpa stands for an alternative, able to react to all situations in a way that ensures safety, dignity and solidarity.

For example, during the lockdown in March and responding to an urgent need for safe shelter for unaccompanied minors, we have managed to set up a team and a whole new space to host 30 unaccompanied minors in Pikpa, whilst continuing to protect the other residents of the camp from the pandemic. We have also supported the public hospital at the time with donations to respond to the emergency.

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After the fires in Moria in September, our volunteers and residents have started cooking and distributing meals and hygiene products to the thousands of people who were forced to flee and stay on the street. Together with other grassroots actors and networks, we spearheaded a huge coalition of over 450 organisations, movements and politicians and pushed a public mobilisation through a [petition](#) which by now gathered close to 175.000 signatures, to keep up the pressure on EU governments to evacuate the camps and finally put protection first. At the same time, in Pikpa, we started hosting women who had just given birth, when no other shelter was available.



SAVE DIGNITY SAVE PIKPA



THE SAVE DIGNITY - SAVE PIKPA CAMPAIGN

But then came Wednesday 23 September, and everything changed: Minister Notis Mitarakis announced in the media that he would close down Pikpa camp by the end of October. The announcement marked the start of our SAVE DIGNITY - SAVE PIKPA campaign. We immediately mobilised all our energies, resources and our committed network to organise our strategy to challenge this decision and resist in any possible way. We reached out to the authorities and politicians at the local, regional, national and EU level. We collaborated with legal actors RSA and GCR engaged in legal measures at the European Court of Human Rights to protect our residents. We mobilised through our Save Dignity - Save Pikpa Facebook group, we trended on Twitter with our #savepikpa twitterstorm, we organised a press conference, we talked to local, national and international media every day. The whole Pikpa community joined in to paint Pikpa. We looked into every creative way to campaign against this decision. At the same time, we were going through the stress together with the residents of the camp, sharing their fears and hopes, making strategies and discussing future options, to maintain the feeling of community we had been building over the years. They knew all about the living conditions in the new camp and could not understand why they were asked to leave a place where they finally felt safe.

This time of resistance has been extremely difficult for all the community, but we received a lot of empowering support from all of you, and we really want to thank you from our hearts. You helped us keep up our energies to keep going and you made us feel that we were able to change this decision. We advocated for all the residents to be informed in a timely manner, to be given time to say goodbye to a space where they had lived in sometimes for years, to pack their belongings in peace, and to be transferred to accommodation appropriate to their individual condition. In the last days, it was communicated to the authorities that the transfer should happen without the presence of the police and that the community had no intention to resist the eviction. Nonetheless, on the 30th of October a massive Police operation took place to evict Pikpa camp. Riot police and police forces, accompanied by the Public Prosecutor, arrived in Pikpa camp at 6:30 in the morning in order to move the residents to the "old" Kara Tepe camp and evacuate the place. It was a truly sad day and an utterly unfair decision for the vulnerable refugees of the camp. You can read more on that day [here](#).

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It is important for us to also stress the personal implications this event has had on the team, the volunteers and residents, after a series of crises and the long fight for the space. It was a small victory for us that the residents of Pikpa were transferred to the "old" Kara Tepe instead of the new camp, however, we believe that the presence of riot police was unnecessary and was even traumatising for some of the residents and children of the camp, as well as for the workers and volunteers of the camp who were not allowed to say goodbye.

It has been a shock for us to face this eviction knowing the living conditions of so many refugees on the island, just before winter, and fighting for values we believed in: the respect of people's right to a dignified life.

The eviction has been disastrous for all of the community and needs time to be processed, also by some of our team members who worked there for several years. We had to postpone a needed time for mourning due to the emergency to support the residents that were affected by the eviction and moved to Kara Tepe.

Lesvos Solidarity will continue its mission on defending refugees' safe access to human rights and dignified living conditions.

Our nurse, psychologist and social workers have been meeting with each resident after the events, in order to support them going through this process and assessing new needs they have. Our psychosocial team has been facilitating group empowerment sessions, giving people an opportunity to share their experience and frustrations. We have continued providing them with medical, psychosocial and case support, and ensuring a smooth handover to the organisations operating in Kara Tepe. Based on the needs expressed, we have organised distributions of NFIs, blankets and household goods that the residents needed in their new accommodation.



Military truck parked at Pikpa to carry residents' belongings to Kara Tepe municipal camp.
Photo Credits: Paul McNeill

“ Lesvos Solidarity will continue its mission on defending refugees' safe access to human rights and dignified living conditions. ”

We have also put a focus on continuing to support them in their integration into society, through connections with other actors and supporting administrative processes that will enable them to access jobs and private accommodation. Some, who had jobs, have already managed to move to their own apartments.

Additionally, LeSol continues to provide vocational training and education programs through our support center in Mosaik, and the Safe Passage and Humade workshops. We also adapted our educational program to the COVID-19 situation by creating a new set of online classes.

In the meantime, regarding the operation on the evacuation of Pikpa, we are gathering all LeSol's belongings for future projects or emergencies and doing all the necessary amendments in order to leave the premises in a seamless condition. We hired workers and a moving company to finish the process of getting the camp emptied on time to avoid the fine from the Urban planning office, and have found a land where we can store all of our assets, to be used for future projects, or in case of emergency.

We would be grateful for any kind of support for this costly operation. It is difficult to describe the emotional impact this "de-construction" has had on the team these last weeks, tidying Pikpa now silent and empty, under the surveillance of the police.



Finally, it is time for our team to regroup and discuss future projects. Some proposals have already taken shape and we are using this moment to design them to start new activities with fresh energy in 2021. This brings us hope and an opportunity for a renewed vision for the organisation, but requires a series of discussions on our objectives and potential impact, in a very difficult political context and whilst in lockdown. But despite the challenges, we are confident that we will find the best possible way to continue our work in Lesvos, in solidarity with refugees and with the local community. In the end it's the unbreakable PIKPA spirit that keeps us going and that we want to keep spreading around, knowing that the impossible is possible and that no dream is too big. We are still receiving donations to achieve our mission, especially during this transition phase that we are going through.



If you are interested in supporting our mission, [here](#) you can find the link to our website and our banking details:

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