

Disaster hits Greek fishermen who saved refugees

Extreme weather ruins small fishing boats which saved many lives during 2015 refugee crisis

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File Photo

By Evgenia Choros

ATHENS

Kostas Pinteris and Thanasis Marmarinos are not just two traditional fishermen from a small Greek fishing village. They are among the fishermen and residents of Skala Sikamias, Lesbos Island, who used their small fleet to rescue thousands of refugees and migrants from the Aegean Sea in 2015.

However, Kostas and Thanasis now face hard times of their own as their fishing boats -- which saved so many lives -- were unable to withstand extreme winter storms that struck Greece earlier this month.

Lesbos attracted attention recently when the international community reacted to footage showing hundreds of people living in tents under freezing temperatures.

There were accusations for unpreparedness to deal with such a situation, despite forecasts which predicted severe weather conditions.

But not even the locals could prepare sufficiently for such weather.

"Who could have expected that? I am 63 years old and this is the first time I've seen so much snow," Thanasis told Anadolu Agency.

He is one of the fishermen from Skala Sikamias who rescued many refugees and migrants during the 2015 crisis.

Located close to Turkey, the small village of no more than 100 residents received thousands of refugees and migrants who sought a new life in Europe.

Along with Kostas Pinteris and several other fishermen from Skala Sikamias, Thanasis used his fishing boat to pull refugees from half-deflated craft and take them to shore. Once they were safe on dry land, the residents would offer them food and clothing.

"If it wasn't for us, especially from here [Skala Sikamias], we would now be mourning thousands of drowned people," Thanasis says. "This is what we did for five months. The NGOs and volunteers came afterwards. We used to pull [refugees] out; the villagers gave them clothes," he added.

"We emptied the tools from our boats because they're small, in order to fit in as many people as possible," says 40-year-old Kostas Pinteris.

"Even if you didn't want to help, when you see someone drowning you just reach out your hand to help him, whoever that person is. We made no exceptions -- whoever was in need we rescued them. Instead of fishing for fish, we fished for souls," Kostas told Anadolu Agency.

"I saw them in the sea and rushed to save as many people as possible," he recalls. "I tried to catch as many small hands as possible," explaining how he gave priority to women and children.

Thanasis has been a fisherman for almost 50 years. As soon as he finished school, he started to fish for a living like most of the people from Skala Sikamias. His only source of income for his family was his small boat Ai Nikolas (St. Nikolas). Now, he is unable to work.

When the snow covered the island, his moored boat -- despite being covered with a protective tent -- capsized under the weight of the snowfall.

Its electronic equipment and fishing tools were ruined. According to Thanasis, all that is left from his boat is the hull -- the rest is now useless.

"This is double damage for us because we are also losing money as we are not out there doing our job," says Kostas, whose boat suffered the same fate.

Neither man was insured. When they asked the authorities for help, they were told that because the incident was so exceptional there was no compensation available.

The two fishermen estimate that depending on the equipment that they have to buy and fix, the cost of the damage is over €10,000 (\$10,700).

Until something is done for the boats, the two fishermen will have to get by with the help of others.

- International recognition

Amid the fishermen's bad luck, an important distinction for the island has come which could make the future a bit better for them.

On Jan. 31, the mayor of Lesbos, Spyros Galinos, will travel to Stockholm, Sweden to share the Olof Palme Prize -- an international peace award -- along with the mayor of Lampedusa and Linosa, Giusi Nicolini.

The two Greek mayors will accept the award for "their inspiring leadership in one of the most difficult periods of our time" according to an official announcement.

Since the award consists of a diploma and a substantial stipend, the mayor of Lesbos has promised that he will distribute the prize money to the people of Lesbos, giving priority to the two fishermen from Skala Sikamias.

"There was a collective effort on the island to defend the values of freedom, democracy and solidarity to the people in need," Spyros Galinos told Anadolu Agency. "During that bad time, the people of Lesbos were given the opportunity to not only defend their values but also the European values that unfortunately other countries have forsaken," he added.

An award nomination is not something new for the island, as two locals from Skala Sikamias -- 85-year-old Emilia Kamvysi and 40-year-old fisherman Stratis Valiamos -- were chosen to be nominated in 2016 for the Nobel Peace Prize.






Skala Sykamias was also recently recommended as a top tourist destination for 2017 by the magazine AFAR7, in an effort to boost the village's local economy.



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