Alexis Tsipras, Visiting Lesbos, Says Greece Cannot Cope With Refugees

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Alexis Tsipras was visiting Lesbos the Greek island which has received the bulk of arrivals and where aid groups condemned living conditions for refugees as dire.

"I think we are battling something which is beyond our abilities, and everyone should understand that," he said, on a visit to a packed migrant registration centre with Martin Schulz, head of the European Parliament.

Cash-strapped Greece has been struggling to handle an influx of hundreds of thousands of migrants fleeing from war and hardship in the Middle East. Aid organisations estimate more than 601,000 have entered Europe through Greece this year.

With at least 430 people having died this year trying to make the short sea crossing along Greece's border with Turkey, Mr Tsipras said it was "imperative" to reach a deal with Ankara to stem the flow.

About 15,000 refugees and migrants were effectively stranded on Lesbos today because a ferry strike had stopped reception centres forwarding arrivals onto the Greek mainland.

"It's an asphyxiating situation," Mr Tsipras said.

International aid agency IRC, which has a unit on Lesbos, said conditions at one main centre were unacceptable and that Greece had struggled for years to cope with far fewer migrants.

At Moria, an army camp converted into a refugee centre, Schulz and Mr Tsipras got a taste of some of the frustration.

"We are here three days. We are hungry. I have two children, my children are sick," one man shouted at Mr Tsipras.

Mr Tsipras patted his arm. "We will do our best."

The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR launched a new funding appeal today, saying it needed $96.15 million in additional support for Greece and affected Balkan countries. Greece has had 5.9 million euros ($6.4 million) in EU aid so far this year.

UNHCR forecasts up to 5,000 arrivals per day from Turkey between now and February. With a recent bout of bad weather, people smugglers have started offering discounts on journeys with flimsy inflatables and charging more for trips on boats.

"We were unfortunate enough to see an improvised dinghy as we were heading in, full of refugees," Mr Tsipras said. "It's criminal."

"It is imperative that we reach an agreement with Turkey to stop the flows by targeting the smugglers."