

Macedonian police tear-gas refugees trying to cross Greek border

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Monday saw scenes of chaos at the Greek-Macedonian border crossing at Idomeni, as Macedonian police fired stun grenades and tear gas at hundreds of desperate Syrian and Iraqi refugees seeking to travel through the Balkans towards Germany.

Police unleashed the barrage on the refugees, including women and children, after they briefly knocked open a border fence, shouting, “Open the border!” Macedonian police also hit Greek police stationed at the scene.

Officials of the Doctors Without Borders charity, working near a camp of 7,000 mostly Syrian and Iraqi refugees, said they treated 22 people for respiratory problems after the tear-gassing. Ten were children and four were under the age of five.

Macedonian police also fired tear gas at refugees who sat down on train tracks connecting the two countries, blocking a cargo train headed north from Greece, to force the Macedonian authorities to reopen the border. Refugees held up signs in front of media cameras saying, “Open the borders—no food,” and “We are humans, not animals.”

Hundreds of thousands of innocent people fleeing countries devastated by imperialist military occupations or proxy wars are trapped as Europe callously closes its borders.

“Very many people were forced to sleep in the open, without tents, wrapped in blankets,” said Syrian refugee Nidal Jojack, who is trapped in Idomeni but hopes to reach Germany, where her 18-year-old son has already arrived. “It was very cold. The borders are effectively closed. It’s a huge problem. To get food, we have to wait in very long queues.”

“I have been 17 days on the road with my family and my two children. I don’t know what to do,” a Syrian refugee sitting on the train tracks told the Athens News

Agency.

The crackdown at Idomeni comes after last week’s summit at which Austria and nine Balkan countries, including Macedonia, agreed to limit the number of refugees they accept to a few hundred. In Orwellian fashion, they classified all refugees from Afghanistan—a country subject since 2001 to NATO military occupation, civil war and US bombings and drone strikes—as “economic migrants,” meaning they cannot travel onward from Greece.

The Greek government responded by forcing Afghan refugees at the Macedonian border to board buses and head back south to Athens. There, they were left in Elliniko, an abandoned Olympic stadium.

Several Afghan refugees there drew up a petition which they gave to UN officials. It declared, “We took our lives in our hands. We demand not to go back [to Afghanistan] because we are in danger there. Please open the borders for us, so we can move forward. We came here to save our lives.”

Massoume, an Afghan widow trying to reach her married daughter in Germany, but who is now trapped in Elliniko, told UN officials, “I am so alone here. I feel I am in a desperate situation. I tremble day and night. If the border doesn’t open, I don’t know what will happen to me and my children.”

A humanitarian crisis is erupting in Greece, already bled white by six years of European Union austerity policies, as refugees arrive but cannot travel on to Austria and Germany. Greek officials estimate that there will be up to 70,000 refugees in Greece this month. About 2,000 arrived on the island of Lesbos and 1,250 on the island of Chios just on Sunday.

Greek officials have denied the press access to refugee centers and threatened to deploy the army there—a controversial move in a country run from 1967

to 1974 as a military dictatorship. There is every reason to fear that Greek soldiers, who have already attacked refugees resisting deportation back to Athens from the border, will have a green light to terrorize people.

Responsibility for the fate of the refugees trapped across Europe lies above all with Washington and the major EU powers. Their ruthless policies are leaving millions of people no way to escape war. On the one hand, the US and its European allies are continuing military operations in the Middle East, despite the so-called truce in Syria, fueling conflicts that have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and forced tens of millions to flee their homes.

On the other hand, the EU powers are doing everything they can to keep refugees from traveling on to central Europe and deliberately seeking to make their situation as painful as possible.

“The EU is betting on incremental steps, hoping that the backlog will deter potential migrants,” explained Wolf Piccoli, head of research at corporate intelligence firm Teneo. That is, by persecuting migrants in Europe, creating a large backlog of people trapped in horrible conditions at various borders, the EU powers hope to convince other potential migrants that it is better to stay in war-torn areas or refugee camps of the Middle East.

As the EU collectively pursues this barbaric policy, the European powers hypocritically blame one another for the worst aspects of the crisis, stoking conflicts that threaten to tear the EU apart. Austrian-Greek tensions are intensifying after Greece reacted to last week's Austrian-led summit with the explosive step of withdrawing its ambassador from Vienna. Athens then snubbed a request from Austrian Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner to visit Greek refugee camps.

“The policies of Austria and Hungary are turning Greece into a giant refugee camp,” Greek Deputy Education Minister Sia Anagnostoipoulou told Greek state television. “What are we supposed to do? Let people drown in the Aegean Sea?”

Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann reacted by denouncing Greece: “I cannot understand Greece's policy anymore. Greece cannot act like a travel agency that sends the refugees other places. Greece received 11,000 refugees in the past year, whereas we received 90,000. We will not allow this to be repeated.”

German-Austrian tensions are also rising. Rejecting criticisms from Berlin and the EU that Vienna's limits

on refugee flows violate international law, Austrian Defense Minister Peter Doskozil said Berlin “should be grateful” that Vienna's limits to refugee flows had cut the number of migrants arriving through Austria to Germany.

German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble retorted that open borders in Europe are a vital strategic interest: “With all due respect, Austria is relatively small. It doesn't take much to control its border. It won't tear Europe apart. But we are right in the middle. You can't contend with Europe without dealing with Germany. We have to take on this responsibility. We cannot behave like Austria or Sweden.”

In fact, Berlin's strategy for keeping borders in Europe open depends on keeping refugees from arriving in Europe. Not only are EU and Turkish officials in talks for Turkey to halt the refugee flow, but Germany is leading a naval deployment in the Aegean Sea. Its warships are there to block refugees crossing to Europe from Turkey.

If this fails, elements of the German government are quietly preparing to close Germany's borders. Citing sources at the German Interior Ministry, *Welt am Sonntag* reported Sunday that Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere had ordered his staff to draw up plans to close Germany's borders. *Die Welt* reported that de Maiziere sees next Monday's EU-Turkey summit as a “turning point,” after which Berlin should take unilateral action if disagreements are still unresolved.



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