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SAMOS — VACCINATION CAMPAIGN CURTAILED BY EXCLUSIONARY TREATMENT OF RESIDENTS IN VATHY REFUGEE CAMP

Everyone should have access to the Covid-19 Vaccine, no exclusion. This applies, of course, to refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people in every circumstance and regardless of their legal status. Vaccination is key to ending the pandemic, which has disproportionately affected those living in camps, yet access to vaccines continues to be incredibly difficult.

This is why, this week, Samos Volunteers and partner NGOs in Samos have decided to step in and support all camp residents that want to - and are allowed to - receive their Covid-19 vaccine. We will support them in booking the appointment through the local pharmacies and drive them to the Health Centre in Karlovassi, approximately 30 km from the Vathy RIC: at the moment, this is the only way they can access the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

The reason why we decided to step in is because, despite all the public statements of success and all the EU funds allocated to cover for the Covid-19 emergency, asylum seekers and refugees are still cut off from accessing this life-saving vaccine as the authorities responsible for the health care of the people confined in the hotspot, have repeatedly failed to provide a sufficient amount of doses to vaccinate all of those interested in the camp.

In June, 100 doses were brought to Samos as part of the vaccination programme for the camp residents. Already on that occasion, the number of people who had expressed interest in getting vaccinated was higher than the availability of doses. Last week, with more people expressing interest and some others still waiting since the month before, 25 doses arrived to the island.

Overall, less than 10% of the necessary doses to vaccinate the camp residents who had expressed an interest were brought to Samos. This meant that, despite fully complying with all necessary requirements and procedures, and after a long wait, around 90 people have been left without this potentially life-saving vaccine.

The official explanation provided is an alleged unavailability of vaccine doses. However, as vaccine doses are clearly still available for the general population, we are left wondering why there is no fair and equal access for the refugee population, who also lack the funds and means to travel to the vaccination centre in Karlovassi - not to mention the actual access to the information on where they can get vaccinated.

Needless to say, Samos Volunteers is not a medical organisation and this initiative does not fit in any of the projects that we run on the island. Yet, with access to vaccines so critical we felt a duty to work with our partners to provide a temporary solution - a solution that is far from ideal, because the appropriate and adequate way to run a vaccination campaign would be to bring the correct quantity of vaccines to the camp, as was in fact promised by the competent authorities. We simply refused to stand by when vaccinations are key to protecting all communities on Samos.

Regardless of all our joint efforts, in the current situation, only people with an AMKA (health care number for residents in Greece) or a PAAYPA (social security card for asylum seekers in Greece) can access the vaccination. This means, furthermore, that people who received a subsequent rejection of their asylum application (after a first instance rejection) are denied any access to healthcare, including COVID vaccines. In the past weeks, for this very reason, a number of camp residents in Samos - as well as other facilities in Greece - have had their cards deactivated and are therefore now completely excluded from any vaccination campaign, despite having already registered to receive their vaccine dose.

The curtailment to healthcare faced by people in the refugee and migrant community in Greece is but one of the many well-known shortcomings of the system in place. This has become even more problematic in the past year and a half, with the new social challenges and health risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

A global public health crisis is only one of the many reasons why in our European Union there should be no place for exclusionary policies and discriminatory treatments.

We therefore call on all the competent authorities to provide access for everyone, including those without status, to vaccines immediately.

