

EUROPE, DON'T LET US DOWN

Voices of refugees and migrants in Greece



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OXFAM

Since the beginning of 2015 more than one million migrants,¹ including refugees, fleeing war, persecution, natural disasters and poverty, have travelled through Turkey to Greece in search of safety and a dignified life in Europe. Lacking safe and legal alternatives, they put their lives in the hands of smugglers and risk everything during perilous sea and land crossings.

In March 2016, a series of policies were put in place by European countries to prevent the further movement of people in Europe, including border closures and an agreement between the EU and Turkey to deport back to Turkey all migrants arriving on Greek islands. As a consequence, more than 50,000² people are currently scattered across detention centres, abandoned buildings and makeshift camps in Greece.

Substandard living conditions and lack of adequate food, medical care, and information have heightened anxiety, depression, and uncertainty. Hunger strikes, threats to inflict

self-harm, and violent confrontations have occurred across the country. The Greek government, still dealing with the effects of the economic crisis, is struggling to deliver the protection, services, and shelter needed.

Oxfam and ActionAid have listened to hundreds of refugee and migrant women and men on Lesbos island, in Athens and in the Epirus region of northwest Greece to understand why they fled their countries, what their immediate needs are, and what they plan to do next. Their situation is desperate, but also avoidable.



A boat with migrants arrives at the small Greek island of Lesbos, February 2016. Photo: Pablo Tosco/Oxfam Intermón

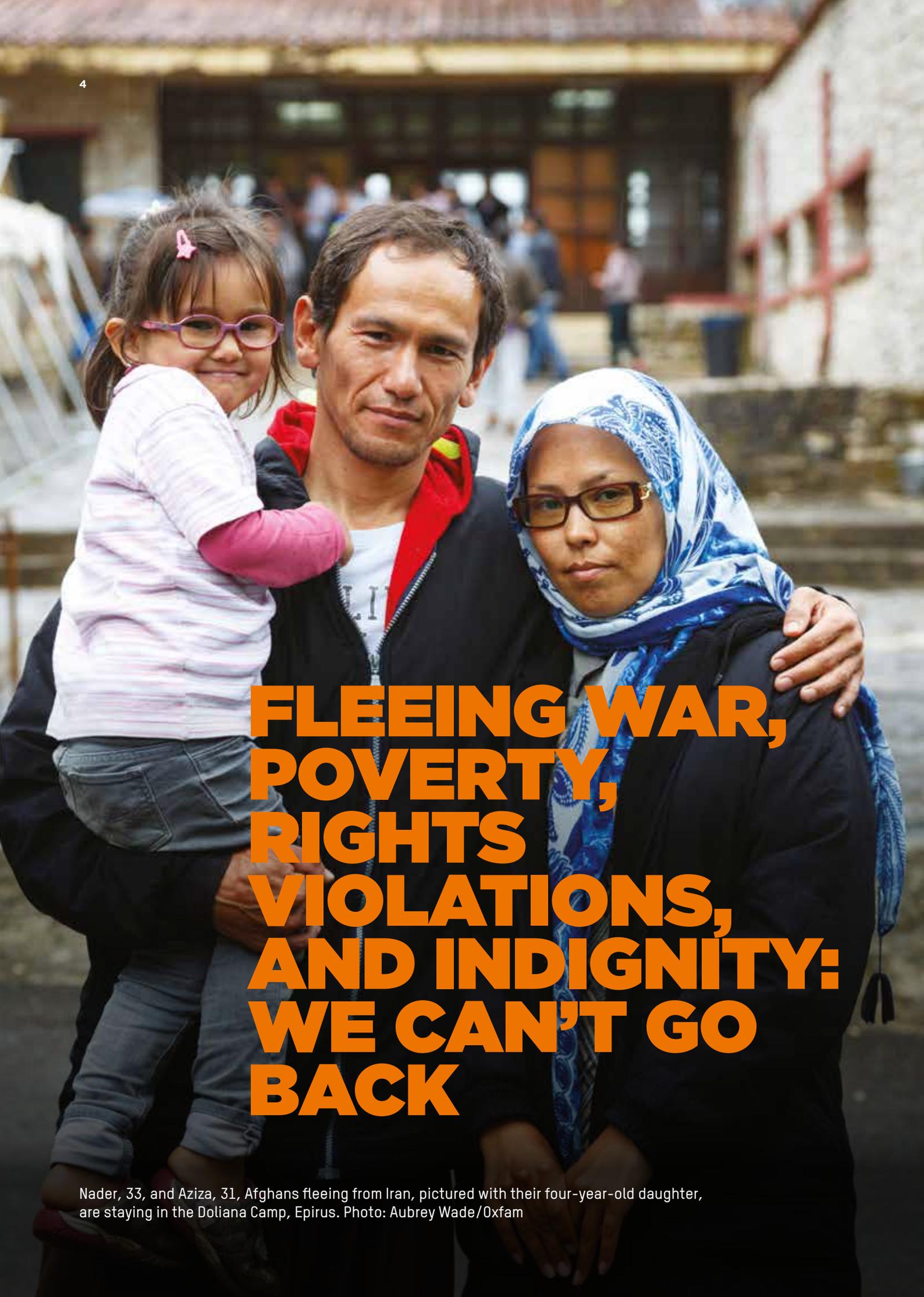
These are the key messages that the people seeking refuge in Europe want European people and their governments to hear:

- **Most of all, migrants are seeking hope for the future and are asking Europe not to forget them, but to help them.** The state of physical, psychological and legal limbo in which people find themselves has led to a sense of hopelessness and desperation. Europe must take a collective, shared approach to facilitate international protection, help them integrate, support them to live in safety and dignity, and fulfil their children's basic right to education.
- **Europe should do more to reunite families.** Many people in Greece are trying to reach family members in other parts of Europe but, despite EU provisions for family reunification, are unable to do so. One way to alleviate pressure on Greece and help to meet people's urgent call to be reunited with their loved ones is through speeding up and broadening the family reunification scheme.
- **Information about rights, legal status, and options** is important to take away some of the fear and anxiety that

people are suffering from when their fate is unknown. This includes information about how long people will stay in camps, what rights and services they are entitled to under Greek and EU laws, who is eligible for the EU relocation and family reunification schemes, and when and how people can access these legal options.

- **People need access to fair, efficient, transparent and humane asylum procedures,** including information about the asylum process, when and how people can ask for asylum, free legal aid, appropriate interpretation, and efficient processes for determining refugee status.
- **Protection, especially from abuse and exploitation, is critical** and requires that people understand who is responsible for their safety and how to seek help if necessary.
- **Humane treatment in reception and accommodation facilities is needed,** including ensuring that all sites accommodating migrants are open (not closed detention centres) and by improving access to nutritious food, medical care, and hygienic water and sanitation facilities.





**FLEEING WAR,
POVERTY,
RIGHTS
VIOLATIONS,
AND INDIGNITY:
WE CAN'T GO
BACK**

Nader, 33, and Aziza, 31, Afghans fleeing from Iran, pictured with their four-year-old daughter, are staying in the Doliana Camp, Epirus. Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

The people whom Oxfam and ActionAid spoke to described harrowing experiences in the countries they have fled from and the countries they transited. From the brutality of war and conflict to sexual- and gender-based violence, poverty, and a lack of dignity and opportunity, the message from refugees and migrants across Greece was loud and clear: we cannot go back.

“My wife and I were born in Iran, [our parents were] from Afghanistan, which meant we didn’t have the same rights as citizens with Iranian parents. The Iranian authorities told us that they would give us ID cards if I went to Syria to fight ISIS. That’s the point that we decided to leave.”

Nader, 33, Afghan from Iran, Doliana Camp, Epirus

“If we sent the girls to school the Taliban would beat them and carve in their leg with a knife ‘This is what we will do if you send your daughter to school’.” Golpari, 23, Afghan female, Katsikas Camp, Epirus

“During the journey, I found myself at risk. The ISIS men tried to rape me. When we got to Turkey, the Turks sent us back to the borders with Syria twice. They were shooting at us with their weapons. However, if you pay, you can get to Turkey again.” Maria, 27, Syrian, Moria closed facility, Lesvos



Maria, 27, Syrian, Moria closed facility, Lesvos.
Photo: ActionAid



Cecile, 42, Cameroonian fleeing Mali, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesvos.
Photo: ActionAid

“I never thought to come to Europe, but my daughter would have had to suffer circumcision when she turned six years old. I couldn’t let this happen, so I took my children and left for Europe.” Cecile, 42, Cameroonian fleeing from Mali, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesvos

“I left Sinjar two years ago when Daesh³ came. The Yazidi are poor people. Daesh took everything. They destroyed our houses, they took our women. They took some members of my family and they killed my brother-in-law. They cut his throat.”

Gazal, 34, Yazidi female from Sinjar province, Iraq, Katsikas Camp, Epirus

“I want to tell Europe that if Turkey was a safe country, I wouldn’t have risked the lives of my wife and children and put them in the boat to cross the sea. If [Turkey] is such a safe country, why don’t they let it into the EU?”⁴ Mohammad, 43, Syrian male, Moria closed facility, Lesvos

GREECE CAN'T COPE AND WE HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN



Kara Tepe Camp in the southeast of Lesbos. Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

While refugees and migrants were grateful for the patience and support of the Greek people, almost everyone to whom Oxfam and ActionAid spoke said that they did not wish to remain in Greece. Many referenced the economic crisis that Greece is experiencing and reflected on their stay in the country up until this point, including their lack of access to basic information and to asylum. Many also expressed a feeling of having been forgotten. Their disappointment in the rest of Europe was clear.

“Life in the camp is very hard. One day is like a lifetime. We want to feel our humanity and to have our respect. We feel forgotten. We want the world to know what’s happening to people like us.” Fatima, 47, Syrian, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos



Fatima, 47, and her daughter Maisa, 19, Syrian, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos.
Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

“Before we took our children and family over the sea, now we will take them over land. What other option do we have?” Syrian male, Filippiada Camp, Epirus



Washing hanging on the fence at Katsikas Camp, Epirus.
Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

“We don’t know about the details of the EU-Turkey deal. The only thing we do know is that Europe sold us to Turkey. Turkey is making money off of us. Before coming here we thought that Europe would take care of us, but now we know that nobody cares.” Jalal, 20, Afghan male, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos

“We feel we have overstayed our welcome in a country that is struggling to support itself and its own people. The Greek people have their own problems.” Wahid, 37, Afghan male, Katsikas Camp, Epirus

“Does the rest of Europe even know that we are here? Do they know that we are more than 500 people in this camp living like this?” Rahim, 33, Afghan, Katsikas Camp, Epirus



Rahim, 33, Afghan, with his son, Katsikas Camp, Epirus.
Photo: Renata Rendón/Oxfam



REUNITING FAMILIES

A mother, 36, from Syria with three of her four children, Doliana Camp, Epirus. Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

Families have been torn apart in desperate efforts to reach safety in Europe. Most people we spoke to reported having family members scattered across several countries, including countries of origin, transit and other European countries, and between sites across Greece. The urgent yearning to be reunited with family was a constant theme. However, the process for reunification is confusing, with little information provided, while a narrow definition of 'family' means that for many, family reunification is not an option.

"I have no passport, just a Syrian ID card. So this is causing me problems. I want us to be able to join my husband [in Germany] to be safe. My message to the European Union is please help families get back together. I miss my husband and the children miss their father." A mother, 36, Syrian, Doliana Camp, Epirus

"[My husband] entered Leros island on 23 March and is not allowed to leave. No one has explained why to me. The Athens police said that I could go to my husband on Leros, but that then I wouldn't be able to return to the mainland where my four children and mother-in-law are." Gazal, Sinjar province, Iraq, Katsikas Camp, Epirus



Gazal, right, is a Yazidi from Sinjar province, Iraq. Her husband entered Greece after the EU-Turkey Agreement was put into effect on 20 March and therefore is not allowed to leave the island. Gazal is seen with her mother-in-law Ilhan, Katsikas Camp, Epirus.
Photo: Renata Rendón/Oxfam

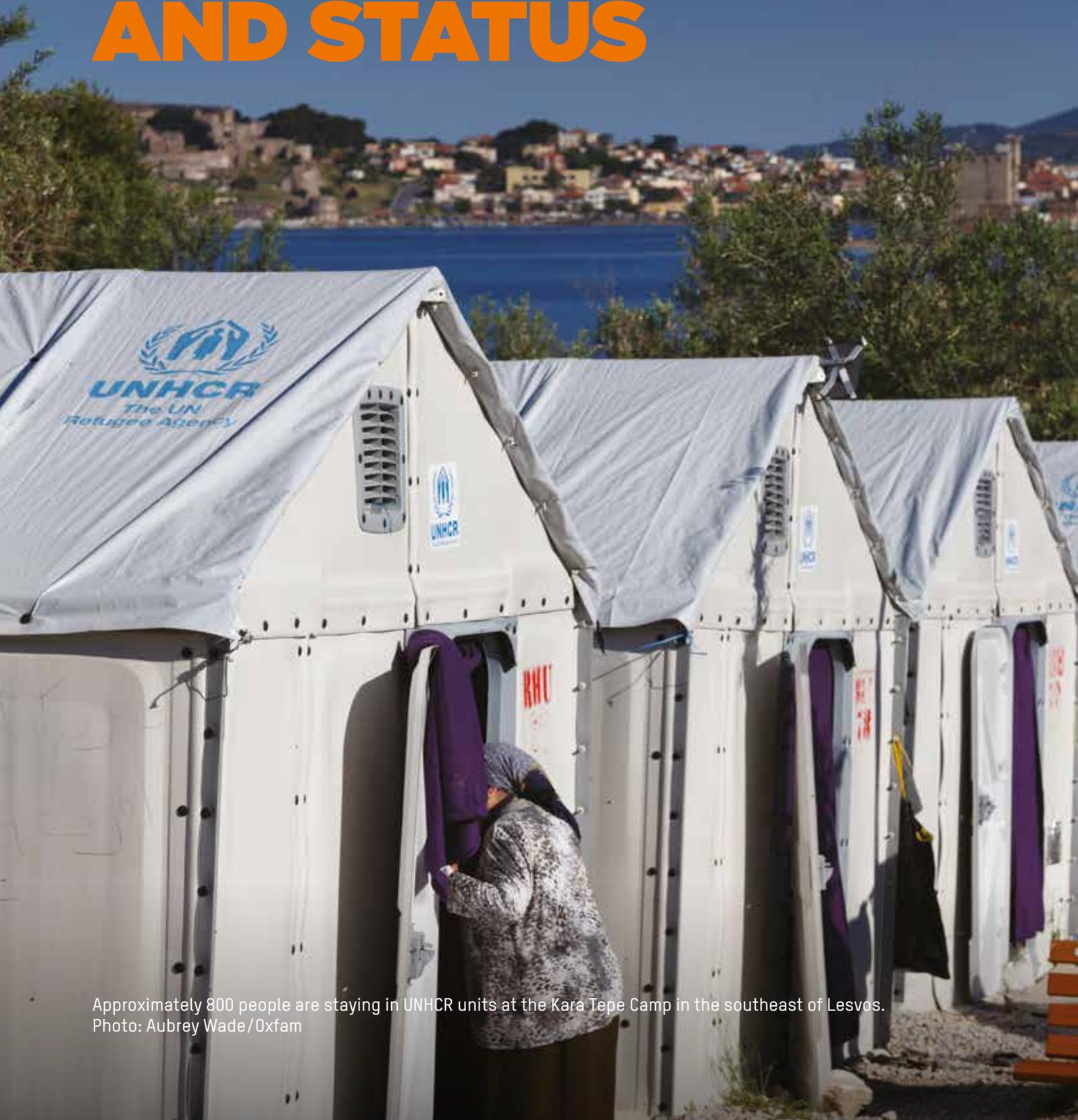


Rweda, 37, and her son, Syrian, Tsepelovo Camp, Epirus.
Photo: Renata Rendón/Oxfam

"I have two children in Germany, and four of my own and two from another family member here with me. I don't know where my husband is, if he is in Syria still, if he is dead or alive." Rweda, 37, Syrian, Tsepelovo Camp, Epirus

"We have registered for the family reunification programme in Chios, but the authorities misspelled the surname of two of my children. I am scared and I don't know what to do. All this time that we have been here in Skaramagas, I have never heard of a successful case of family reunification." Syrian female, 44, Skaramagas Camp, Athens

ACCESS TO INFORMATION, LEGAL OPTIONS AND STATUS



Approximately 800 people are staying in UNHCR units at the Kara Tepe Camp in the southeast of Lesbos.
Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

The almost total lack of information about legal status and options has led to tremendous anxiety and suffering. Several months into their stay in Greece, most people had no information on their rights. There was little understanding of the relocation and family reunification processes. Afghans in particular expressed concern that their police-issued entry papers had expired and were afraid that they could be arrested at any time. The introduction of the EU-Turkey Agreement and regular changes in procedures mean that many people have lost appointments to apply for asylum, without understanding why. Some said they had received false information.

“After we arrived on the island we went to Athens, where the police were waiting for us. When they put us in the bus, they told us that they were taking us to Idomeni, but in the morning we found ourselves here. They told us that we would stay here for only a few hours, but now it’s been two months.” Mohamd, 28, Syrian male, Filippiada Camp, Epirus

“I arrived in Chios before the EU-Turkey Agreement. When I was on the island, I registered for the relocation programme, but since then I have had no information. After the EU-Turkey Agreement, they told us we had to leave the island and come to Athens. So we lost our appointments for the relocation programme and now we have to do everything from the beginning.” Melik, 26, Syrian, Skaramagas Camp, Athens



Melik, 26, Syrian, Skaramagas Camp, Athens.
Photo: ActionAid



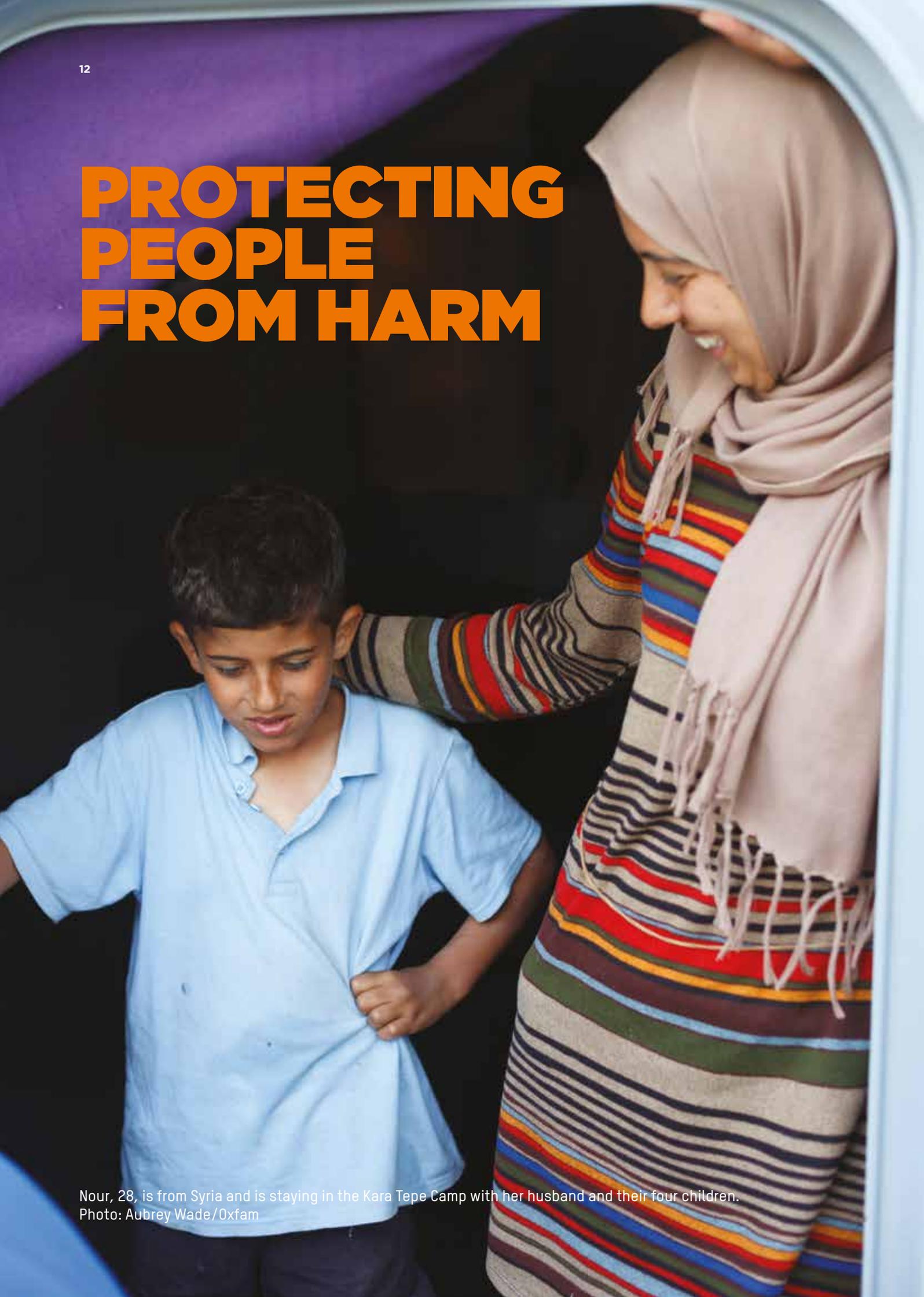
Sakine, 30, Afghan, Katsikas Camp, Epirus.
Photo: Renata Rendón/Oxfam

“All we want is some information so we can have some hope. All of these difficulties we have gone through – they would be easier if we knew what was going to happen. Even if they told us that we would be here for six more months it would be better than nothing. We have no information.” Sakine, 30, Afghan, Katsikas Camp, Epirus

“Greece doesn’t have the means to help us. If I could ask for asylum in Greece, I would, but there is no way to ask for it. Greece has no capacity. If I go to the police office they will tell me to go onto Skype. I tried Skype many times, but I can’t get through to anyone to schedule an appointment to ask for asylum.” Syrian male, Tsepelovo Camp, Epirus

“Every day we are worried about the next. Will we still be here tomorrow? Will we be deported?” Afghan male, Filippiada Camp, Epirus

PROTECTING PEOPLE FROM HARM



Nour, 28, is from Syria and is staying in the Kara Tepe Camp with her husband and their four children.
Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

Many people with whom Oxfam and ActionAid spoke said that they did not feel safe at the sites they were living in. Women and men spoke of tensions, arguments, and violent confrontations between groups as a result of the prolonged period of time they have spent in inadequate conditions and with no information about what lies ahead. Women especially fear for their safety; even going to the bathroom at night is dangerous. Violence was reported at almost all of the sites where Oxfam and ActionAid conducted interviews with many people looking, unsuccessfully, to the police and army to intervene. Afghans also spoke of feeling insecure outside of the sites.

“We don’t feel safe going to the showers or the toilets alone. We have set up groups of six and we all go together. If one wants to go, she has to take another five women with her.” Tagrit, 30, Syrian female, Moria closed facility, Lesbos

“When there is a fight, the police show up late. Like in the movies.” Fatima, 19, Syrian female, Moria closed facility, Lesbos



People walking around Katsikas Camp, Epirus.
Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam



Jalal, 20, Afghan, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos.
Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

“I don’t feel safe [in the camp]. Once, a man tried to kidnap a little girl. The child started shouting and the kidnapper put her down and escaped. And of course it could happen again.” Jalal, 20, Afghan, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos

“I can’t sleep at night – I don’t feel safe. We [two women] live in a tent together and we take turns sleeping.” Afghan female, Katsikas Camp, Epirus

“We don’t feel safe here because we can’t go into the village. All of our documents are expired. The police told us not to go into the village and that we will be arrested if we go far from here. When I go to the village and I see the police car I feel like I’m in Iran again.” Afghan male fleeing from Iran, 18, Epirus

“A few weeks ago [a couple of men] were drinking a lot and [one of them] broke a bottle in half and stabbed a 15-year-old boy in his leg. We went to get the police but they wouldn’t come – they said that they don’t get involved in these things. Only when it got really out of control did they come over to help.” Afghan male, Epirus



IMPROVING ACCESS TO FOOD AND MEDICAL CARE

A group of men from Afghanistan volunteer in a community garden set up by Humanitarian Support Agency (Oxfam's partner in Kara Tepe Camp). They are planting vegetables to supplement the food that is distributed. Photo: Aubrey Wade/Oxfam

People said that having ingredients to cook nutritious food and having improved access to medical care were priorities for them. People reported being served potatoes and pasta on a daily basis, rarely with any vegetables or meat, for more than two months. Nutritious options for pregnant women and children under one year of age are urgently needed. Oxfam and ActionAid received initial reports of people selling their valuables in order to obtain cash to buy food. Many people described insufficient access to medical care and medicine and talked specifically about diet-related health issues like diabetes. There is no regular transportation to hospitals if doctors are absent in camps, and there are often no interpreters even when people are able to access services.

“My husband passed away two days ago. He was diabetic. He had to take insulin. But here we couldn’t find any. He suffered from kidney failure. The authorities got him to the hospital. But it was too late. I had to find €2,000 to send his dead body back to Kabul. I borrowed money from anyone I could, and now I have to give it back.” Naime, 38, Afghan, Schisto Camp, Athens



Naime, 38, Afghan, Schisto Camp, Athens.
Photo: ActionAid

“You can’t eat the food here. It’s always pasta or potatoes. There are people who have blood sugar problems and their diet is not proper. There are people who get food poisoning.” Maria, 27, Syrian female, Moria closed facility, Lesvos



Ariana, 19, Syrian, Konitsa Camp, Epirus.
Photo: Renata Rendón/Oxfam

“My brother is six years old and has autism. It’s hard to find help for him. He screams at night and has gotten worse since we got here.” Ariana, 19, Kurdish from Syria, Konitsa Camp, Epirus

“My child has lost eight kilos in two months. He only eats oranges and orange juice. He wouldn’t eat for a week, so I also stopped eating to try to get him to eat.” Afghan female, Katsikas Camp, Epirus

“When the Pope was here, everything was perfect. They brought us nice food. If only the Pope could be here every day!” Mouna, 41, Syrian female, Moria closed facility, Lesvos

“I’ve been trying to find vaccines for a week now. I go down, they send me up. I go up, they send me down. My daughter is two-and-a-half months old and she needs the vaccine.” Ahmed, 38, Syrian male, Moria closed facility, Lesvos

“I was diagnosed with arachnoid cysts in my brain, which causes nausea and seizures. I left the camp and went to the hospital in Athens to receive treatment but I passed out in the metro, fell down, and injured my back. The doctor examined me and said that I should stay inside, rest, and live in an environment with no stress because the cyst may grow and cause neurological damage, but I cannot leave my children alone in the camp.” Syrian female, 44, Skaramagas Camp, Athens

