



Reasons for Leaving: Refugee Stories from the Greek Island of Samos

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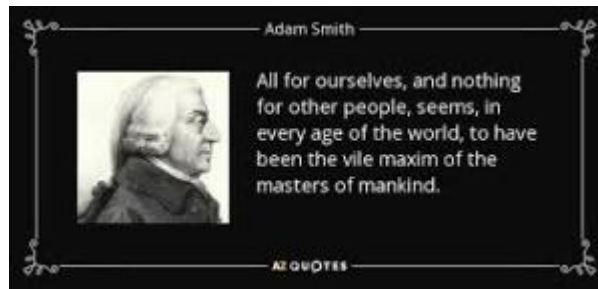
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Last Saturday on a warm early spring day on Samos it was a delight to meet Mamoud whilst he was cutting up broccoli and potatoes ready for the evening meal which was being prepared at the Open Border kitchen at the top side of the Camp. Mamoud, a graduate in English has traveled with five friends from Sialkot which is a Punjabi city close to the Indian border. He thought we might have heard of Sialkot as it is the place where over half of the world's footballs are made. But this was news to us. A quick google search revealed that Sialkot is considered to be one of the more successful and peaceful cities in Pakistan. A large manufacturing base, plenty of jobs and a developed infrastructure including an international airport. This is where Mamoud and his friends lived and from where they left to make an expensive and hazardous journey through Iran and Turkey before the risky night time boat ride to Samos. He arrived 5 days ago after 20 days traveling.

“Corruption” was his spontaneous response to our question as to why he and so many left their homes. He continued by detailing the ways in which everything in his city favoured a wealthy minority leaving the majority to suffer. So he said there were no teachers in their schools and colleges, no doctors in the public hospitals; there was an international airport but this was private and only for business use. Wages were minimal and often not paid in full. Without a personal connection the chances of a decent job were non-existent. Corruption he said was the entire system - no part was untouched. “Of course we don't want to leave our families, friends and home. Who does? But there is no chance for life in Sialkot. If you are not rich and connected you live in a society which is closed off. We are kept out and we are kept down” Mamoud told us.

Living in Samos we know about corruption. We know that this is not some isolated problem but is in fact the system here. It drives and shapes so much of our daily realities. And this is what we hear from nearly all those labelled as ‘economic migrants’ from throughout north and west Africa as well as from Pakistan. All, without exception, identify the corruption of their societies, as the key factor in making them leave. Moreover, in their accounts they highlight how corruption creates societies which subjugate and almost suffocate the majority of the people.

Invariably systemic corruption gives rise to what many Algerians describe as ‘Mafioso politics’ which is violent, unaccountable, arbitrary and immune from any sanction. They witness the extreme robbery of their countries’ rich material resources such as gas in Algeria and oil in Nigeria with no come back for those who steal and yet long prison sentences for the poor who have been caught for the most minor of offences. They daily



experience public hospitals and schools with no resources but see the rich fly out on private planes to get their health care and schooling for kids in Europe and north America. And these systems of deep corruption are usually protected by aggressive state violence through the police, the judiciary and prisons.

These and many other factors combine to make for intolerable societies and especially for the young people who make up such high proportions of their urban populations. Mamoud told us that he thought around 70% of the population of Sialkot was under the age of 30 years. In fact, it is a common feature of nearly all the main sources of 'economic migrants' (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Pakistan) that they come from societies in which over 50% of the population is under 30. And so not surprisingly the overwhelming majority of refugees from these countries are both young and often male. Young women in many of these places due to various conservative social attitudes have few possibilities to leave. This is a big issue for the consequences are enormous for many women. In Sialkot for example, it would seem that young women have been recruited to replace child labour and form a growing part of the super-exploited workers in that city. Here on Samos it is nearly always refugees fleeing war (Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq) who come in family groups of all ages including girls and women.

These young people might live in societies which exclude them and close them out but they are more 'connected' (via the internet) to the world than ever before. However distorted they see other, more seducing possibilities for happiness than is on offer at home, many have friends, family and Facebook friends in Europe who reinforce these messages.

Such 'pull' factors when combined with the push of corruption are what lead young men like Mamoud and his friends to take the road out. And what a road. Some idea of how bad was revealed when Mamoud described the Camp in Samos as the best place they had stayed in since leaving home! They paid to cross Iran crowded 20- 30 at a time in the back of a pick up. Turkey they described as a nightmare with constant beatings from the police and border guards. All of them had been battered in the 12 days they had been in Turkey. Mamoud told us of a group of young Pakistani men they met on the route who had been forced by the Turkish guards on the border with Iran to fight with a group of Afghani refugees to decide who would go through. It became a vicious fight with many injuries. But for the guards it was just sadistic theatre and in the end they let none of them through.

Mamoud's stories are common. We hear many times about the 'hell of Turkey', the endless threat of violence and abuse of all kinds. As one refugee said ' I died a thousand times in Turkey'. Yet Turkey is the country the EU is now turning to in order to control the refugee exodus to Europe. Turkey has now been 'designated' a safe country for refugees by Greece and from the beginning of March there have been buses taking refugees from the closed Detention Centres here back to Turkey. The vast majority to date of the 2-300 who have been returned this month are from north Africa. We heard this week that they are held in an horrendous prison camp on their return to Turkey and told to phone their families in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia to get them to send money for the flight back to their countries. Until

they get the fares they remain incarcerated.

But ignoring the voices and experiences of the refugees is common practice for the authorities in Europe. They are helped in the process by the governments of the refugees which with few exceptions have simply abandoned their citizens to their fate. There will be no protests from Algeria or Morocco about the abuse of their people wherever they might be.

Yet there is almost certainly going to come a time, sooner rather than later, when the refusal to consider the welfare of the refugees is going to blow. Despite all the efforts of the authorities to divide and rule the refugees by offering preferential treatment to some such as the Syrians there have been relatively few outbreaks of violence between the refugees. But they do occur especially in the massively overcrowded and degrading conditions in some of the camps and around Athens and Pireaus and on the borders with Macedonia. What is much more common, but not newsworthy to much of the mainstream press are the solidarities and support systems across the range of refugees without which life would become impossible for some. As Mamoud told us, 'we know that they want to divide us and we hate it. Look at us in this camp, it does not matter where you are from, we all suffer. We are in the same place. We won't fight each other. We won't give them this gift. Anyway', he continued, 'look at Macedonia. Now it is no longer good enough to be a Syrian if you want to pass. If you come from Damascus for example, they refuse you.'

The term 'economic migrant' has been a key weapon in the authorities' war against



refugees. It hides much more than it reveals and those revelations which focus on a singular reality that a better job and wages is all that drives the refugees to places like Europe reflect the lens through which the elites view the world. That is personal gain. It distorts and hides one of the key factors which unites all refugees namely that they are all in one form or another victims of a global system based on greed and pillage to the benefit of a tiny minority at the expense of humanity and our environment. It is system which thrives on wars and weapons, which plunders the wealth of the globe and which has seeded corruption as the mode of governance in their client states. Slicing refugees up into different groups simply masks this truth and more dangerously permits whole groups of people to be treated as if they were outside humanity. On Samos now we see this clearly in the ways in which North African and Pakistani refugees are being randomly arrested and locked in the police cell. Yesterday 10 Pakistanis were arrested and detained. No reason given. Mamoud and his friends are very worried and rightly so. Those arrested are almost certainly going to be forceably deported. They have no lawyers and seemingly no rights.

Yet despite all the difficulties and dangers the sheer determination to get through is what comes over and over again when we speak together. We have not met any refugees who have arrived in the past month who were not aware of the closing of the borders blocking their routes out of Greece. They all knew of the difficulties facing them in Athens and

beyond but nearly all were anxious to get their papers so they could move on from Samos to what we consider as a worse hell. But as Mamoud told us, we will find a way, even though it is likely to be more dangerous, exhausting and expensive.

It is a determination that will make any attempt to remove thousands of refugees currently stuck in Greece back to Turkey very difficult for the authorities. The majority will not cooperate. There is one thing transporting a few bus loads from the closed detention centres in Athens to Turkey but quite another to remove thousands of others; against their will. Sadly, as we see the razor wire fencing being fixed this week around the about to be opened hotspot on Samos we fear that the authorities are preparing for a tough strategy of removal. It is what we have come to expect.

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