

# Chaos and death



**BEWILDERED:** A child screams as medics try to wrap him in a foil blanket

From **Niamh Griffin**

ON LESBOS

**I**N one corner of a muddy cemetery on a wind-swept Greek island, a tiny plaque marks the grave of three-day old baby, one of thousands of people who drowned fleeing to Greece this year.

The chaos of the desperate sea-crossing between Turkey and Greece is such that even these most vulnerable babies cannot be protected. Last week, just days after I stood at that tragic grave on Lesbos island, seven more children drowned in the Aegean sea.

## 'Traffickers have lower rates for stormy days'

More than 800,000 people have entered Greece this year from war-torn Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. Over a million refugees have arrived including those who landed in Italy, Malta and Gozo. Following the Paris attacks, concerns grew that terrorists could slip into Europe, with one bomber suspected of passing through Greece.

One Greek analyst warns sweeping public service cutbacks have dramatically reduced Greece's ability to process refugees. But in spite of an EU donation of €3bn to Turkey to keep refugees on their side of the sea, the boats continue to come.



**WAITING GAME:** Niamh Griffin at a refugee camp on Lesbos

## A chilling dispatch from the Greek island that has become the landing point for nations on the move

I travelled to the Greek island of Lesbos, the entry-point for almost half the refugees in Europe this year.

Standing on rocky Eftalou beach, I could clearly see Turkey, and even the white towers of a mosque less than 10km across the sea.

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# in race to Europe

**1,005,504**  
Migrants who arrived in Europe in 2015

**821,008**  
Migrants in Greece alone

**160,000**  
EU refugee quota over the next two years for all EU countries

**4,000**  
Irish quota over the next two years under EU plan

**129**  
refugees arrived in Ireland under this plan so far

**PANIC:**  
A dinghy deflates just 100m from the Lesbos shore



Mytilene. We have emptied our cupboards. It's terrible here, it's terrible what I have seen.'

And she warned: 'The EU is closing its borders, what are we going to do? They are coming here, and they cannot go back.'

Dr Markus Alt, a Swiss volunteer with the Adventist Help medical bus said: 'People at home want to donate equipment, and that's good. But we need cash, and that is the least sexy thing to sponsor. We need to pay a mechanic to fix our bus. We need to get wood to build a roof. That costs money.'

When refugees reach Athens, hundreds stay at a squat run by the Greek Solidarity movement. Thousands more turned back at the Macedonian border now sleep in a former Olympic stadium.

Greek analyst Dimitri Rapidis from think-tank Bridging Europe warned that Jordan and Lebanon cannot take more refugees so

## 'Lawyers are needed to screen people'

Europe's burden must increase. Asked if Greece can process this many people, he said:

'Not at all. We have a big capacity gap, and that has to be dealt with by the EU. Lawyers, translators are needed to screen people to allow them into Greece, and that is the core of the problem; the funding.

'Greece cannot do this unless the EU cooperates. At this moment, I feel quite pessimistic.'

Sitting in an Athens café, he said: 'We don't expect Ireland to support Greece financially, mainly we demand support from Germany and France.'

More than 5,000 people entered Greece on just one day (December 20) last week, according to the UN.

Mr Rapidis said: 'We are focused on the Syrians, but what is the plan for the other people?'

And while it was hoped winter winds would lower the numbers arriving from Turkey, NGOs and volunteers now expect the boats to continue.

Knowing how many boats I saw in just a few days, and hearing of people camped along Turkey's shores waiting to travel, I can only agree and fear the graveyard will continue to fill.

question often being: 'Where am I?'. Coaches take people up winding mountain roads to transit camps. One is in the car-park of OXY nightclub. Late at night, I watch people stumble in, grit blowing in their faces. It's easy to get on the wrong bus, to get separated.

And under cover of darkness, other things happen. A volunteer on

## 'Winter hasn't stemmed the tide of boats'

clean-up duty after many boats arrived at once, found four Moroccan passports discarded on the rocks. A Syrian man told another he was baffled by unfamiliar Arabic spoken by men claiming to be Syrian.

The border into Macedonia from the north of Greece is the main crossing into northern Europe. But only Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans

can cross at the moment, putting their passports at a premium on the black market. Registration is done at three camps, by nationality. Non-Syrians are taken to the sprawling Moria camp. Since the Paris attacks money has appeared to improve walls and huts. But when I visited, hundreds still slept outside among olive trees, sheltered only by tents donated by Dutch festival-goers.

The flimsy tents stand in ankle-deep mud; two blew away as I watched. Irish revellers at Electric Picnic had donated similar tents.

The Migration Minister complained recently that his request for 1,600 extra police was ignored by the EU. Shortages of translators and even passport scanners are cited in local newspapers.

A source familiar with the Greek legal system said refugee lawyers travel to the islands voluntarily but cannot afford to stay long. Their advice is not recognised without authority. Even inside the walled area, people sleep on footpaths and registration queues stretch down

the slopes. As darkness falls, I watch a man walk up and down outside selling or buying Syrian identity cards.

A report by EU border agency Frontex warned of 'a high degree of falsely-claimed nationalities' among refugees passing through Greece.

Around Mytilene harbour, travel agents offer bus/ferry tickets to the Macedonian border via Athens. Hundreds huddle on the pier, waiting.

Brussels feels very far away. It's as if this is all happening on the Aran Islands and Galway County Council were picking up the pieces.

A government report found €947,000 spent by the island council just to September. And tourism is dropping, with hotel cancellations up by 30% on last year.

The only hospital is stretched to breaking point, and the morgue has reported being overwhelmed when large boats sink.

Local retiree Angie Bonoparti, 63, spends her days on the beaches.

She said: 'We are not rich in

It would make a glorious summer outing, on a sleek yacht with trained crew. But cheap, inflatable dinghies steered by terrified refugees, most of whom cannot swim, frequently sink or run aground instead.

Traffickers charge up to €1,200 per person for this nightmare, with lower rates on stormy days.

The day starts early here as the group of volunteers who travel to Greece to help the migrants, including many Irish people, guide a crowded dinghy in soon after sunrise.

One little boy, his teeth chattering hard enough to be heard metres away screamed at medics trying to wrap him in a foil blanket. No parents, just a dazed-looking teenage boy helplessly shushing him. People mill about, seeking a phone signal.

The UN says 60% of arrivals are male, one quarter are children and 16% are women.

Dinghies carry at least 50 people, and usually arrive in clusters. Medics from Jordan do as much translation as medical work, with the first

# 'The idea is to reach shore before anyone drowns'

By Niamh Griffin

THE trick, says Francis Mooney, is to drive fast enough to reach the shore before anyone drowns – but slowly enough to avoid spinning off the muddy track onto the rocks below.

Lesbos island is Greek but sits less than 10km from Turkey. Refugees and migrants fleeing war travel by boat to Greece on their way further into Europe, but the flimsy inflatable boats often capsize or even sink.

Volunteers like Francis, John Paul Barber and Jude Bennett from Belfast are among those running rescue services on the island.



**HEROES:** Francis Mooney, John Paul Barber and Jude Bennett

Almost 400,000 people have landed on these beaches this year alone. A rescue diver back home, Francis dons a

wet-suit for his daily work; swimming out to help guide sinking or overloaded boats to shore. He said: 'I spend a

lot of time in Bundoran; I'm well used to the cold water. But you see people just freezing here. When I pick a baby out of a boat, that smile is my reward.' 'When the waves are rough, they're coming in over the boat. It gets very heavy and the boat collapses in the centre. The children usually sit there, and it just collapses; they are gone before anyone can do anything.'

John Paul, a former hospital porter, stands at the water's edge watching for the next boat.

He said quietly: 'I was prepared for everything – but not emotionally. You cannot be ready for this – they have no shoes; they

have nothing when they come. I have to go away on my own a bit, you need to spend time alone to deal with it.' Jude Bennett is an art curator turned emer-

## 'You cannot be ready for this'

gency fund-raiser for the crisis, in partnership with singer Joby Fox.

She said: 'The boat situation changes every day, it's slowing now a bit because of the winter but that could change.' Everyone from local Greeks to the

refugees themselves is aware the Paris attacks changed how some people view refugees.

'It is a complex issue but there's no doubt people need help. Me personally I try not to think about the politics, it can be upsetting especially when you know boats are going down.'

John Paul said: 'When you see people, you just see they are in need of help.'

'You see really elderly women. I've seen a wheelchair folded up in the boat, at the side of the boat. There was a man today, paralysed and they had to lift him off.'

Contact Jude Bennett through: [www.refugeesrescue.co.uk](http://www.refugeesrescue.co.uk)