

Hungarian border police fire tear gas and water cannon at refugees

Chris Marsden
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Hungarian police used tear gas and water cannon Wednesday in an unprovoked attack on hundreds of refugees seeking access to Europe.

The excuse offered was that some in the crowd had thrown plastic water bottles at the police, injuring no one. Later this was upgraded to accusations of stone-throwing and “aggression” that allegedly injured 20 officers. In reality, the stone-throwing occurred after the police attack.

There were also claims of an “attempted breakthrough” in the 4-metre-high border fence, which is topped with razor wire. The fence was fully sealed on Monday.

James Reynolds of the BBC gave a revealing account of what took place. He wrote: “For more than an hour, in the afternoon heat, a group of migrants and refugees stood inches from a line of Hungarian riot police at the border gate. A water cannon stood behind the police. ‘Open the gate, open the gate,’ the group shouted...

“Several people began to throw empty water bottles towards the Hungarian line. Minutes later, riot police fired tear gas canisters in unison. The crowd ran backwards, nearly knocking over tents. I ran back with the crowd, with the sting of tear gas in my eyes. Several refugees pointed me towards a father carrying a baby—both had been caught up in the tear gas... From the back, we watched the Hungarian police fire water cannon...”

Television reports showed the very real injuries sustained by asylum seekers, with pictures of ambulances arriving on the Serbian side of the border after the firing of tear gas and water cannon led to a stampede of refugees seeking safety. Many, including children, suffered from the impact of tear gas.

Protesters, mainly young men, were filmed facing off against police and pouring water over their eyes and

covering their faces. People received medical treatment from the Serbian ambulance service. Two children were injured in the clashes after they were thrown over the security fence, an adviser to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said on TV.

The clash occurred at a border crossing between the Hungarian town of Röszke and Horgos in Serbia, one of the main frontier crossings in the European Union. Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said he had demanded that Serbia act against migrants who “attacked” police on the border. “Police are taking lawful and proportionate measures to protect the Hungarian state border and the external frontier of the European Union,” the government declared in a statement.

While Serbia has protested the firing of tear gas into its territory, Hungary has ordered the border crossing with Serbia to be suspended for 30 days.

A reported 373 people, including 73 children, entered Croatia from Serbia after the Hungarian border fence closure. The *Guardian* reported that mine cleaners had been despatched to the Croatian frontier “amid concerns that refugees may inadvertently stray” into “minefields left over from Croatia’s 1991-95 war.”

Hungary boasted of a drop in migrants entering the country from 9,380 on Monday to 366 on Tuesday. That day, it declared a crisis in two southern counties, stating that the border zone there would be extended to 60 meters from 10 meters to accommodate the expected swell of refugees trapped there. Orbán told Austria’s *Die Presse* that Hungary would now build a fence along parts of its border with Croatia.

The brutal treatment of refugees has been documented by aid agencies as well as reporters. The *Guardian* cited Muntada Aid official Kabir Miah explaining, “What we witnessed at Röszke shocked us.

We saw women, children, babies and elderly people being herded into an open field where they were kept for days without shelter, exposed to the cold and rain.

“On Monday night it was raining and the refugees burned anything they could find, including wet blankets, to keep themselves warm. Children were suffering asthma attacks from inhaling the smoke. Diabetics were having fits as no insulin was available. One person was coughing blood. There were no doctors.”

Miah explained that the largely Muslim refugees were repeatedly and over several days offered only pork salami sandwiches to eat by police, despite repeated appeals and protests.

Zahir Habbal, a 29-year-old Syrian, told of how his request for asylum was summarily denied after a few perfunctory questions. He was one of just 16 or so applicants whose appeals were “heard” Tuesday, with all of them “turned down in a maximum 20 minutes.”

The suffering is underscored by a report by Germany’s chamber of psychotherapists that half of those refugees who have made it to Germany are suffering from “psychological illness” such as post-traumatic stress disorder, including one in five children. “Forty percent have already had suicidal thoughts or have even attempted to kill themselves,” the organisation reported.

Whatever official criticisms are levelled against Hungary, all of the major European powers are responding in a similarly brutal fashion. Both Britain and Germany have sent troops to the Mediterranean to clamp down on people smugglers. The UK’s Royal Navy frigate, HMS Richmond, is to take part in a blockade-style naval operation, described as a “more aggressive” phase two of a European Union initiative.

Austria has closed its border with Hungary, while the Austrian rail operator EBB yesterday suspended its service between Salzburg and Germany. This was done under instructions from the Merkel government in Berlin, which has closed its borders with Austria and the Czech Republic and sent hundreds of border guards to Bavaria to stop refugees crossing.

British Home Secretary Theresa May told Parliament Monday that the government was opposed to any European Union-wide quota system for taking in refugees and relocating “120,000 people already in Europe.” She supported the creation of “screening

centres” in refugee “hotspots”—a de facto endorsement of the measures put into practice by Hungary. “Claiming asylum must not be viewed as an easy means of resettlement in Europe,” she insisted.



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