

# "THEY ARE KILLING MINDS"

LIFE IN THE SAMOS CLOSED CONTROLLED ACCESS CENTRE



This report is written by I Have Rights, a non-profit law clinic that provides assistance to people on the move at all stages of the asylum procedure on Samos. I Have Rights engages in advocacy and strategic litigation focusing on (i) ending the detention of people on the move, (ii) ending the illegal practice of pushbacks and (iii) defending the right to seek asylum. I Have Rights raises awareness of ongoing EU and state practices leading to human rights violations and defends the rights of people seeking protection in Europe.

Testimony collection for the report was supported by Samos Volunteers, an independent organisation which supports displaced communities living in Samos by offering psycho-social support, recreational activities, women-only spaces and a free shop. Samos Volunteers advocates for fair and dignified migration policies.

The report, published on World Refugee Day, features anonymised quotes from testimonies collected from May to June 2023 through semi-structured interviews conducted by I Have Rights and Samos Volunteers with people who have resided in the CCAC in 2023. Interviews were structured around the following thematics: the structure, safety, health, food & water and hygiene conditions. Unless specified otherwise, the pictures included in the report were provided by people that reside or have resided in the CCAC. The pictures credited to the Samos Advocacy Collective were taken by residents in 2021 using single use cameras. The report aims to amplify the voices of people accommodated in the Samos CCAC and challenge the narrative of such prison-like structures being a humane and dignified way to accommodate people seeking protection in the European Union.

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## Introduction

In September 2021, the first Greek Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) opened on Samos. Built in an isolated location, 8km from the nearest town, its architecture mimics the dehumanising infrastructure of prisons. Presented as a solution to the disastrous conditions in which people seeking safety had previously been subjected to on the Greek hotspots, CCACs have since opened on four other Greek islands, with the structure being presented as an example of a more humane approach to migration by many across Europe. However, when a respondent who had been accommodated in both the old camp and the new Samos CCAC was asked which he preferred, the answer was immediate:

“

***I prefer the old camp. I had small freedoms there. Sure, we didn't have a container or kitchen, but we managed ourselves then.***

”

Restrictions placed on asylum seekers in the prison-like structure not only have a negative impact on their daily lives but also violate their human rights, as will be illustrated throughout the report. When arriving to the CCAC, people are automatically *de facto* detained for up to 25 days. After, they are subjected to intensive surveillance and security infrastructure including: multiple layers of barbed wires, 24/7 CCTV watched from the control centre in Athens, drone monitoring, police (including riot police), private security, airport-style security upon entry and exit, check-points throughout the structure and a strict curfew. Such levels of surveillance and control, as well as the intense restrictions of their freedom of movement have an impact on the mental and physical well-being of people seeking safety.



## SECTION 1: STRUCTURE OF THE CCAC

### **"They didn't build that place for us"**

On the design of the camp two respondents commented:

“

***They built it for their selfish interests, they built it because maybe they have family in this place. The fences, the restrictions... they didn't build that place for us.***

”

“

***There is not enough area for your special place, special life. Anyone needs some area to pray, to move.***

”

On the prison-like structure of the CCAC two respondents explained:

“

***It is very difficult for us in the camp; very, very difficult. The camp is a prison. We live like prisoners in the camp.***

”



Sign used during a protest that took place in the CCAC in April 2023.

“

***Even in my country, I have never been in a prison like this place. Our freedom is limited. It's a place we call 'the next African prison'. Minds are destroyed. Mentally, psychological illness is killing people in this camp. People lost lives, lost babies, lost families. We came here because we needed protection. We expected a house, not a prison.***

”

Another structural issue raised in multiple testimonies was the lack of privacy. In particular, multiple persons complained that they are not provided with a key to be able to lock their containers:

“

***We have no privacy, it stresses me a bit, I feel stressed. I am afraid that someone will come in the container.***

”



“

***Our container is not locked, it is not safe. I don't feel safe in this environment. They can always enter the containers when they want. no privacy. Of course it's bad, especially we ladies need privacy. of course it stresses you, but there is nowhere you can go and complain.***

”

“

***You can't move, you can't breathe. It's like a grave, really like a grave. Around the camp it's a prison, but my container it's a grave.***

”

## SECTION 2: SAFETY

### ***"Police vehicles yell at us like we are animals"***

The CCAC is presented by EU and Greek authorities as a safer environment for asylum seekers compared to the old camp. However, all respondents expressed feeling unsafe in the structure. A respondent explained that by the entrance of the CCAC there is "a room special for policemen" where:

“

***Many times they ask some guy to go inside this room, sometimes [to] hit them, sometimes make a double check, take off all the clothes, besides talking with bad words. It always happens. Five times at least in a week.***

”



To enter the structure, people must go through airport-style security, which includes their bags being searched, having to take off their shoes and jackets, go through a metal detector and being fingerprinted. There are also check-points inside the structure, where people are subjected to searches again:

“

***Everytime you come inside or outside they check you. Even inside the camp to go to the doctor or reception, they search you. What kind of life is this? If someone has stress, they build it up. They can attack you, to give you more stress. They can create a problem for you, even if you are a kind person minding your own business.***

”



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In May, for a week, respondents reported being subjected to body searches every time they entered the CCAC:

“

***They told you to stand outside the door and they touched all your body parts. We asked why you are doing this, they said they are just following orders. They put on gloves. We asked why and said they can't do that. It was very weird, it was disrespectful, it's not right, you can't touch a woman like that. They don't know my background. It was women who touched women and men who touched men. They check every time you enter and leave. They tell you to stand and open your legs, and they touch all your body parts. Men and women stand next to each other. It happens outside the door, not even in a room, it's outside.***

”

“

***It is very embarrassing. They do that to everyone. It makes me feel embarrassed and very very bad, it is shameful. Once you pass the machine, they start checking you and tell. They touch your bra, they feel inside the bra.***

”

Furthermore, respondents generally reported being afraid of police in the CCAC, with respondents reporting feeling targeted and mistreated, particularly following protests:

“

***The day after a protest, we are treated as if we are criminals.***

”

People's treatment in the CCAC left respondents feeling like they are being treated as criminals rather than people seeking refuge. Additionally, one respondent reported being asked to spy on other residents for the police. Such experiences contribute to asylum seekers distrust of police in the CCAC:

“

***We don't trust the police. If we come from town, police vehicles yell at us like we are animals. They point at some of us. We have psychological problems, and shouting can affect our brains. So they shout. They search you, make you remove your sneakers like you are animals or thieves. But we didn't commit any crime.***

”

“

***When I see police, I lock myself inside the container to try and feel safer. But even then, I am worried they could bomb the container.***

”

“

***Do you think the people would feel comfortable saying no when asked to be spies? They can't say no. If someone says no, everyday policemen will harass them. If they say yes, policemen everyday will ask them for new information. If they don't have new information, they will be harsh with bad words and ask them to do his duty as a good spy.***

”





## SECTION 3: HEALTH

### ***"I don't even know what type of pills they are giving me"***

All respondents complained about the lack of essential medical support in the CCAC. All reported feeling high stress levels with many reporting other forms of mental distress, including thoughts of self-harm.



*Sign used during a protest that took place in the CCAC on 2nd May 2023.*

A respondent shared with the camp authorities that following the torture he experienced in prison in his country of origin, he had serious health issues that would most likely require surgery. He reported being told "there is no doctor for bones" [on Samos], and was not given an alternative solution.

Many reported the lack of access to medical services as a major issue, sometimes causing them added distress:

“

***The lack of access to medical treatment is stressful because they only give you painkillers; that can't cure every disease. It is not easy with the camp doctors, you go and explain to them, they just give you painkillers.***

”

Treatment, when provided, does not seem to be properly explained, as two respondent mentioned:

“

***When you say you don't feel well, they give you some weird things, they don't explain.***

”

“

***Right now I take pills three times per day, different ones, eight to ten different pills. The psychologist told me to take these. They treat me like a donkey. Just take these pills! I don't even know what type of pills they are giving me.***

”

Many respondents reported having issues sleeping in the CCAC, often citing their physical or mental health issues:

“

***It's so difficult because every night I don't sleep. In my mind I am feeling something uncomfortable, asking many questions in my mind. For a long time[...] I don't sleep because it's difficult to breathe. Sometimes I take painkillers because it's painful. I told them but they don't give any respect to me. No help, nothing. So I still have trouble breathing.***

”

“

***Sometimes I use some sleeping tablets. MSF [Médecins Sans Frontières] gave them to me and I use them, but otherwise I cannot sleep because of the camp stress. If there was no MSF in the camp for us, some people would die there. Because the camp doctor makes no effort. You tell them you are feeling bad, they simply tell you to go out. The workers in the camp are very, very wicked. Sometimes I feel like harming myself because of the stress of being in the camp***

”



## SECTION 4:FOOD AND WATER

**"A hungry man is an angry man"**



*The amount of food given to asylum seekers for a full day (on the left, breakfast, and on the right, lunch and dinner combined), pictures are from 29th May 2023.*

The food provided in the Samos CCAC was described by respondents as inedible or to have gone bad upon distribution. Respondents explain:

“

***We have to remove the green colour [mould] and eat it.***

”

“

***Everyone has stomach ache everyday.***

”

Respondents described in more detail the visual aspect of the food they receive as sometimes green, sometimes blue, and the chicken is said to be “full of blood”.

“

***It's not for humans. Some food is so old it has started to ferment, sweat, rise. The air inside the packet is puffed up. When you break the plastic seal, the smell is very bad.***

”



Sign used during a protest that took place in the CCAC on 2nd May 2023.

Even when the food provided is edible, the quantities are not sufficient to sustain an adult with their needed nutrition intakes:

“

**Wednesday they gave me one piece of bread and an orange in the morning, and nothing else until 1pm. How can this food sustain me until then?**

”

Another respondent compared the food provided in the camp to the food in his country of origin, Sierra Leone:

“

**I am from one of the poorest countries in the world. We are very poor, but the food here is not something we would eat even in my country. The food is better there. Even animals cannot eat this food. How can this food sustain you or take away your hunger?**

”

Additionally, residents of the CCAC are provided with drinking water only once a day, in the morning:

“

**Food, water, shelter should be constant, not something you ration [...] A hungry man is an angry man.**

”

## SECTION 5: HYGIENE

### ***"After I wash in the shower water, my skin is itchy"***

Respondents reported a lack of access to hygiene and cleaning products with two respondents detailing skin reactions to the water supply in the CCAC:

“

***The camp uses water filtration wrong. After I wash in the shower water, my skin is itchy. The water they give us to drink we have to use for brushing teeth, instead of using the camp water.***

”

“

***Water is not good, it is recycled water, because right after showering your body becomes white, and dries. it really impacts your body. You can't use it for cooking. It contains white pieces. Some people cook with it, but when you boil it, it looks horrible.***

”



Moreover, running water is not available throughout the day with it being cut for at least three hours in the afternoon, as well as overnight between 10PM and 8AM. On the water being cut, two respondents explained:

“

***Water is a basic necessity and it should be constant.***

”

“

***If someone is sick, he needs to use the bathroom, he needs water to clean himself, to clean the toilet. They have to control themselves until the next day***

”

Furthermore, hygiene products are given to people only upon arrival to the structure, but once the “welcome package” runs out, they are usually left to buy all supplies they need on their own., This includes soap, toilet paper, menstrual products, and cleaning supplies:

“

***We are not given soap, nothing like that . Not even anything to clean your container. They have a lot of cockroaches. Last time we spoke with the manager he said it was because we didn't clean. But how can we do this? And how can we live without cleaning? They don't give us anything. if we ask them for something, they respond, 'Why don't you go buy it?' It's a bad situation.***

”



Living conditions in the containers are often described by people in the CCAC as overcrowded and unsanitary. Many report severe cockroach infestations. Respondents explained:

“

***“I don't have a broom, a mop, nothing to clean the container.***

”

“

***They [cockroaches] are there everyday. I think I have been bitten by them during the night***

”

Menstrual products are also not provided:

“

***If you need hygiene products, you need to wait for Just Action [local NGO], because they don't give it to you in the camp. When you ask they would say 'its for mothers, its for babies'. Also, there is no soap, it's reserved for mothers, for babies.***

”

## Conclusion

The CCAC consistently falls short of EU human rights standards. As explained by a respondent:



***We are supposed to be given protection, but we are having to beg for food. It's our right to come and seek safety and European protection, food, water, shelter. None of it is given to us by the Greek authorities.***



This disregard for basic human rights caused frustration levels to rise in the structure, leading to protests being held by people in the CCAC. For example, on the 4th of May a letter addressed to the Samos Camp Management was shared by a group calling themselves “Concerned Asylum Seekers of the Samos Camp”. The letter highlighted the reasons behind the protests including being deprived of food and the prison-like environment of the CCAC:



***The food that is supplied to asylum seekers in the camp is not something to write home about, so poor and not enough to sustain us for the day [...] It has also come to our notice that we are like in the prison.***



Together the testimonies from asylum seekers on Samos challenge the narrative that CCACs are a humane and dignified way to accommodate people seeking protection in the EU. As one of the respondents demands:



***We need authorities to close the camp. To close the camp is my suggestion, close this camp and move us to another safe place.***



I Have Rights echoes this demand and calls for the closure of CCACs in Greece and for the accommodation of people seeking safety in dignified community-based housing schemes that respects their freedom of movement and allows them access to services and support.



Researched and written by I Have Rights.

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