

Troops fire on refugees trying to enter Macedonia

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Macedonian soldiers and police opened fire Friday on thousands of refugees crowded at a border crossing, leaving several people wounded. The violence came one day after the government in Skopje declared a state of emergency and rushed troops to the country's border with Greece to stem the flow of refugees seeking to cross the Balkans into northern Europe.

After sealing the border with razor wire, the Macedonian security forces, backed by armored vehicles, fired tear gas, stun grenades and plastic bullets into the crowd, which included many women and children. Police using batons and shields beat a number of the refugees.

Unrest among the refugees increased after Macedonian authorities announced that they would allow "a limited number of illegal migrants in vulnerable categories" to cross the border and let in a few hundred refugees, consisting largely of families with children and pregnant women.

The move intensified demands from the rest of the refugees, who have been trapped in a no-man's-land along the border, sleeping outside in the cold and damp, without food or shelter.

Macedonian Interior Ministry spokesman Ivo Kotevsky defended the vicious assault on the defenseless refugees, declaring that the troops and police were "standing on our territory and defending the border." The aim, he added, was to "reduce illegal border entry to a minimum."

The Macedonian government, the spokesman said, was treating the refugees "according to our capacity," adding that the European Union must do more to assist with what is a "global problem."

The hardline policy against refugees adopted by the rightwing government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski is widely seen as an attempt to create a

diversion from the growing popular uproar over a massive wiretapping scandal and endemic corruption, in advance of an upcoming election.

The violence against the refugees drew condemnation from human rights groups, which charged that the actions of Macedonia were in violation of international law.

"The Macedonian authorities are responding as if they were dealing with rioters rather than refugees who have fled conflict and persecution," said Amnesty International's Europe deputy director Gauri van Gulik.

"All countries have a duty to protect those fleeing conflict and persecution, and Macedonia is no exception," van Gulik added. "When the system cannot cope, you improve the system, you don't just stop people from coming in."

The United Nations agency for refugees issued a statement declaring that it "is particularly worried about the thousands of vulnerable refugees and migrants, especially women and children, now massed on the Greek side of the border amid deteriorating conditions."

Many of the refugees are fleeing the death and destruction caused by imperialist interventions in the Middle East. Of the 42,000 refugees registered as traveling through Macedonia over the past month—double the number of the month before—more than half were from Syria, where the Western-backed war for regime change has driven some four million people out of the country.

Outside the Macedonian border crossing, several people held up signs reading, "Help us, Syria."

"We are very angry because the police had told us they would let us through today. We are not animals," Jad, a 25-year-old Syrian, told AFP.

Jacob, also Syrian, told the news agency, “We are hunted in Syria because we are Christian. They wanted to kill us. Why won’t they let us through here?” he asked.

Macedonia is only the latest flashpoint in the campaign of repressive measures being unleashed against refugees across Europe. The Syriza government in Greece has behaved similarly, sending riot police to deal with desperate refugees who have crossed the Mediterranean to Greek islands from Turkey and seeking to drive them out of the country.

Hungary, the EU country bordering the Balkans, has begun building a four-meter-high fence to block refugees from entering from Serbia. Britain, meanwhile, has beefed up security at the French port of Calais to block refugees trying to cross from France.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande are set to meet in Berlin on Monday for a discussion on the refugee issue. In preparation for the meeting, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere and his French counterpart Bernard Cazeneuve held a news conference on Thursday in Berlin calling for a stepped-up and coordinated response to the rising flow of refugees.

“It’s unacceptable for European institutions to continue working at the pace they are currently operating at,” said de Maiziere. He said that he and the French interior minister had agreed that the EU should assist Italy and Greece in setting up “waiting areas” for imprisoning refugees. He also called upon the EU Commission to pressure countries bordering the EU to take back refugees denied asylum and expelled from EU countries.

A spokeswoman for the European Commission responded to Maiziere’s criticism by telling reporters in Brussels that the problem was not with the EU, but rather with its member governments, which have failed to support existing plans for dealing with the issue.

“The proposals are all on the table,” said the spokeswoman, Annika Breidthardt. “It’s time that member states adopted them.”

“We can only succeed if we work together on this, not against each other,” she added.

With the drive to create a “fortress Europe” to keep the refugees out, the national conflicts between the various European powers are intensifying, with increasingly bitter recriminations over differing refugee

policies as well as over the number of refugees being accepted by each country.

Within this context, rightwing and neofascist elements are waging an increasingly violent campaign against refugees and immigrants, while leading bourgeois politicians in a number of countries are calling for the scrapping of the Schengen Agreement, which allows visa-free travel across the EU.



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