

Refugees shot by Turkish border guards

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17 May 2016

According to eyewitness reports published last week by Human Rights Watch, at least five people were shot or beaten to death by Turkish border guards in March and April on the country's border with Syria, including a 15-year old boy. Fourteen others received serious injuries as a result of shots or beatings.

The European Union has remained silent about the report detailing the deliberate killing of refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria. While the EU is insisting that Turkey pass amendments to its anti-terrorism laws with regard to the introduction of visa-free travel in the EU for Turkish citizens, Brussels is giving President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a free hand in the inhumane treatment of refugees inside Turkey.

When the far-right Alternative for Germany demanded border guards shoot at refugees, government representatives expressed their anger. But the report by Human Rights Watch suggests that Turkey has practically adopted the order to shoot against refugees on behalf of the EU.

According to Human Rights Watch, on the night of April 15 near the Syrian border town of al-Duriya, a group of seven refugees came under fire from Turkish border guards. A 13-year-old teenager watched as his 15-year-old cousin died in a hail of bullets.

He told Human Rights Watch: "We were in a valley called al-Nabua. I am not sure whether we were yet in Turkey, but suddenly the shooting started. My cousin fell down. He was shot in the head. I was next to him. There were bullets flying all around us. We threw ourselves on the ground. A few hours later the shooting stopped and we escaped."

The commander of the local border guards later told another cousin who wanted to pick up the corpse: "Anyone who approaches the border will be killed."

Just two days later, on April 17, two refugees were shot and four others seriously injured at the Khurbat al-Juz Güveççi border crossing. A survivor told how his

sister and cousin were killed.

"When we were about 500 meters from the wall, we heard automatic weapons fired from the direction of the wall and bullets landed all around us. The women started screaming and the children started crying, but the shooting continued. We all threw ourselves onto the ground, covering the children. I was lying close to my sister and my cousin, and the bullets hit them while we were lying down. They stopped screaming and shouting. I knew right away they had been killed."

The report cites further cases of refugees being shot, beaten and mistreated. In March, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported several cases of violence by Turkish soldiers and border guards against refugees. The organization spoke of up to 16 refugees who had been shot on the Syrian-Turkish border in the preceding months.

This shows the true face of the European Union's refugee policy—the dirty deal with Turkey makes the government in Ankara its stooge in sealing off the EU's external borders. As Europe's bouncer, the Erdogan government does the dirty work for the EU, which also bears responsibility for the deaths of the refugees on the Syrian-Turkish border.

The pact between Turkey and the EU adopted in Brussels on March 18 stipulates that Turkey take back all refugees who come across the Aegean to Greece. In return, the European Union has committed to taking one Syrian civil war refugee for each one deported back to Turkey.

Moreover, Ankara will receive €6 billion in financial aid, as well as speeding up the country's EU accession talks and the removal of the visa requirement for Turkish citizens entering the EU. The EU will also support Turkey in establishing so called "Safe Zones" in North Syria, in which refugees from other parts of the country can be housed.

The deal came about, despite Turkey not having fully

ratified the Geneva Convention and turning away people from Syria and Iraq seeking protection. Approximately 2.7 million refugees who are mainly from Syria, but have also fled from Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan, are currently staying in Turkey.

For over a year, the border crossings between Syria and Turkey have been closed for all practical purposes, and only the seriously injured are allowed through. This year, the Turkish government has begun the construction of a concrete wall along its border with Syria. Some 300 kilometres are already completed of a planned 900-kilometres-long wall whose sole purpose is to stop refugees crossing the border.

With this, Turkey has created de facto “safe zones” in some Syrian areas along the border. In the region around Azaz, north of the contested Syrian city of Aleppo, as well as in the border region east of the Turkish city of Antakya, a massive landscape of camps has been created in which refugees find no protection, but sit in a trap. The refugee camps there are regularly shelled by various factions in the civil war.

The European Union is thus endorsing Ankara’s policy of accepting no more refugees into the country, and if necessary stopping them by force.

The president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, said during a visit to a flagship refugee camp in Turkey that the country was “the best example in the world for how to deal with refugees.” The German government has also made clear that it wants to maintain the dirty deal with Turkey under all circumstances.

At a European conference in the Foreign Ministry in Berlin on Thursday, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party) said, “I know very well that this agreement is also regarded critically. But at the same time, we have to see we have a sustained interest that this agreement on migration does not collapse.”

At the same meeting, Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union) also made it clear that her government, like the European Union, has abandoned all constraints to collaborating with authoritarian regimes when it comes to sealing off the EU to refugees.

The aim was the protection of the external borders instead of closing the national borders, said Merkel. That was why Europe could “not simply shut the door to states that trampled human rights underfoot. That is

what we must now learn—with Turkey, with Lebanon, with Libya, in cooperation with many African countries.” Faced with the hundreds of refugees drowned in the Mediterranean, she added cynically, the agreement with Turkey will help “to save lives and combat the causes of flight.”

Even if the dirty deal struck with Turkey should fall apart, the European Union has already taken measures to repel refugees at its external borders by other means. Greece has practically abolished the right to asylum. Refugees there are deported in summary proceedings. Their access to lawyers and right to appeal in court against a refusal of asylum are massively limited. The so-called “hotspots” on the Greek islands, which were first referred to as “open” registration centres, have been transformed into closed detention centres. Moreover, alongside coastguard boats, NATO warships are patrolling the Aegean to intercept refugee boats.

In addition, the complete sealing off of the Balkan route has ensured hardly any refugees have made it to Europe via Turkey and Greece in recent months. While in January, 67,415 refugees were registered in Greece, in April it was only 3,460. And in April, more refugees were initially registered in Italy than Greece, having risked the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean. At the same time, the number of refugees drowned in the central Mediterranean in the first four months of this year has risen massively to 976.



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