**Greek Volunteers share UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award**

*The Hellenic Rescue Team and Efi Latsoudi of “PIKPA village” on Lesvos joint winners of humanitarian honour*

A 2,000 strong volunteer sea rescue team, credited with saving thousands of lives during the 2015 refugee crisis, and a passionate human rights activist who provided a safe haven for thousands of the most vulnerable refugees arriving on Greek shores, are the joint 2016 winners of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)’s Nansen Refugee Award.

Konstantinos Mitragas on behalf of the Hellenic Rescue Team (HRT) and Efi Latsoudi from “PIKPA village”, a community-run accommodation area on the Greek island of Lesvos were both chosen for their tireless volunteer work during the 2015 refugee crisis on Greece’s shores: the HRT for their round-the-clock efforts to save refugees and migrants in distress from the sea, and Efi Latsoudi for her compassion and care for the most vulnerable refugees and migrants arriving on the island of Lesvos.

This award recognizes the work of volunteers and the support and assistance provided by people in Europe and around the world last year, and who continue to welcome refugees in their communities and assist with their integration.

Over 850,000 people arrived in Greece by sea in 2015 with more than 500,000 of these arriving on the island of Lesvos. In October 2015, arrivals peaked at more than 10,000 per day, as conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq continued to uproot people from their homes. Sadly, over 270 people died in Greek waters over the year.

Speaking about their nomination for the award, UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi said:

“Hundreds of thousands of people fleeing conflict and persecution last year made the desperate bid to reach Europe in search of safety, many risking their lives in unseaworthy boats and dinghies, in a journey which all too often proved insurmountable.

Both the Hellenic Rescue Team and Efi Latsoudi refused to stand by as they witnessed the dramatic humanitarian situation unfolding on their shores, and are fully deserving of the Nansen Refugee Award. Their efforts characterize the massive public response to the refugee and migrant emergency in Greece and across Europe, in which thousands of people stood in solidarity with those forced to flee, and the humanity and generosity of communities around the world who open their hearts and homes to refugees.”

More than 2,000 volunteers make up the HRT and have been rescuing people from the Aegean Sea and Greek mountains since 1978. In 2015, the volunteers worked 24 hours a day, responding to endless rescue calls in the middle of the night. During this time they undertook 1,035 rescue operations, saving 2,500 lives, and assisted more than 7,000 people to safety.

On Lesvos, PIKPA village provides a safe and welcoming environment on the island for particularly vulnerable refugees including women who had lost their children during the crossing and adults and children with physical disabilities. Efi Latsoudi is one of the volunteers who in 2012 transformed the former children’s summer camp into a refugee haven with the help of local authorities. PIKPA has hosted up to 600 refugees a day, despite a capacity of just 150, and distributed over 2,000 meals each day.

Konstantinos Mitragas, a sea captain and The Hellenic Rescue Team’s (HRT) secretary-general, is a Thessaloniki businessman by trade, he said: “2015 was the most difficult year that we have ever faced as a rescue team. We lived absolute horror. There were many casualties, among them many children, which is the thing that affects you most.”

“I believe it’s something in your heart that moves you and makes you volunteer and I can say our volunteers are heroes. No matter where someone comes from, or their religion, as a rescue organization we have to be there. We have to be united in periods of crisis.”

Efi Latsoudi, a trained psychologist and human rights activist, is a driving force behind PIKPA village, she said: “PIKPA started as a dream – a place where refugees would receive fair and decent treatment. Our idea of PIKPA village is a community of people; volunteers and refugees are part of this community.

“For me supporting refugees is not something exceptional, it’s something that we have to do. I think the reason that Greek and international volunteers come to the island every day has to do with solidarity. I think this is something that comes in our blood. There is a face of Europe that is very human and it’s amazing. It can do miracles and this is a miracle.”

The announcement of this year’s Nansen Refugee Award winners comes at a time when UNHCR is urging the world’s governments to work together and find joint solutions for the current global refugee crisis through its #WithRefugees petition, which currently has over 700,000 signatures.

UNHCR’s Nansen Refugee Award honours extraordinary service to the forcibly displaced, and names Eleanor Roosevelt, Graça Machel and Luciano Pavarotti among its laureates. The 2016 ceremony will be held on 3 October in Geneva, Switzerland. Speakers and performers at the event will include Senegalese singer, Baaba Maal; World Poetry Slam Champion of 2015, Emi Mahmoud; professional dance collaboration, the Grey People, and Lyse Doucet, the BBC’s Chief International Correspondent.

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**Notes to Editors**

**Interview Opportunities**

The Nansen winners are available for embargoed interview by telephone on September 2 and in Athens on September 5. They are also available on September 6 in Athens following the announcement. Please see media contacts below to arrange an interview.

**Media contacts**

For media inquiries and to arrange interview with the 2016 Nansen Award Winners please contact:

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**For photos and b-roll of the Nansen 2016 winners and further case studies, please go to:**

**About UNHCR’s Nansen Refugee Award:**

UNHCR’s Nansen Refugee Award recognizes extraordinary humanitarian work on behalf of refugees, internally displaced or stateless people. The award includes a commemorative medal and a US$100,000 monetary prize. In close consultation with UNHCR, the laureate uses the monetary prize to fund a project that complements their existing work.

**ABOUT THE #WITHREFUGEES CAMPAIGN**

The #WithRefugees Campaign and its petition aim to build public empathy and support for refugees and asks governments to act with shared responsibility for people forced to flee their homes. The petition asks specifically asks governments to make sure: every refugee child gets an education,  every refugee family has somewhere safe to live and every refugee can work or learn new skills to make a positive contribution to their community. The #WithRefugees petition will be delivered to UN headquarters in New York on September 16 ahead of the UN Global Summit on Refugees and Migrants, scheduled for the 19th September.

The petition can be signed at [www.withrefugees.org](http://www.withrefugees.org).

**About UNHCR:**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was established on December 14, 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. UNHCR safeguards the rights and well-being of refugees and stateless people. In more than six decades, the agency has helped tens of millions of people restart their lives. UNHCR is on the front lines of the world’s major humanitarian crises, including Syria, Iraq, Central African Republic, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and countless other emergencies.