

Catastrophic conditions for refugees on Croatian border as authorities close camp

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According to media reports, the Bosnian authorities have started the evacuation and closure of the Vucjak refugee camp. The approximately 600 inhabitants of the camp are to be taken to a former barracks near Sarajevo within the next three days.

The catastrophic conditions in the camp, which lies near the town of Bihac, once again illustrate the inhuman refugee policy of the European Union and the right-wing governments of the region. The Bosnian authorities reacted only after international media had reported on the untenable situation of the refugees and the EU Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovi?, intervened.

In Vucjak, up to 600 refugees lived in unheated tents, although temperatures have dropped to -5 degrees Celsius in recent days with the onset of winter. Tents collapsed under the weight of snow, television station N1 reported. There is no electricity or running water. There is no medical care either. The refugees had to cook their meals mainly from the meagre donations given by the local population and aid organisations.

At the end of November, several hundred refugees went on hunger strike to protest against the inhuman conditions and to demand being able to enter the EU. On homemade signs they wrote "We are dying!" expressing their despair.

Male refugees in Vucjak, in particular, tried desperately to cross the impassable terrain of the border region into Croatia, an extremely dangerous undertaking. Croatian border guards use enormous brutality against refugees. Croatia even sends migrants back to Bosnia when they are already in the interior, so they are not safe there either.

At her final press conference, EU Human Rights Commissioner Dunja Mijatovi?, who visited refugee camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina last week, was forced to

strongly criticise the actions of Croatian border officials, especially the brutal repatriation of refugees to Bosnia.

Numerous doctors had credibly confirmed that massive violence was being used in the repatriation, reported Mijatovi?. She had heard many testimonies of violence and ill-treatment by the security forces. Often the refugees are also robbed by the security forces. According to Mijatovi?, the repression of the refugees is a violation of the Human Rights Convention, the right to asylum and the prohibition of torture.

The EU commissioner noted that she had already requested in October that Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovi? take appropriate measures. Since then, however, the situation had worsened. Mijatovi? called for an independent investigation into police violence. The culprits had to be identified and brought to justice. At the same time, illegal migration in the region must be closely monitored and then reacted to at the European level, she said.

The northern Bosnian town of Bihac lies on the border with EU member Croatia and is part of the so-called new Balkan route. Most refugees fleeing war and persecution from the Middle East come via Turkey and try to reach EU territory via the Balkan states that do not belong to the EU.

Initially, the route was mainly via Hungary. But then Viktor Orban's right-wing government, supported by the EU, hermetically sealed the border. It erected an insurmountable fence and concentration camps on the border with Serbia. State and paramilitary groups hunted down migrants. Aid organisations were punished for helping refugees.

Croatia is now using the same methods to seal off the EU's external border. Not only refugees who are trying to obtain asylum in Europe are affected. As the

newspaper *Žurnal* recently reported, two Nigerian students who were legally in Croatia were arrested in Zagreb and deported to Bosnia.

Before crossing the green border into Bosnia-Herzegovina, the two had to sign documents in Croatian, the news magazine *Focus* reports. It quotes one of the men saying, “The car stopped. We were led outside and a policeman told me: Sign! I said I don’t want to do that, you can’t expect me to sign something I don’t understand. Then one of the policemen pulled a gun and said he would shoot me if I didn’t sign. I was scared, and I signed.”

Then the policemen stole their money and forced them to cross the border on a forest road. Together with a group of refugees who had also been expelled, they ended up in the “Miral” refugee camp in Velika Kladuša. According to media reports, the camp is in a terrible condition, as is the case in Vucjak.

Although there can be no other explanation for the incident, the Croatian police strictly denied it. It is impossible to say how the two students got to a refugee camp in Bosnia more than 100 kilometres away without travel documents and money. “It is not documented that the two persons left Croatia legally,” a statement said.

According to Tajana Tadić of the Croatian human rights organisation “Are You Syrious,” this incident is part of a widespread practice throughout the country. The police deliberately targeted people of other skin colours and seldom took the trouble to examine people thoroughly. There had been several documented cases of illegal deportations from Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina. “Officially, the Croatian authorities justify this practice with the political aim of being admitted into the Schengen area as soon as possible,” says Tadić.

According to Amnesty International, the actions against refugees at the EU’s external border are carried out with the knowledge and approval of European governments. “European states are closing their eyes to the malicious attacks of the Croatian police and are financing their activities,” the human rights organisation wrote in a statement.

In Croatia, as in Hungary, the EU relies on an extremely right-wing government. During a border visit in the summer, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović justified the police brutality. “When someone

walks through this difficult terrain, it is normal for abrasions, haematomas and wounds to occur,” she said, “You have to think about that next time you hear stories about the brutality of our police officers. They’re not brutal, I guarantee it.”

Grabar-Kitarović claimed that there were no illegal deportations, and added, in the jargon of right-wing extremists, that they were not refugees anyway, but economic migrants.

Grabar-Kitarović is a member of the governing party HDZ. This ultra-nationalist party was founded in the late 1980s under Franjo Tuđman, who led the country into a bloody civil war. Even today, nationalists and open fascists set the tone in the party. For example, the professed anti-Semite and fascist Zlatko Hasanbegović was Croatian Minister of Culture in 2016. In the meantime, he is no longer a member of the HDZ and has founded his own neo-Nazi party. The HDZ maintains close relations with the leading EU states and is a member of the European People’s Party (EPP), to which Germany’s Christian Democrats also belong.

During a visit to the Croatian capital Zagreb at the end of November, German Chancellor Angela Merkel paid tribute to Croatian efforts to protect the EU’s external border and the country’s efforts to join the Schengen zone.

When a journalist asked whether Croatia could take over the EU Council presidency, in view of the allegations of human rights violations at the border, Merkel rejected the criticism and replied, “From a German perspective, we have also had experiences with refugees and migrants. But from the perspective of a country that is supposed to protect the external border, of course, it looks different than from the perspective of a country that is in the middle of the Schengen area.”



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