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H.E. Alexis Tsipras
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Your Excellency

OPEN LETTER FOLLOWING VISIT OF KUMI NAIDOO, SECRETARY GENERAL OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL TO LESVOS ISLAND AND MORIA REFUGEE CAMP

In early October, I visited Lesvos and the refugee camp in Moria, on behalf of Amnesty International. I would like to begin by stressing my admiration for the people of island who, in welcoming hundreds of thousands of refugees and asylum-seekers over the past years are a beacon of solidarity and inspiration. It was clear to me from my visit, that the spirit of this solidarity is very much alive today despite the tides of fear and xenophobia.

I would like to thank your government for having ensured access to the camp, for me and my colleagues, during this important visit in October and on previous occasions. External and independent monitoring of the human rights situation is paramount to ensure transparency and protection for people, foster and sustain constructive dialogue, and support solutions where needed.

As such, I would like to highlight the devastating situation I came across during my visit and to work towards solutions that respect human rights and are viable on local, national and international levels.

Moria is not the first refugee camp I have visited over the years but what I witnessed was quite simply shocking. Problems of overcrowding are well documented, and when I was there it was almost three times over capacity. The policy of containing refugees and asylum-seekers on the islands in order to implement the EU-Turkey deal means that thousands of people remain trapped there for months on end in squalid conditions. Their lives are in limbo, crushed by the prospect of being returned to a country that is not safe for them.

I witnessed firsthand how people, even pregnant women and babies, have to sleep in cold, dirty and overcrowded tents. Women and girls, unaccompanied minors and members of the LGBTI community are particularly exposed to danger. Showers and toilets are scarce and not in separate areas, many facilities don't lock, lighting is poor and even taking a shower or getting water can be stressful and risky. People have to queue for hours to get food or see a doctor and they are not always guaranteed a meal. Children often have no access to education and teenagers feel isolated and in despair due to the lack of prospects. What alarmed me most, is the fear that women have expressed, their fear of sexual harassment and violence, their fear for their safety and that of their children.

Furthermore, during my recent visit, I had the opportunity to speak with a range of activists, grassroots organizations and NGOs offering services and support for the asylum seekers in Lesvos. They shared similar concerns. Among other things, they deplored the inhumane conditions and described the situation as a humanitarian disaster. Many were concerned about the lawfulness of the procedures and practices relating to the detention and deportation of asylum

seekers and migrants, the bureaucracy of the asylum interview processes, which could deprive those transferred to mainland Greece of the ability to attend their interview, as well as efforts to target and criminalize ordinary people showing solidarity with migrants and refugees.

The hardship and horror experienced on a daily basis by people who are already traumatized having fled war, persecution and violence and faced the perilous journey to Greece, is about to get worse as the winter looms. It terrifies me to think that the people I met will be forced to spend months in conditions that will become even more dire when rain, cold and possible snow arrive. We cannot forget that it was during such conditions that the tragic losses of life occurred two years ago and that reports of self-harm and suicides persist today.

This will be the third winter that Moria and many of its inhabitants will have to endure such conditions. This coincides with the third winter of the implementation of the EU–Turkey deal, which in Amnesty International's view is the main driver behind the inhumane conditions refugees and migrants face today in Moria and on some other islands in Greece. There is no doubt in my mind, that the situation I witnessed is not the sole responsibility of Greece. Far from it, Amnesty International has documented how the overstretched systems of frontline countries creak under the strain. Yet EU countries are failing to deliver a coherent and workable asylum reform that would enable sharing responsibility for asylum seekers more equitably. Delays in providing solutions mean people fleeing desperate situations are languishing in limbo, many waiting for their asylum application to be processed in one European country while their family resides in another. Current EU asylum policy puts disproportionate pressure on some EU countries and tears families apart.

We will continue calling the EU to deliver a functioning and fairer asylum system, which supports Member States, including through a mandatory distribution mechanism, protects people in need and enables families to reunite in the EU.

While the EU-Turkey deal is hailed as a success among many political leaders in Europe, I can now add my personal experience to the voice of NGOs, activists and refugees and migrants themselves that nothing is further from the truth. Moreover, the idea that an approach that condemns so many people to suffering and puts local societies under such strain can be modelled elsewhere is startling.

Your Excellency, I would like to conclude this letter with a few urgent requests:

- Take all the necessary measures required to restore human dignity for those trapped in Moria and the other camps on the Greek islands, such as Vathy in Samos and Vial in Chios that my team have visited on several occasions. While we welcome ongoing transfers of people to mainland Greece, we urge you to step up these efforts and ensure refugees are transferred into adequate and dignified accommodation which ensures respect for their human rights.
- Urgently end the cruel containment policy imposed to those asylum seekers arriving in the Greek islands from Turkey, while working with other countries that can ease the pressure on Greece by offering to share responsibility for asylum-seekers and refugees arriving in Europe.
- Address with special care the needs of children, women survivors of violence, pregnant women and new mothers, and those who face persecution because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, among other groups; I urge your government to listen to their demands and act on their words.
- Ensure that those showing solidarity with migrants and refugees and offering much needed services, be it NGOs or grassroots organizations and activists, are always protected and by no means targeted or harassed.

- Finally, in a climate where xenophobia and hatred threaten the fabric of our societies, attacks against refugees and migrants and those showing solidarity with them must be condemned and investigated and any alleged hate motive duly taken into account in the prosecution of these crimes.

The situation on Lesbos is a scar on the conscience of Europe, and I thank you for your attention to these issues.

Yours sincerely,



Kumi Naidoo
Secretary General