

# Many Greeks losing homes

[Greece, from A1] clothes and you smell like 55 pigs? It's not like that anymore."

Greece is seeking to pull itself out of a financial quicksand. Talks between the country's ruling Syriza party and European creditors to release more than \$8 billion in bailout funds collapsed Sunday night. Shortly afterward, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras released a harshly worded statement that accused creditors of "pillaging" his country.

On Friday, Tsipras visited an economic forum in Russia and suggested that his country is "not afraid of heading to new seas and reaching new harbors."

The remarks suggest that a fundamental gap exists between the two sides over austerity measures — and, with a major payment to the International Monetary Fund looming, make default and a Greek exit from the Eurozone seem more likely than they were even a few weeks ago.

In response to the growing possibility of a run on banks, the European Central Bank on Friday increased its level of emergency liquidity.

Tsipras has also held out the possibility of a closer alliance with Russia. At the forum, he closed a pipeline deal with Moscow, viewed as a means of both giving Greece more economic options and increasing its leverage with European creditors, who have not taken kindly to the alliance.

But even as the toll of the crisis can be felt from the Mediterranean to the Macedonian border, few consequences are as insidious as the sudden emergence of scores of citizens without a place to live.

Estimates vary, but some experts peg the number of new homeless as high as 20,000. Moreover, nearly 20% of Greeks no longer have enough money to cover daily food expenses, according to a recent study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The nation's unemployment rate is 26%, the highest among 28 European Union members.

At Athens' many apartment buildings, stories are rampant of people delinquent on so many months of rent that they simply leave behind keys and furniture, sneaking out in the middle of the night.

Until five years ago, it was hard to imagine masses of people living on the streets here; homelessness was so negligible that no one even bothered to measure. At the time, this was a strong welfare state with a rich tradition of family bonds. But austerity has eroded the former, and economic recession has frayed the latter.

The crisis has played out in a kind of domino effect. What might begin as a hard-



**A HOMELESS MAN** reads a newspaper in Athens. Some peg the number of new homeless as high as 20,000. Greece's unemployment rate is 26%, the EU's highest.

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— ROMAN GERODIMOS, Expert on modern Greek society at Bournemouth University, England

luck case or two soon cascades through families and social groups. At some point there are too few roofs for too many relatives or friends.

Maria Gadov, the only child of a longtime Athens family, inherited her parents' export business. Her future seemed bright as she studied English at a University of Michigan satellite campus here.

But as Greece's economy deteriorated, so did the export sector. (Because of the euro common currency, analysts say, costs are often too high in Greece for exports to be profitable.) Her business went belly up.

Gadov, now 46, found kitchen work at a summer camp, along with a few other odd jobs. Soon those evaporated too, and she couldn't pay her rent. A friend took her in, but before long the friend lost her job and apartment. By the end of 2013, Gadov was out on the street.

"The shelter gives us food and a place to sleep, but I worry if next month will keep looking like this, or next year," she said. "But at least I'm not terrified like I was at the beginning. I know I will not die being homeless."

Wholesale migration out of apartments and into shelters is not common even in recession-struck countries.

But what experts say is also notable about the newly homeless in Greece is that many have lengthy work histories and none of the addiction or mental health issues often associated with living on the streets.

"What we're seeing is the wiping out of a lower-middle class, or a former lower-middle class," said Roman Gerodimos, an expert on modern Greek society at Bournemouth University in England. "And we're so in the middle of it we can't even know what it's going to mean, both for them and for society as a whole."

The issue has created a new cultural mind-set in which poverty is an omnipresent reality and a pervasive fear.

"I see myself in them," said Christos Alefantis, a journalist who founded the street paper Shedia, describing the publication's sales force. "Take away two or three paychecks and they're me, they're so many of us."

Shedia — the name translates as "raft" — comes out monthly and chronicles Athens life. Its vendors are allowed to keep half of the \$3.50 price for each copy sold.

Over time, the number of homeless seeking to sell Shedia rose far beyond the publication's needs. There is now an application and selection process for the positions.

Under pressure from European creditors to cut expenditures, the Greek government has not provided the safety net its citizens once could rely on. A national program to move some of the displaced back into their homes via a stipend of a few hundred euros monthly has faltered, and many of those selected last year say they have not received the money.

Instead, municipalities and community groups have stepped in, creating soup kitchens and shelters.

Lambros Moustakis, a large man with a jovial manner, lives in one such shelter, the Hotel Ionis, where Samolis and Gadov also reside.

A receptionist for more than 30 years, Moustakis found himself out of a job in 2010 when the hotel chain he worked for closed many of its properties. His savings dwindled, and eviction followed. He spent his first night on the street sleeping in a central Athens square next to his suitcases.

"I just prayed to God, because I didn't know what else to do," he said. "I didn't know what it was not to work. I didn't know what it meant not to have a place to go at the end of the day." He soon found a space at a homeless shelter, one of the country's first.

For all the challenges, many of those who find themselves struggling show little self-pity. Some even engage in a form of gallows humor. Shelters have started theater groups; the terror of the early days has settled into a kind of bearable reality.

"You have to spend your time thinking about the good side, because the bad side is too terrible," Gadov said.

Moustakis said it can be difficult to keep his spirits up.

"What makes me really depressed is when I see all these people come in," he said. "Every day, every week, every month. ... It never seems to stop."

Asked what keeps him going, Moustakis paused. "The idea that one day, I'll be back, with a key, in my own apartment. That's the dream," he said.

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