

Cold weather kills hundreds in Eastern Europe and the Balkans

Markus Salzmann
24 January 2017

In the past few weeks icy temperatures and massive snowfall have caused hundreds of deaths in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Greece. Official figures record 33 deaths from cold in Europe just last weekend.

In Poland, more than 50 people have died as temperatures have fallen at times to minus 25 degrees. Twenty of the victims died of carbon monoxide poisoning due to inhaling fumes from burning wood in enclosed rooms.

In Slovakia, *Pravda.sk* reported that two people, presumed homeless, were discovered dead in the cities of Nitra and Bratislava. In one village a pensioner was found frozen last Friday in front of his doorstep. In the northern Slovakian district of Namestovo, a 54-year-old died on the way home from work.

In Latvia, 19 people have died due to the cold temperatures since the start of the year. According to the state forensic medical institute, 60 deaths have been registered since September 2016.

According to official data, likely an underestimate, over a dozen deaths have been recorded in Bulgaria since the beginning of the year. Snow storms have cut off about 650 villages from electricity.

In Romania, more than 130 roads had to be closed due to snow storms in past weeks. Hospitals were evacuated and public transport collapsed. Moldova closed its border with Ukraine because of massive snow, while more than a meter of snow fell in northern Albania. Many villages were cut off from the outside world in these regions. There are as yet no reliable figures on casualties.

In Hungary, at least 80 people have frozen to death this winter—twice as many as last year—not counting deaths taking place in the last several days, when temperatures fell to negative 20 degrees. Of the dead, about 30 people froze to death in unheated homes,

according to data from the Hungarian Social Forum.

Hungary's large Roma population is especially impacted. The *Washington Post* reported that large number of Roma boys skip school in order to chop firewood or forage for sticks for wood stoves.

Deaths due to the cold have also been recorded in Ukraine and Belarus.

In a month-long period in the winter of 2011-2012, extreme cold killed about 600 Europeans. If the current cold wave persists for a similar length of time, the number of deaths could be much higher.

The situation in the refugee camps along the so-called Balkan route and in Greece is particularly dire.

On Friday the UN children's fund Unicef warned that more than 23,000 child refugees and migrants could risk respiratory infections, "even death from hypothermia," due to sub-freezing temperatures across Europe.

An estimated 23,700 migrant and refugee children, including infants and newborns, remain stranded in Greece and the Balkans, where temperatures have plunged below minus 20 degrees.

A television report last week showed dozens of lightly clad refugees on the island of Lesbos lining up for the only meal they were to receive that day. Even more deplorable were the scenes inside the flimsy tents where the refugees and their families live. The inhabitants burn wood and refuse inside the tents in order to keep warm.

"Infants and the very young generally have less body fat to insulate them against the cold, making them more susceptible to respiratory problems and potentially fatal viral and bacterial infections such as pneumonia and influenza," declared Basil Rodriques, Unicef Regional Health Advisor for Central and Eastern Europe. In response to reports of migrant tents buried in snow, the

EU's migration chief, Dimitris Avramopoulos, told reporters "last week's images must not be seen again."

The deplorable conditions in the refugee camps are an indictment of the policy of the pseudo-left Syriza government in Athens, which, along with all other European, prioritizes deterring and deporting refugees over providing humanitarian relief.

In Serbia, about 2,000 refugees live on the street or in storage halls. One of these "accommodations" is located in a row of warehouses behind the central bus station in the Serbian capital, Belgrade. Men, women and children live there without heating and sanitation. In order not to freeze, they light open fires, leading to smoke poisoning and severe respiratory diseases.

The only help comes from private, non-profit organizations that provide blankets and warm food.

"The government has failed here," declared Petar Bogovic of the private aid organization Refugee Aid Serbia. "European policy, the icy temperatures and the lack of preparation for the winter have exacerbated an unbearable situation for thousands of men, women and children."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact