

Refugee crisis deepens across central Europe

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With Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, taking the lead, the European Union (EU) and its constituent states are adopting an increasingly repressive approach to the growing number of refugees fleeing to the EU from Syria and other war-torn countries in the Middle East and Africa.

Hungary is the entry point for the so-called Schengen Area of 26 EU countries that permit free travel across their internal borders. Nearly 150,000 refugees have crossed into Hungary from Serbia this year, according to records kept by the defense ministry, the bulk of them from Syria.

Defense Minister Csaba Hende said Tuesday that up to 3,500 soldiers could be sent to the Serbian border to deal with the influx of migrants, under terms of legislation being debated in parliament, to take effect September 15. A vote is scheduled for Friday.

The laws would also make it a felony to cut through the four-meter-high border fence just completed along the Serbian border, or to enter Hungary anywhere except at official border posts.

Hende claimed that troops would not use firearms against unarmed migrants, but he did not rule out other forms of force, including truncheons, tear gas and other anti-riot weapons.

He was speaking after the mobilization of police in Budapest, the capital, to force refugees away from the main railway station, including those who had already purchased train tickets for Austria, Germany and other destinations further west and north in the EU.

The Hungarian authorities had been refusing to allow immigrants to travel by train out of Budapest, but lifted the blockade on Monday, with at least six trainloads packed with more than a thousand migrants leaving the downtown Keleti station.

On Tuesday morning, police intervened to shut down all train traffic, clear the refugees out of the main courtyard of the station, then reopen the facility to non-

refugee traffic only. The Budapest police chief announced new controls in the capital city for the next seven days, with regular document checks and vehicle searches.

Prime Minister Orbán is seeking to rally support for his hard-line position on migration, meeting with EU leaders in Brussels Thursday and then with the so-called Visegrad Four (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic) in Prague Friday, the Hungarian news agency MTI reported.

The Visegrad Four have rejected quotas for accepting any portion of the estimated 800,000 migrants now fleeing the Middle East and North Africa for Europe.

Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico denounced any effort to place immigrants in Slovakia, in openly racist terms. "We strongly reject any quotas," he told reporters in Bratislava, the capital. "We will wake up one day and have 100,000 people from the Arab world, and that is a problem I would not like Slovakia to have."

British home secretary Theresa May said on the weekend that she wanted not only to eliminate illegal immigration but to cut back legal migration from other EU member states as well.

Meeting in Paris Sunday, May, French interior minister Bernard Cazeneuve and German interior minister Thomas de Maizière issued a joint statement calling for immediate action to stem the flow of migrants. This would include the creation of "hot spots" in Italy and Greece, essentially detention zones where migrants would be penned in and registered.

In response to this declaration, the EU is convening a meeting of the interior and justice ministers of all 28 member states on September 14 to discuss the crisis.

German chancellor Angela Merkel, while taking a softer line rhetorically, is pressing the other EU member states to take a much larger share of the growing wave of migrants. Germany and Sweden

received half of all migrants into the EU last year.

On Monday, Merkel denied press reports that the German government was dropping enforcement of the Dublin rules, which require that migrants be registered and processed by the first country in the EU that they enter, for refugees from Syria. Strict application of the Dublin rules would allow countries in the interior of the EU, like Germany, to send most migrants back to the EU border countries like Hungary.

Germany and Austria have complained to the EU that border countries have failed to register immigrants, instead simply sending them further on, as Hungary did Monday with the trainloads of refugees sent to Vienna and Munich.

While the various governments discuss repressive measures or offloading the responsibility for migrants on each other, the response among ordinary people along the path of migration has been far different.

Most notable was a Monday evening rally in Vienna, attended by a reported 20,000 people, in sympathy with the refugees. Marchers carried banners with slogans like “No Person is Illegal” and “Human Rights are Borderless.”

The rally followed a memorial service in Vienna’s cathedral for the 71 refugees found dead last Thursday in an abandoned freight truck on the highway between Budapest and Vienna. This event has profoundly shocked popular opinion in Austria.

Press reports cited thousands of people gathering at the Vienna train station Monday to greet the arriving trainloads of refugees, applauding and chanting, “Refugees are welcome here,” and holding a banner with the slogan, “Refugees Welcome—Open Borders.”

According to the account in the *New York Times*, “The Viennese who assembled to greet the newcomers brought shopping carts and boxes full of bottled water, bread, diapers, cookies, fruit and candy.”

Social worker Marlene Pramhas and several friends brought loaves of bread for the migrants. She told the *Times*, “They have been traveling so long and must be very hungry and they have been treated so shabbily. We felt we had to do something. It’s a small thing but maybe it will help.”

There were similar scenes in Munich, the capital of Bavaria in southern Germany, where about 2,500 refugees arrived on trains from Budapest during the course of one day. Munich residents brought drinks,

food and baby products to the train station.

In Budapest itself, despite the official crackdown, a pro-immigrant group, Migration Aid, called for a silent demonstration at the railway station for Wednesday night, to protest the government’s “demonizing” of refugees. The protest, given the title, “Not in My Name,” was directed against the mobilization of soldiers and other repressive measures against migrants.



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