

# Refugees face death and despair on Greek-Macedonian border

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Scenes like these in Europe are unknown since the end of World War II: thousands of people living in pools of mud and flooded tents, crying babies transported across rivers, entire families wading barefoot through water and mud, fighting their way through bushes and forests in an attempt to cross the Macedonian-Greek border.

The shocking pictures and videos currently transmitted from northern Greece to the whole world reveal the brutal nature of European refugee policy. The closure of the Balkan route denied tens of thousands of people refuge in central Europe. The plight of refugees is being exacerbated by representatives of the European Union in order to deliberately deter people.

The closure of the Greek-Macedonian border cost three refugees their lives on Sunday night. Two men and a woman from Afghanistan drowned in a river while trying to cross the border. The other 23 people in their group were taken to the Macedonian border town of Gevgelija and had to be treated for hypothermia.

On Monday, over 2,000 refugees from the border camp at Idomeni set off to cross into Macedonia at a spot without a border fence, close to the Greek village of Chamilo.

Leaflets were passed from hand to hand with instructions in Arabic on how to cross the Macedonian border. The flyer apparently encouraged people to quit the camp and head for the border. Who issued the leaflet remains unclear; according to *Spiegel Online*, it may have stemmed from Syrians who had successfully fled to Germany and shared their experiences via Facebook. Unknown “volunteers” have also been linked to the flyers.

Regardless of who was responsible for the leaflets, the reason for the flight to the border was the

desperation of the refugees. A twenty-year-old Syrian from a group of refugees who crossed the border summed up the attitude of the refugees. He told *Zeit Online*: “I know that I might be arrested in Macedonia. But I have nothing to lose,” he said.

Residents in Chamilo watched in horror as families with small children and infants, the elderly, and the handicapped, poorly protected against rain and cold, walked past their houses until late at night. They helped them with blankets, water, food, and even a pram.

At a raging torrent behind Chamilo refugees and helpers erected a rope across a river and with luggage and children on their shoulders struggled through the water. A video shows a boy who tried to cross, without holding the rope: he was immediately swept away by the river’s current and had to be rescued.

At a second river on Macedonian territory, the Mala Reka, about 1,500 people struggled through bushes and managed to cross the border. There, they were immediately surrounded and arrested by Macedonian police and soldiers. Most were taken to a school and other buildings in the Macedonian border village of Moin.

Slowly, details about the refugees’ fate in Macedonia have come to light in the last two days. Police arrested about 60 journalists, photojournalists and helpers and dispatched them to a prison in Gevgelija, so that no witnesses could document their brutal anti-refugee policy. Before the arrested were released, they had to pay a fine of 250 euros for “illegal border crossing” and received a six-month travel ban.

EU leaders are well aware of what was in store for refugees trying to cross the Macedonian border. On March 1, police chiefs from Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary and Austria met in Belgrade to discuss methods to deal with refugees.

Two days later Macedonia sent a 12-page list to neighbouring countries detailing its requests for armaments to protect its southern border.

Macedonia's "shopping list" to deal with refugees included pepper spray, tasers, "special bombs", grenade launchers, a crowd control dispenser, and armoured vehicles.

Macedonia has announced it will return all the refugees to Greece. According to Greek police, Macedonian security forces have already deported several hundred refugees in military vehicles on illegal forest trails. However, it is still unclear whether all the refugees have been returned to Greece.

Many refugees reported by the brutal treatment by the Macedonian police and military forces. "They yelled and beat us, they put us in military vehicles and returned us at 02.00 in the morning", one Syrian told the Greek daily *Kathimerini*, after he arrived back in Idomeni.

Refugees who yesterday walked back to Idomeni told Greek state television ERT of beatings and ill-treatment. They were forced to wait in the rain for hours without food or water and then driven in military vehicles to the border, where they had to crawl through a hole in the fence back to the Greek side.

The aid organization "Save the Children" told the British *Guardian* that the Macedonian authorities left the shivering refugees in their wet clothes exposed to the elements, without any information for orientation. On their return to Idomeni, rain forced many to spend the night outdoors. "Some people collapsed on the roadside and needed medical assistance on the spot."

About 400 refugees were unable to cross the border into Macedonia and stayed on the riverbank. The starving people, including many sick children, then trudged back on Tuesday to Idomeni.

After nearly three weeks, around 12,000 refugees wait under catastrophic conditions in the makeshift camp in Idomeni, which is sinking into the mud after days of rain. New tents have been erected, because most refugees prefer to remain in Idomeni rather than move into an official Greek camp. They fear their imminent deportation to Turkey and hope that the Balkan borders will be reopened after the European Union summit on Thursday.

The situation also remains critical at the Greek port of Piraeus, where nearly 4,000 refugees are located. Many

are sick and weak. On Tuesday a child with hepatitis A was hospitalized; a few days ago a girl in Idomeni received the same diagnosis.

In Piraeus, many refugees refuse to be placed in other accommodation and are awaiting the results of the summit. The government is trying to convince refugees to move, stressing the allegedly "humanitarian" conditions in reception centers and camps. But according to ERT, refugees have already returned from these camps to Piraeus because of intolerable conditions there.



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