

Refugees in Europe confront catastrophic conditions

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The mistreatment of refugees in the European Union is taking on ever more alarming dimensions. Thousands have been left waiting outside in heavy rains and mud with no shelter; sleeping in open fields, parks or train stations; waiting desperately behind barbed wire fences and at ferry docks; and surrounded by baton-wielding police who attack them with stun grenades and tear gas. This brutal reality stands in sharp contrast to the hypocritical declarations of Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, or German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Throughout Europe, there has been a wave of generosity and support for refugees among the population, beginning in Greece and extending through Serbia and Hungary, where people who often have very little to live on themselves still share what they have. In Hungary, they even risk prosecution for aiding illegal entry. In Germany, volunteers care for refugees and have made numerous donations.

In complete contrast, European governments and security agencies are bullying and harassing refugees wherever they can and doing everything possible to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

Hungary

A disturbing video from the registration camp of Röszke on the Hungarian-Serbian border highlights the inhumane treatment of refugees. In the video, police throw water bottles and bread to refugees who are caged behind fences like animals. Desperate people with arms outstretched try to get hold of the miserable packages of food. It is a scene that resembles feeding time at a zoo more than a food distribution at a refugee camp in the wealthy European Union.

Peter Bouckaert, crisis coordinator with Human Rights Watch, described the conditions in the reception camp: “The detainees at Röszke are held in filthy, overcrowded conditions, hungry, and lacking medical care.” His organization received a limited tour of the camp from Hungarian authorities and questioned some of the refugees.

The sleeping quarters in the tents are not nearly large enough for the refugees. They get neither enough to eat nor clean drinking water. Mothers who inquire about water for their babies are instructed to use dirty water. Children, constantly vomiting and suffering from high fevers, go without medical care. Two refugees told Human Rights Watch that the kinds of conditions that prevailed there “were made only for animals.”

Recently, around three or four thousand refugees have been picked

up each day at the Hungarian-Serbian border and brought to the camp with no end to the flow of people in sight. On Tuesday, a new law will take effect in Hungary that criminalizes illegal entry. Refugees will be threatened with imprisonment and deportation to Serbia.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his chancellery minister Janos Lazar have repeated for weeks that on September 15, “a new era” in the treatment of refugees will begin. A 60 meter-wide “transit zone” will be established which will be formally considered neither Hungarian nor European territory, but will be treated in a similar way as transit zones in airports. There, asylum applications will be processed in eight-day rush procedures. Only refugees who receive protection status will be permitted entry into Hungary, while the great majority will be mercilessly deported back to Serbia. The planned measures are in flagrant violation of Geneva Conventions concerning refugees, according to which no refugee may simply be refused entry at the border.

In order to prevent a mass escape from the transit zone, the army will be positioned at the border. On Wednesday, military exercises began under the telling name “Decisive Action.” General Tibor Benko explained to the television station *M1 Channel*, “It is our task to make sure that Hungary is defended.” There will be two or three soldiers for every border police officer. For the time being, no firing orders have been given. Protesting refugees are to be suppressed with water cannons, tear gas and stun grenades along with police truncheons. But the direction in which an increasing militarization of the European border is leading is more than clear, especially as Bulgarian and Czech military detachments have been called to the borders to repel refugees by force.

Hungary is certainly not alone in the European Union in its hardline attitude toward refugees, notwithstanding all the public assurances of EU officials that border fences and barbed wire will be avoided.

In Greece, the EU has taken on the greater part of the cost of border fences with Turkey, as well as Bulgaria. The Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla will be surrounded by a retaining system of several fences at which immigrants will die or be severely injured. Whoever makes it over the fence will meet with the abuse of Spanish border police and hired Moroccan thugs. Neither the European Union nor any European government has taken exception to these barbaric acts.

At a meeting on Friday, the Visegrad Group, consisting of the governments of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, once more reaffirmed their hostile attitude toward taking in refugees in general and toward Juncker’s proposed plan to divide up 160,000 refugees among EU member states according to a quota system in particular.

“We’re convinced that as countries we should keep control over the

number of those we are able to accept and then offer them support,” declared Czech foreign minister Lubomir Zaoralek during a press conference in Prague.

In Germany the tone toward refugees within the federal government is also growing sharper. Hans-Peter Friedrich, second in command of the Christian Social Union’s (CSU) parliamentary fraction, called the taking in of refugees an “unprecedented mistake with devastating long-term effects.”

He warned explicitly of “illegal immigrant IS fighters” among refugees. The Bavarian premier has pointedly invited the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban to a meeting of the CSU state faction. A number of German newspapers with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to the fore are also agitating against the refugees under the motto: “Eastern Europe is right [to exclude refugees].”

Greece

While the European governments further ensnare themselves in their conflict over the reception of refugees, the trail of refugees continues unimpeded despite heavy rains. Dozens of refugee boats from the war zones of Syria and Iraq land on the Greek islands of Kos and Lesbos each day. Without the support of the native population, they would have almost no chance to survive there, as they get neither food nor shelter from the Greek authorities. Tents are spread out everywhere and there are practically no sanitary facilities for refugees who hope to catch a ferry to the mainland as soon as possible.

Only last week, EU commissioner Dimitri Avramopoulos and European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans visited Greece to get an overview of the camps. Rather than speeding up aid for the care of tens of thousands of refugees stranded in Greece, they only organized a “Hotspot,” a huge internment camp for refugees in which they will be registered and screened. The European border protection agency Frontex will process its asylum seekers and at the same time have a mandate for the quick deportation of refugees back to their countries of origin.

The European Commission has already granted the Greek government 475 million euros this year, though the bulk of the money was used not for the urgently needed care of refugees, but for the building up of border protections. The list of acquired materials includes drones, patrol vessels, cars with infrared cameras and biometric surveillance systems, all for the implementation of Frontex operations.

In recent days, as many as 7,000 refugees at a time have crossed the border into Macedonia. Despite drastically worsening weather conditions, they are forced to sleep under the open sky. The Macedonian government is now also considering the building of a fence on the border with Greece to hold back refugees. In an interview with the Hungarian weekly *Figyelo*, Macedonian Foreign Minister Nikola Popolski said that Macedonians also needed “some kind of a physical defense,” adding that “if we take seriously what Europe is asking us to do, we will need that, too. Either soldiers or a fence or a combination of the two.”

Germany

In Germany, Chancellor Merkel takes selfies with refugees at a processing point in Berlin-Spandau, while the government is working to escalate their harassment. The residence requirement will be introduced nationwide and extended, under which payments for collection centers will be largely removed and replaced with benefits in kind. Furthermore, detention in the collection centers will be raised from three to six months.

The situation in refugee camps is also worsening in Germany. This is not only because approximately 40,000 refugees arrived in Germany in the last week alone, but above all because the government’s refugee provisions have been delayed for months, and along with that, a deliberately planned organizational chaos has been created. Since the beginning of the year, the federal agency for immigration and refugees, which is subordinated to the interior ministry, presented detailed numbers that accounted for a much higher influx of refugees than the 400,000 that has been repeated like a mantra for months.

The consequence is the complete and intolerable overcrowding of processing points in every state, city and municipality. The situation in Berlin is especially dramatic, but also in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where district administrator Rolf Christiansen, responsible for the processing camp near Rostock, criticized the inhumane conditions of the camp to the *Schweriner Volkszeitung*: “The conditions there are unworthy of our country and this has gone on for weeks. Hundreds of people have to camp out at night, the provisions don’t work, no one checks on it, the camp is overcrowded.”

In Lower Saxony, there are too few sleeping places in the camps in Friedland and Bramsche and a weeklong wait time for refugees before they can even register as asylum seekers, according to the local refugee council. What life is like in a processing camp is clearly illustrated in a video by SWR3 journalist Alena Jabarine, who filmed undercover for several days in a refugee camp in Hamburg. In every free corner, people sleep on the bare floor. There are not enough toilets or washing facilities. Refugees go weeks without knowing what will happen to them, but are not allowed to leave the camp.



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