

EU responsible for refugee disaster in Bosnia: People without food, in sandals in the snow

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Without food, wearing just sandals in the snow and lacking a roof over their heads, more than 3,000 migrants must brave sub-zero temperatures in the northwest of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This catastrophic situation—like the conditions in the Greek refugee camp Kara Tepe on Lesbos and the mass deaths in the Mediterranean—is a result of the European Union’s criminal refugee policy.

European governments are abandoning these desperate people to their fate. On January 5, the German government announced it was not planning to take in any refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Near the town of Biha?, with 43,000 inhabitants, a few kilometres from Croatia’s external EU border, the temporary tent camp for refugees in Lipa, with about 1,300 residents, was closed on December 23 because of a failure to make it winter-proof.

The camp had been in operation since April and never had a functioning electricity and water supply. The thin unheated tents barely offered protection from the cold. Shortly before the eviction, several tents and containers went up in flames. Since then, the Lipa residents have literally been fighting for survival.

Anja, 25, from Switzerland, who has been working for the Spanish aid organisation “No Name Kitchen” in Biha? since November and asked to remain anonymous out of concern for her own safety, told *Die Zeit*, “After the fire, they were on their own and occupied empty houses outside the camp. Some have even converted toilet containers into homes.”

Conditions in the camp, run by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), were already unbearable before the onset of winter and then deteriorated massively with the fire and onset of the frost. Everything is lacking. Add to this the constant threat of infection amid the deadly COVID-19

pandemic, which is also out of control in Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to Worldometers, more than 113,000 people have already contracted coronavirus in this country of just under 3.5 million people, and more than 4,200 have died from the virus.

At the turn of the year, the refugees were given hope of being moved to a heated camp in Bradina, in an old barracks. On December 29 they were put on 20 buses, only to disembark again after 30 hours in the same place they had boarded: the burnt-down camp in Lipa. Yet on the outskirts of Biha?, a few kilometres away from the Lipa camp, stands the fully equipped Bira reception centre, which has been empty since mid-2020, where there is heating, electricity, running water and safe sleeping space for 1,500 people.

In the meantime, some emergency tents have been rebuilt by the Bosnian military in Lipa. But this is only a drop in the ocean, as Anja reports:

“There is no running water and no electricity. The tents also offer little protection from the cold. Temperatures are often below zero, as Lipa is at a relatively high altitude. In protest against these conditions, some of the residents went on hunger strike on New Year’s Day. According to our information, several hundred people are taking part. They apparently ended it only yesterday. People have written banners with slogans like ‘We want freedom’ and ‘We are not animals.’”

There are hardly any tarpaulins, sleeping bags or blankets to protect them from the winter temperatures. As Sumka Bucan from the aid organisation Care told the *Hamburger Morgenpost*, “The closure of the camp in Lipa one day before Christmas was already inhumane, but now the former residents find themselves in a life-threatening situation. Without heating and adequate clothing, 1,300 migrants must

sleep outside because they no longer have a place of refuge. Some of them were left in the snow with sandals on.”

Meanwhile, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) regularly helps frostbitten people, as the aid organisation’s country director Nicola Bay told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. “The situation there is absolutely unstable and dangerous. ... It has snowed a lot in the past few days and now the roof is threatening to collapse under the mass of snow.”

Speaking to *Euronews German*, a resident of the camp, wearing sandals and a pair of shorts, says, “We live like animals. Even the animals live better than us.”

Some of the camp’s 1,300 residents have since sought shelter in empty factory buildings or other ruins in the area. Window openings are often only sealed with plastic bags. In the so-called “Jungle” on the outskirts of the city, more migrants live in tents and under tarpaulins.

According to research by Tagesschau.de, in addition to the 1,300 residents of the camp, another 2,000 migrants live in the area around Lipa and Biha? without a roof over their heads. In total, more than 3,300 people are exposed to the cold, hoping to find a decent life in the EU after their arduous journey via the “Balkan route.”

Anja tells *Die Zeit* that her NGO is often approached by other refugees on their journey to the camp. “We haven’t eaten for five days, please give us something too,” they ask her. “We are forbidden to distribute food and clothing, since then we have been doing it secretly. Refugees are seen as criminals, so those helping them are also regarded as criminals.”

In addition, migrants confront xenophobia and racism. They are forbidden from taking certain buses and from entering certain petrol stations and cafés. On the Croatian side of the border, brutal pushbacks are systematically carried out under the aegis of the EU. In doing so, European governments are increasingly relying on fascist forces to fend off and outright terrorise war refugees and other migrants at the EU’s external borders.

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