

Eight refugees killed by European border guards

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In recent days, a total of eight refugees have been killed in two separate incidents by border guards at the European Union's external border with Turkey.

The EU has responded to the influx of refugees fleeing war and violence in the Middle East by seeking to make its borders impenetrable. It has erected fences, expanded the border police, and provided them with military hardware. Although up to now there has been no order to shoot, refugees are being killed by border police in increasing numbers.

Last week, a border police officer shot dead an Afghan refugee at the Bulgarian-Turkish border near the southeastern Bulgarian town of Sredets. The man had tried to enter Bulgaria from Turkey together with some 50 other refugees. The group was discovered by Bulgarian border guards and, according to the Bulgarian Interior Ministry, did not obey the order to immediately turn back. As a result, a border guard fired warning shots, with a ricochet allegedly hitting the man in the neck, fatally injuring him.

However, it is questionable how a warning shot, which is usually fired up in the air, could ricochet in such a manner that it struck someone. According to the Interior Ministry Chief of Staff Georgi Kostov, none of the refugees were armed. Nevertheless, all of the men were detained for illegal entry.

For years, human rights organizations have denounced the inhumane treatment meted out to refugees by the Bulgarian authorities. They not only deny refugees a fair asylum procedure, but also fail to provide any sort of social assistance. If refugees are not arrested immediately, they are forced to live in inhuman conditions, without food or access to medical care. Nevertheless, refugees continue to be sent back to Bulgaria from other EU countries under the Dublin Agreement.

On Thursday, a refugee boat sank off the Greek island of Lesbos after it was rammed by a Greek coast guard ship. Seven refugees, including four children and a baby, were drowned and 31 others were rescued from the sea.

Greek harbour police said the boat had suddenly changed course and tried to escape. As a result, the small wooden boat collided with the 30-metre coast guard vessel. A photographer from Agence France-Presse (AFP) said he saw the refugee boat sink within two to three minutes.

On Wednesday, three refugees, a woman, a young girl and a baby, drowned when their boat capsized off the island of Lesbos.

As the number of refugees trying to cross the Aegean to Europe has increased, so has the death toll. At least 234 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean off the Greek coast since the beginning of the year, more than three times as many as last year, when "only" 73 refugees died attempting the crossing. In total, 450,000 refugees have arrived in Greece this year.

While the EU has handed over hundreds of millions of euros to the Greek government for securing its borders, including the establishment of a border fence on the land border with Turkey, the refugees on Lesbos are largely left to fend for themselves.

Every day, up to 4,000 refugees arrive on the Aegean island. Once on dry land, they have to walk from the coast to the island's capital of Mytilene, 70 kilometres away.

The UNHCR refugee agency has provided tents for a makeshift refugee camp near the registration centre in Moria, but hygiene conditions there are catastrophic. Many refugees still have to sleep in the open air, and many do not even have a blanket to lie on. "It is appalling to see how sick and disabled children must lie

in the dirt, with flies buzzing around their eyes,” said Eva Cossé of Human Rights Watch.

The refugees receive neither food nor water from the Greek authorities; aid agencies only manage to provide them with food irregularly. In most cases, refugees have to buy bread and water at market prices at nearby kiosks and shops.

Then they have to wait for days to be registered and receive provisional travel documents providing the opportunity to leave the island for the mainland. This has repeatedly resulted in violent clashes with the Greek police, which controls access to the registration centre. Refugees have to wait behind barbed wire to be let in.

On October 4, Human Rights Watch observers witnessed Greek police armed with shields and batons fighting against desperate refugees who wanted to gain access to the registration building. One police officer shouted, “You’re not human, you are animals. We have ordered you to form a queue, but you do not obey.” The police then shot tear gas, driving away the refugees. One refugee was left unconscious in front of the police line.

In a few days, the first so-called refugee “hotspot” will be established on Lesbos, operated by the European border management agency Frontex. It will be a registration centre where refugees are fingerprinted like criminals and their asylum application will be decided at a preliminary hearing.

A few days ago at a press conference, the Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, and current chair of the EU Council of Ministers, Jean Asselborn, along with the European Commissioner for Migration, Dimitri Avramopoulos, announced the opening of the “hotspot” on Lesbos. He cynically declared, “We need to welcome refugees with an orderly identification process and medical examination, and provide a correct admission. But we must also know who is knocking at our door.”



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