

Humanitarian disaster on the Balkan refugee route

Martin Kreickenbaum
30 November 2015

The crisis situation for refugees seeking to enter Europe escalated November 28 on the Greek-Macedonian border. Macedonian police used stun grenades to repel refugees who have been prevented from entering Macedonia from Greece. A total of 40 people were injured and photos show refugees with severe head injuries.

Hundreds of refugees, men, women and children, have been stranded on the border in freezing weather and without food at the cordoned-off border near the northern Greek city of Idomeni. For about a week, only refugees with Syrian, Iraqi or Afghan passports have been allowed to cross the border. Refugees with other nationalities are rejected on the grounds that they do not come from “war zones.”

In particular, refugees from Iran, Pakistan, Eritrea, Somalia and Bangladesh are stranded on the Greek border and do not know what is going to happen to them. The makeshift camp at Idomeni operated by the UN refugee agency UNHCR is completely overcrowded. Hundreds of refugees are camping outdoors, without adequate sanitary provisions, and with inadequate supplies of food and clean drinking water.

In protest against the racist screening of asylum seekers at the border, the refugees have been blocking the single-track rail link between Macedonia and Greece for days. More than 60 refugees have gone on hunger strike, and eleven of them have sewn their own mouths shut.

Last Thursday around 200 desperate refugees stormed the border, throwing stones at the border policemen stationed there. The newly erected barbed wire fence along the border was demolished over a length of approximately 40 metres. Some refugees were caught in the barbed wire, others were chased by the police

and forced back with batons. Only five people actually managed to get to the Macedonian side, where they were quickly intercepted and detained. Police officers armed with assault rifles moved to block the place where the border fence had come down.

“We cannot wait any longer, last night we slept in the rain,” 31-year-old Heritier Shabani told the press. He comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and arrived on the Greek island of Samos about ten days ago. The refugees do not receive any help from the Greek authorities. “If there were buses, we would return to Athens, but there are none, at least not enough,” said Shabani.

As a result, more and more refugees are stranded at the border. Of the approximately 4,000 refugees who had previously crossed the Greek-Macedonian border each day, more than 90 percent were allowed to cross because they came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. However, hundreds of refugees arrive each day for whom the border remains closed.

The humanitarian disaster developing along the Balkan route began with the decision by the Slovenian government on 19 November to no longer allow so-called “economic migrants” into the country. The governments of Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia followed suit.

Dimitris Christopoulos from the International Federation for Human Rights fears that the “nightmare scenario for Greece” has begun, because the border closures mean the country has now gone from being a transit state to one in which refugees are detained. There was no appropriate infrastructure in Greece for looking after asylum seekers, he said. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon sharply condemned the actions of the authorities in the Balkans.

“To sort out refugees based on their adopted

nationality violates the right of all people, regardless of their nationality, to apply for asylum, and their right to an individual examination of their need for protection,” Ban noted in a statement on Tuesday.

Asylum seekers from African countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea or the Republic of Congo, where no less bloody wars are raging, are routinely turned away at the borders along the Balkan route “by visual inspection” as alleged “economic refugees.” Hundreds of African refugees, taken by surprise by the developments, are now sitting in no man’s land in Croatia, Serbia or Macedonia, since they can neither move on or go back.

The real originators of the border closures are the governments in Germany and France. They are taking advantage of the terrorist attacks in Paris to further seal off Europe against refugees. The target of these racist measures, which constitute a blatant violation of international conventions on refugee protection, is to turn away as many refugees as possible at the borders of Europe.

While in Germany, the demands for a “ceiling” for refugees are growing louder, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls has called for a complete stop to the influx of refugees from the Middle East to Europe. “We cannot accept any more refugees in Europe—that’s not possible,” Valls told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The European Union must find solutions with Syria’s neighbouring countries in order to process more refugees, Valls said, “otherwise Europe is placing in question its ability to effectively control its borders.”

On Sunday, the European Union heads of state and government met with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, in an attempt to negotiate a dirty deal. In return for a payment of 3 billion euros and the prospect of opening up further EU accession negotiations, Turkey would commit itself to preventing refugees from travelling to the EU.

Turkey has so far accepted around 2.5 million war refugees from Syria, but they do not have refugee status there. Some 250,000 people live in 25 huge camps without access to work or education.

Although the war in Syria has intensified with the enormous air strikes by France and the United States, as well as Russia, and the remaining infrastructure of the country, including schools and hospitals, is being razed to the ground, Turkey has begun to reject all

refugees at the border.

In March, Turkey had closed the last two open border crossings. Until recently, however, refugees who needed urgent medical help could still enter. But in recent weeks they have also been denied this possibility. “The closure of the border forces pregnant women, children, old people, the sick and injured to run a gauntlet of border guards in order to escape the horrors of the war in Syria,” said Gerry Simpson of Human Rights Watch.

As a result, hundreds of refugees are gathering in the woods in the hills southeast of Antakya, Turkey in order to be taken across the border illegally by smugglers. There, border guards mercilessly hunt down refugees, forcing them back into Syria. Refugees interviewed by Human Rights Watch tell of gunfire and severe mistreatment by the Turkish border police. Families are torn apart, and refugees herded into detention camps, before being forcibly removed to Syria.

These massive violations of the Geneva Convention are being carried out by Turkey under pressure from the European governments, which do not want to accept any more refugees, and are using Turkey to do their dirty work in pushing back refugees. In face of the inhuman treatment of the now millions of Syrian refugees, all talk of a military escalation in Syria being necessary to stop a humanitarian catastrophe is exposed as pure hypocrisy.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact