

Hungarian government cracks down on refugees

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This week, the Hungarian parliament in Budapest approved a further tightening of asylum laws and authorized the country's security forces to deport refugees to Serbia and Croatia without due process.

Refugees caught within an eight-kilometer-wide strip along the border will now be summarily deported. In addition, border security is being massively strengthened. The number of soldiers and border guards will be increased from 4,000 to 10,000, and they will be equipped with additional vehicles, thermal imaging cameras and other devices.

The number of refugees registered on the Balkan route is plunged. Barely more than 250 refugees a day are able to traverse the closed borders along the Balkan route with the help of people smugglers.

The EU in Brussels has largely looked on approvingly at Hungary's brutal actions, despite the fact that expulsions without an asylum hearing, expedited asylum proceedings and the detention of refugees and deprivation of their rights represent massive violations of international refugee protections and violate EU law.

The victims of this brutal policy of deterrence are refugees who have already endured weeks in overcrowded makeshift camps outside the transit zones. After fleeing from wars in Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq, they are now camped out in small tents or in the open air, in the dust and dirt in front of towering barbed-wire fences. Three mobile toilets were only recently installed, but there are no showers, no medical care, and only one water tap. Many people are ill, especially children. Once a day, Hungarian police officers bring tiny food parcels containing bread and canned fish.

There is virtually no escape from these miserable camps. The Hungarian security forces allow only 15 to 20 people into the transit zone daily to apply for asylum

there. Refugees have to place their names on a list and then wait for weeks before they are allowed to pass through the gate in the border fence.

Aid organizations fear that the new regulations will catastrophically worsen the situation in the camps. Since the beginning of the year, the Hungarian security authorities have captured some 17,500 refugees who are accused of illegal entry. Previously, they had been taken to reception centers in Hungary. Now they will be brought back to the border fence, leading to a rapid increase in the size of the camp there, which will assume the proportions of the Idomeni camp in Greece. Already in the first days since the new rules have been in force, almost 150 refugees have been deported each day from Hungary.

"Refugees on Hungarian territory are escorted back to the border, without the possibility of lodging an asylum claim and without being provided any documentation, where they have to endure for an arbitrarily long time under inhumane conditions in order to apply for asylum," Márta Pardavi, co-chair of the Hungarian Helsinki committee, told *Spiegel online*.

The Hungarian government claims that this does not constitute deportation. Although the transit zones and about a two-foot-wide strip in front of the border fence are not part of Hungarian territory, they also do not belong to any other state.

Since August 2015 the Hungarian government has defined neighboring Serbia, from which nearly all the refugees have entered, as a "safe third country." As a result, of the 199,000 asylum applications made in Hungary last year, just 264 have been approved.

Hungary has steadily increased the repressive measures against refugees over the last twelve months. Following the classification of Serbia as a "safe third country", and the complete closure of its borders with

Serbia and Croatia, border fences and fortifications were built, soldiers have employed tear gas and batons against protesting refugees. In September last year, “illegal entry” was declared a crime and thousands of refugees dragged before the courts.

According to György Bakondi, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s security advisor, 4,942 refugees have been prosecuted for damage to the border fence. In general, the punishment has been immediate deportation and a re-entry ban. According to Bakondis, 300 refugees sit in Hungarian prisons.

However, the deportations are often not carried out, as Serbia and Croatia will not take back the refugees. Since there are no accommodation facilities for refugees in Hungary, apart from the detention centers—even for recognized asylum seekers—many refugees end up homeless on the street, where they are again exposed to state repression, since being homeless is also a crime.

Single male refugees who have been deported to Hungary from other EU member states following the Dublin procedures are imprisoned there on the spurious grounds that they might otherwise try to emigrate again.

In addition to this massive criminalization of refugees, a show trial has been launched in the Hungarian town of Szeged against eleven refugees for their alleged involvement in mass protests at the border fence in September 2015. One of them was even indicted for terrorism because he supposedly used a megaphone to incite the crowd that tried to storm the border fence.

The accused, who were sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to three years, included a blind old woman and a wheelchair-bound man. To date, however, there has been no investigation of the brutal police action, in which refugees were shot at with tear gas and driven back using water cannons and truncheons.

The incident was used by the Hungarian government to construe a direct link between refugees, illegal immigration, violence and terrorism. This is also the purpose of a referendum scheduled for October on the question of whether Hungary should participate in the distribution of refugees as agreed by the EU. The date was announced by President Janos Ader this week in Budapest.

This process has already failed for all practical purposes, since, of the 160,000 eligible refugees who are to be taken from Italy and Greece to other EU countries, only 2,800 asylum seekers have so far been redistributed. Moreover, the Hungarian government, which under the EU Commission’s plan would only have to accommodate 1,300 refugees, is seeking to cement its anti-refugee position by means of the referendum.



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