

Macedonian police use tear gas and rubber bullets against refugees

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Macedonian police used extreme violence against refugees attempting to cross the Greek-Macedonian border on Sunday. Refugees at the Idomeni camp in Greece initially gathered peacefully in the morning while a small group attempted to negotiate entry into Macedonia with border police. After the attempts at negotiation failed, Macedonian police repulsed refugees trying to cross the barbed wire fence separating the countries with tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades.

One witness, Laura Samira Naude, an official for the charity Lighthouse Relief, told the *Independent* newspaper she had witnessed “horrific scenes.” She continued: “The police were firing so much tear gas and rubber bullets too. Young babies had to be treated.”

“The scenes we are seeing are the expected and unavoidable result of thousands being trapped in Idomeni and elsewhere in Greece—abandoned by Europe—in awful conditions and with little hope of getting protection,” said Fotis Filippou of Amnesty International.

The latest police violence is a direct product of the criminal deal struck by the European Union with Turkey, which seeks to completely seal off access to Europe for refugees through the so-called Balkan route. In line with the deal Greece has commenced the forcible deportations of refugees from the Aegean islands to Turkey. At internment camps on the islands of Lesbos and Samos, as well as ports in Chios and Piraeus, violent clashes broke out at the end of last week between desperate refugees and the police. An estimated 52,000 refugees are stranded in Greece and on Greek islands under increasingly intolerable conditions.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has questioned the basis for the deportations carried out so far, but the EU has refused to examine the allegations, which suggest that the deportations to Turkey are in outright violation of the norms of protection for refugees under international law.

The Greek government rushed the new asylum and deportation regulations through parliament last week without undertaking any adequate preparations. As a result, authorities on the ground are overwhelmed with asylum applications. While the EU has ordered hundreds of border guards and police to Greece through the EU border protection agency Frontex, only 20 legal experts and interpreters have arrived to support the review of asylum applications. This confirms that the agreement between the EU and Turkey is first and foremost a police state measure aimed at expelling refugees from Europe as quickly as possible.

The threat of deportation is increasing desperation in the camps. Syrians and Afghans have announced their intention to kill themselves rather than be deported to Turkey, according to the *Guardian*. Souaob Nouri from Kabul, who is currently being held in the high security camp on Chios, told the newspaper, “If they deport us, we will kill ourselves. We will not go back.” Another refugee, Akimi, added, “We are not terrorists. We are refugees. The conditions here are very bad. There is no water. They hit pregnant women. Why do they treat us like this? All we want is asylum.”

Voices are also being raised in the Lesbos camp saying that death would be preferable to being sent back to Turkey. Dozens of refugees there, and in the camp on Samos, have commenced hunger strikes to prevent their deportation. A Pakistani refugee in the Moria camp on Lesbos collapsed and had to be brought to a hospital.

Last Thursday, around 250 refugees broke out of the detention camp on Samos and marched through the streets of the city of Vathy. They demanded to be allowed to travel on to Central Europe rather than being deported to Turkey. A massive police operation was able to bring most of the refugees back to the camp.

An ultimatum was given to the 4,270 refugees struggling to survive in an independently established

camp at the port of Piraeus to voluntarily clear the location within two weeks or they would be violently dispersed. In Athens, police also prevented refugees from establishing a protest camp in front of the Greek parliament. Around 40 refugees were arrested by the police, while hundreds more were forcibly brought to the port of Piraeus.

The large-scale, violent police operations have encouraged extreme right-wing groups to take action against refugees and their supporters. On Chios, a mob apparently led by members of the fascist Golden Dawn attacked a camp set up by refugees at the island's port last week after they fled the detention camp. A cafe mainly used by refugee support groups was attacked with stones and petrol bombs.

Along with the EU responsibility for the violent clashes and desperate conditions facing refugees in Greece lies with the pseudo-left-led Syriza government in Athens. It has ruthlessly implemented the EU-Turkey refugee agreement. Refugees are detained and deported en masse, while support groups and volunteers are criminalised. In this process, the Syriza government is relying on military and police special forces, which have close ties to the far-right Golden Dawn.

The German interior minister Thomas de Maiziere has been quick to praise the brutal actions of the security forces. "Even if we have to put up with a few weeks of harrowing pictures, our approach is correct," de Maiziere declared last week. He is quite explicit that the terrorisation of refugees is a deliberate policy aimed at deterring others from entering Europe. He is now seeking to use the EU-Turkey deal as a model for further deportation agreements with North African countries.

De Maiziere is responding to the increasing number of refugees seeking to cross the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy. In the first three months of the year, 19,287 refugees were registered there, an increase of 60 percent from the same period last year.

De Maiziere knows very well that refugees are being abused and tortured in North African countries. Refugees lack all protection in Libya, where, as a consequence of the NATO-led war to overthrow the Gaddafi regime, Islamist militias rule. Last week, in the al-Nasr deportation camp near the city of Al Zawyah, five refugees were shot in clashes with security forces and a further 11 were severely injured. In the camp, 1,500 refugees from states like Somalia, Nigeria and Mali are detained, after trying to make the crossing to Italy.

The EU Commission's plans presented last week to

reform the asylum system mainly contain proposals for more repression and restrictions against refugees. The media only took notice of the parts of the 20-page document which proposed a system regulating the distribution of refugees throughout the EU in the event that a state is overwhelmed by an influx of refugees.

This measure was aimed at maintaining pressure on states to keep the EU's external borders sealed. Secondly, the EU Commission is seeking to breathe new life into the Dublin system, which makes the state where refugees first enter Europe responsible for the processing of asylum applications. The EU Commission sees the Dublin system as necessary to maintain the Schengen agreement and the free movement of goods and capital throughout Europe.

By contrast, there will be no freedom of movement for refugees in Europe. Refugees and recognised asylum seekers will instead be confined to the state made responsible for them. To this end, enforcement mechanisms are explicitly being considered, covering reductions in social welfare, the removal of refugee status, detention and deportation. In addition, no more permanent residency permits will be provided, but merely temporary authorizations that will be reviewed within five years, a system already practiced in Germany. This will mean that refugees will live in Europe under the constant fear of forced removal and deportation.

In addition, the list of "safe countries of origin" will be made uniform across the EU to enable asylum applications to be assessed in sped-up procedures, resulting generally in their rejection.



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