

Thousands of refugees stuck on the Balkan route

Martin Kreickenbaum
24 November 2015

Thousands of refugees have been stranded along the Balkan route with almost no care or accommodation after the Balkan countries Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia virtually closed their borders to refugees last week, only allowing asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq to cross.

The borders were shut under pressure from Germany and France so as to allegedly prevent Islamist terrorists from entering the European Union (EU). In fact, the measure, which represents a blatant violation of international agreements on the protection of refugees, is aimed at repulsing as many asylum seekers as possible at Europe's borders.

At the weekend, the aid organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF) counted up to 6,000 refugees who were temporarily stranded near the Greek city of Idomeni at the Macedonian border and prevented from travelling further. The temporary refugee camp had places for just 900 refugees. Thousands of refugees, including the elderly, children and pregnant women, had to sleep in the open in pouring rain and freezing conditions. There was also no provision of food. Instead, the Greek government deployed additional police officers to the border region to prevent refugees from going further.

When a few hundred refugees nonetheless managed to break through police lines, they were intercepted by the Macedonian border police and sent back. Refugees subsequently occupied the only railway connecting Greece with Macedonia. The camp at Idomeni was transformed into a protest camp.

Some refugees have gone on hunger strike and sewn their mouths shut. They have rejected calls from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to return to Athens. "We will cross or die," they cried. On quickly improvised banners, they demanded to be allowed to continue their journey. "We

are not terrorists. We are just looking for a better life. Please let us go," one stated.

The division of refugees into national groups has produced bizarre scenes. One family was refused the right to enter Macedonia because only the husband could produce an Afghan passport, while the wife and children only had Iranian citizenship. Thirty-year-old Mohammed Mirzam told news broadcaster Al-Jazeera, "We're trapped. ... They won't let my family across. We have no money, and we're waiting without any idea of what is to happen." Other Afghans were not allowed to cross because they were accused of allegedly falsifying travel documents.

The humanitarian crisis now emerging along the Balkan route began on 19 November, when the Slovenian government announced it would not allow any more economic migrants into the country. A police spokesman told Reuters, "More and more people have entered the country over recent days who we have good reason to believe are economic migrants." Slovenia would thus only accept migrants from countries where armed conflict was taking place.

But it is the governments in Germany and France who initiated the partial border closings. They are exploiting the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13 to further seal off Europe from refugees.

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve called for a "significant strengthening of measures to secure European borders" at a meeting of justice and interior ministers in Brussels last Tuesday. The ministers subsequently agreed that refugees would not only be fingerprinted during registration, but also checked against databases of the European security agencies. Police officers from Europol and the border agencies will supervise the registration at the "hot spots".

Slovenia, unlike the neighbouring EU member

Croatia, is also part of the Schengen zone. In border management, it works closely with the Austrian and German governments. It is therefore likely that the idea of a partial border closing originated with German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière, who has been agitating for stronger restrictions on the inflow of refugees for weeks. This is also suggested by the justification offered by the Slovenian government. It declared that only refugees from countries at war or in military conflict would gain asylum in Germany and other European countries, while all others would be rejected as “economic migrants”.

The Slovenian government’s move was part of a domino effect in Serbia, Macedonia and Croatia. According to a report by German public broadcaster ARD’s “Tagesschau”, the European Commission in Brussels pressed for the borders to be closed. “That is the intention of Juncker’s plan, that the humanitarian aspect, meaning any assistance, is limited to those affected by war.”

Serbia’s labour and social minister Aleksandr Vulin said his government had no other option but to follow the example of Slovenia and Croatia. “We need to protect our country, and that is why we have brought in reciprocal measures toward those for whom Croatia and Slovenia have no room. We will not allow into Serbia anyone who cannot continue their journey.”

Since the change in course by Slovenia and Croatia was so obviously agreed with the European Union and Germany, Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski also announced the closure of the border. At the same time, he warned the EU against exploiting his country as a buffer zone against “economic migrants.”

Gruevski recently was informed at a meeting with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban about the Hungarian approach of sealing its borders. Macedonia subsequently also began the construction of a barbed wire fence made available by the Hungarian government.

The sealing of the borders for refugees not from Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq represents a serious violation of human rights, since everyone is entitled to an individual review of an asylum application. For refugees who cannot produce any papers, which is hardly unusual after several weeks of travel, face checks are used to determine who will be allowed to travel further.

“What is taking place here is racial profiling instead of the individual reviewing of each case in accordance with the law,” stated Hagen Kopp from Project Moving Europe. It remains completely unclear why refugees from Eritrea or Somalia are being turned away at the borders, even though they are among those whose need for protection is high within the EU.

The spokeswoman for the UNHCR in Athens, Ketty Kehayoiylou, in the *Guardian* criticised the claim that the rejection of refugees was a necessary measure to prevent terrorists from entering Europe. “This business of placing restrictions and erecting fences to keep terrorists out when terrorists are already in their countries makes no sense whatsoever. Profiling by nationality defies every convention”, she said.

In addition, human rights activists are contending that the conditions facing refugees worsen considerably when borders are closed and they are left in a legal no man’s land. “We fear that precisely at the onset of winter, people will be stranded without accommodation, food or assistance,” a spokesman from MSF said in Serbia.

Thousands of refugees already live homeless on the streets and squares of Athens. The deployment of more police to the border by Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to prevent refugees from travelling on shows that the Syriza government was fully integrated into the measures to seal the borders, and supports them. Instead of accepting the refugees who are in need of protection, the EU is using batons and barbed wire against them, leaving them to their fate as winter begins.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact