

STATEMENT ON THE EU'S SHAMEFUL DECISION TO GIVE TURKEY 3 BILLION EUROS TO HOLD BACK WAR REFUGEES FROM FINDING SAFETY IN EUROPE

by Eric Kempson in Lesvos; and Robina Qureshi, Director of Positive Action following her recent visit to Lesvos to assess the situation.

The EU decision to pay 3 billion euros to Turkey to hold back refugees will not stop refugees coming into Europe, it will only make them use more dangerous routes and pay higher sums to people smugglers.

500,000 refugees have arrived via Greece in 2015 so far. More than 3,000 have drowned at sea, and thousands more are trapped in freezing, muddy fields along Europe's borders as the eastern borders become progressively sealed off.

Eric Kempson, who has lived on Lesvos with his family for the past 16 years, and spearheaded a major voluntary aid effort since February 2015, helping tens of thousands of refugees, said:

"The EU is badly mistaken if it thinks paying Turkey 3 Billion euros will halt the flow of war refugees into Greece. The smuggling trade alone is worth 10 Billion euros. That trade is not just between Turkey and Greece it's all the way up through Europe, with smugglers waiting to get people through. Boats continue to come through, mainly overnight and in bad weather. 500 came through Lesvos yesterday (Dec 3), 450 people came through on December 2nd, and 800 the day before. The numbers are less than the previous three months but are still significant. People will keep coming in bad weather when the Turkish coastguard is not patrolling. And they will come overnight when it's more dangerous. The Africans are making their way here, and they will reach here in the spring. And now that the British government has started bombing Syria along with other European countries, many more people will be trying to come to safety, using more dangerous routes.

"What we are seeing because of the EU decision is further persecution and abuse of war refugees by the Turkish coastguard on the open seas, and more deaths as people take ever more dangerous routes to safety. And these abuses will get worse because of this EU deal, and we are losing a lot more people now because of it.

"The Turkish coastguard is now using very fast boats to go round and round the refugee dinghies to get up a wave of water and they sink them with the babies, children and women in them. They have shot at refugee boats and there is recorded testimony of this by a Sky News Reporter (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjQMzEPASpU>). They are also throwing out an electric cable onto the boats and putting a current down it. We found this out through the burns on babies' arms. They tell people to grab the rope, as if they're saving them. And they use water cannon to fill the boats with water so they can sink it, with all these women and children and babies in the middle. They also slice into the dinghies using a long stick with a knife, and when people sink in the water, the Turkish coastguard picks up the survivors, and takes them back to Turkey as heroes.

"The EU have a very big responsibility because they are paying Turkey to persecute and abuse war refugees on the open seas, and it is completely against the Geneva

Convention on Refugees. The Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis and all war refugees do not want to live in tents in the winter months in Turkey. So they will keep on trying to find a way to get into Europe. And we will carry on staying here, and we will help them come through, we will clothe, feed and water them. And we will give them medical aid.

“The so called leaders of the EU should be ashamed of themselves. We are on the frontline of this crisis and we see what is happening hour by hour, what we want is a solution to stop all of this misery. We want to see war refugees allowed to register in Turkey and fly out to any country that wants them. Or let them take the Mytilene ferry for 5 euros like Europeans, instead of taking a rubber dinghy for up to 2,800 euros and risking their own and their children’s lives. This is what should be discussed, not forcing people to risk their lives even more, and turn up dead on European beaches.”

Last week, three members of Positive Action in Housing, the refugee homelessness aid charity, visited Lesvos to assess the situation on the ground, where aid should go, and to take part in the voluntary aid effort. Robina Qureshi, Director, who visited as part of the team, with with Board member, Mohammad Asif and Senior Caseworker Sunny Singh, said:

“We are very concerned about the decision of the EU to pay Turkey 3 Billion Euros to stop refugees entering Europe. Although the numbers coming in are less than three months ago, they are still large numbers and more people are coming in using dangerous routes, in bad weather and overnight, and that means more casualties and deaths. I personally witnessed through binoculars the abuse by Turkish coastguard boats driving at speed at refugee boats as they neared Greek waters, obviously designed to terrify the lives out of people.

“During our short visit, at least two thousand refugees passed through Lesvos. Sometimes people came in and were calm. Other times, we saw people come off boats utterly terrified, babies screaming, so that was the sign that something bad had happened on the open seas with the Turkish coastguard. We had a quiet beach one minute and then a few minutes later a boat comes in with emergencies all around us. And then another, and another, 60-70 people per boat. There were soaking wet children shivering and in need of a change of clothes, and babies so cold we couldn't get them warm, women terrified that they had lost their children, pregnant women in a bad way, dehydration, sick children, a man suffering a heart attack, all at the same time. Their bare belongings soaked through. Many boats came in during the night too.

“While 90% of the donations to the European Refugee Crisis is being collected by the major aid agencies, we saw that 90% of humanitarian aid being provided on the ground is being done by unpaid volunteers and tiny NGOs like ourselves. We saw little evidence of an emergency response from the major aid agencies, and everyone on the ground knows this. It's shameful. It's now winter and despite multiple promises the UNHCR has abjectly failed to put up the warming tents it promised a couple of weeks ago to Eric Kempson. International Rescue has also got a camp on sight but it lies pristine and empty while thousands of refugees trudge past on the dirt track. It was tragic to watch. The camp is also in a dangerous location on the cliff faces and as winter approaches it will be impossible to bring refugees to the camp

safely. One wonders, given that the majority of donations are being collected by these aid agencies, whether the decision to not "winterise" refugees at Lesvos, is politically motivated.

We were however reassured by the presence of Positive Action's volunteer medics and clinicians on the ground, who immediately began giving medical assistance and helping the other medical teams, such as the Swiss Adventist Medical Bus, Disaster Medics and others. We are still looking for medics and clinicians to volunteer throughout 2015 and 2016, and have raised £40K of a £50K total to go directly to Lesvos. We are doing this because we know that after 25 years of building Fortress Europe the EU has not managed to halt the flow of refugees trying to gain safety in Europe, and it's not going to happen now."