EU-Balkan summit seals off refugee escape routes

Peter Schwarz
27 October 2015

In Brussels on Sunday, the leaders of 10 European Union and three non-EU states agreed a 17-point plan to control the movement of refugees on the so-called Balkan route in order to block them from entering Europe and send them back to their countries of origin.

The agreement is the latest chapter in the brutal response of the European bourgeoisie to the humanitarian catastrophe created by the Middle East wars for domination and plunder waged by the US and its European allies. The supposedly democratic governments have moved to strengthen the security forces, seal off borders, build internment camps and dispatch vulnerable refugees back to the war zones from which they fled.

In recent weeks, the governments along the Balkan route have erected one obstacle after another to deter refugees, prevent them from crossing borders and push them into neighbouring countries as quickly as possible. When the stream of people seeking shelter in Europe from the wars in Syria and Afghanistan did not diminish, European states sealed their borders, or, like Germany and Austria, tightened their border controls, leaving tens of thousands of asylum seekers stranded under catastrophic conditions.

Dramatic scenes unfolded. Refugees were blocked from moving on for days on end. They were abused and ill-treated by security forces. Allowed to proceed, they had to traverse hundreds of miles on foot and sleep outdoors without warm clothing or protection against the elements. Volunteers who travelled long distances and made great personal sacrifices to help the migrants were hampered by the authorities.

When Hungary, through which the largest number of refugees passed on the way from Serbia to Austria, hermetically sealed its border in mid-September, refugees tried to continue their journey through Croatia and Slovenia. Some 230,000 migrants have since been counted in Croatia alone. In the last eight days, 62,000 have reached Slovenia.

The European governments have responded with mutual insults and threats to close their borders. The conflicts became so intense that Slovenian Prime Minister Miro Cerar warned of the “end of the EU and Europe as such” if no common solution could be found.

Pressured by Germany, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker organized the meeting in Brussels to smooth over the tensions. Besides Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the Balkan states—Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece—non-EU members Serbia, Macedonia and Albania participated in the summit.

The measures agreed after hours of heated arguments boiled down to a dramatic worsening of the situation facing refugees and a lessening of their chances of being granted asylum.

All borders are to be better controlled by the deployment of the EU border protection agency Frontex. Four hundred border guards from other EU countries are to be sent to Slovenia this week. The coast guard will be strengthened along the Greek-Turkish border, the route taken by most refugees, as well as along the Turkish-Bulgarian border. The Greek border with Macedonia and Albania will be secured by new Frontex missions.

Both Europol and Interpol are to be deployed in the Balkans and used to combat “traffickers.”

In future, all refugees will have to register before they can continue on to another country. “No registration, no rights,” said Juncker.

This has far-reaching consequences. It creates conditions for the authorities in Germany and other

© World Socialist Web Site

Western European countries to expel refugees at any time. Migrants have a right to asylum and residence only in the country where they are first registered. Although this rule is currently not being applied because of the large numbers of refugees, it is still the law.

To make registration possible, 100,000 locations for refugees will be set up along the Balkan route, half of them in Greece. These facilities are euphemistically being called “rest areas,” but they are actually huge camps where the refugees will be interned until they are registered or deported. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has pledged to complete five such reception centres (“hotspots”) by the end of this year.

In order to deport more refugees, the EU Commission and the German government want to conclude a repatriation agreement with Afghanistan. One in four refugees on the Balkan route originates from this country.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as of the beginning of August, 124,000 Afghans had requested asylum in the EU, more than twice as many as last year. They are fleeing war in a country where the United States and Germany have just extended their military presence. Now most of them are to be sent back to the war zones from which they fled.

The ruthlessness with which the ruling circles of Europe react to the plight of the refugees can be understood only when considered within a broader political context. It stands in sharp contrast to the active sympathy and solidarity with the asylum seekers of broad sections of the population.

“The level of support for the refugees is not only an expression of elementary humanity,” we wrote two months ago. “Many instinctively understand that the refugees are victims of a social system that threatens their own lives.”

This has since been confirmed. Although it is obvious that the imperialist wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria are the main cause of the wave of refugees, the US and its European allies are intensifying their military intervention in the region. The brutal treatment meted out to refugees is the sharpest expression of the crisis of a social system that no longer has anything to offer the vast majority of the people except war, repression and poverty.

Support for refugees, the struggle against militarism and war and the defence of democratic and social rights are inseparably bound up with one another. What is required is a political programme that unites working people across all borders to replace the capitalist profit system with socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site