

Six refugees die at the Polish-Belarusian border as illegal deportations in the EU rise

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The plight of refugees stranded in the no man's land on the border between Poland and Belarus is becoming increasingly traumatic. At least six people have now died of cold and hunger in the last two weeks.

Despite these deaths, the Polish government is abiding by its criminal policy of not letting any refugees into the country. The government's announced state of emergency has been extended for another 60 days and heavily armed soldiers are sealing the border. The regime in Warsaw has the full backing of the European Union, which holds the Belarusian government primarily responsible for the humanitarian crisis.

In fact, Warsaw and Brussels bear full responsibility for the appalling suffering of the refugees stranded in the border strip between Poland and Belarus. Contrary to international obligations under the Geneva Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights, the Polish authorities have refused to even accept the refugees' asylum applications.

It remains unclear how many refugees are camped in the boggy forest area along the 418-kilometre borderline between Poland and Belarus in temperatures around zero. The state of emergency imposed on September 2 by the Polish government over a three-kilometre width of the border region means that journalists, refugee aid organisations and lawyers are forbidden from entering the zone. At the same time, the Polish government has imposed a news blackout. In addition to 2,500 heavily armed soldiers, 4,000 border guards and 600 police officers patrol the narrow strip.

As a result, only scraps of information about the harrowing situation of refugees have reached the public. What is known is that a camp of 32 refugees from Afghanistan—including four women, a 15-year-old girl and a 17-year-old boy—have been stranded since August near the village of Unsnarz Gorny, awaiting EU protection. Trapped between barbed wire fences and surrounded by armed soldiers, the desperate people kept shouting in English to Polish soldiers: "We want international protection!"

Amnesty International has presented evidence that this group of refugees was subjected to illegal deportation. "Our analysis irrefutably shows that their position shifted overnight from Poland to Belarus at the end of August," said Eve Geddie, Director of Amnesty's European Institutions Office. She went on to explain that "forcibly returning people seeking asylum without assessing their individual protection needs is a serious breach of European and international law."

The refugees remain on bare ground without any protection and have received no assistance from the Polish side. One of the refugees told the Polish foundation Ocalenie that they had practically no drinking water and nothing to eat. Only the Belarusian soldiers were prepared to share their own food rations with the Afghans in the no man's land. "No one is telling us how to proceed. I think they are waiting until someone dies here. If nothing happens here, people will die of hunger and cold in the next few days."

A 52-year-old Afghan woman suffering from severe kidney disease pleaded, "Have mercy on us! Take us somewhere, just get us out of here! All we ask is that you save our lives. Even if you won't give us shelter, at least save our lives!"

Even prior to the state of emergency, Polish border guards prevented anyone from assisting the refugees. The *Tageszeitung* reported that residents of a nearby village wanted to send the refugees a pot of hot soup and some pizzas, but border guards did not allow the food to be passed on. "Orders from above!" one border guard explained to justify the cruelty.

Another group of 26 Syrian refugees is stranded near Terespol, and was also surrounded by armed Belarusian and Polish soldiers. The group includes three girls aged six, seven and eleven. The refugees have also been denied any help and are forced to share a single water bottle.

Meanwhile, at least six refugees have fallen victim to this inhumane policy. On September 19, the first four Iraqi refugees were found dead from hunger, cold and exhaustion. Two more refugees were found dead between September 24

and 27.

In particular, the case of the Iraqi woman found dead a few metres across the border on Belarusian territory on September 19 highlights the brutality of the Polish soldiers and border police in the mistreatment of refugees.

The *Tageszeitung* reported that the young woman was already on the Polish side with her husband and three children and wanted to dry their wet jackets and shoes in a village where a family had taken them in. Police, however, had been informed about the border crossing and forced the family barefoot back towards the Belarusian side. When the woman collapsed from exhaustion, her husband and children were herded across the border. The woman's lifeless body was dragged several metres across the border, where she was found surrounded by her family.

The Polish government has blamed the Belarusian regime of Alexander Lukashenko for the crisis at the border. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party (PiS) said that "people are being instrumentalised by Lukashenko for his foreign policy. This is an attempt to trigger a major European migration crisis." A joint statement by the heads of government of Poland and the Baltic EU member states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania said the sudden increase in migrants seeking to cross the EU's eastern border was "planned and systematically organised" by Lukashenko.

Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Kaminski justifies the Polish government's refusal to even hear the refugees' asylum requests with allegations that the refugees have links to Islamist and terrorist organisations. According to Kaminski, "competent authorities" had found that of the 200 refugees apprehended in Poland, 50 had "a criminal past, including links to terrorist groups."

"These are young, combat-trained men who had participated in armed formations in the Middle East," he provocatively claimed.

Kaminski did not provide any factual evidence, however, and launched the type of accusations against the refugees that one associates with a fascist regime. He claimed that the refugees under investigation were linked to the beheadings of hostages, child abuse and paedophilia, and had sex with animals. He presented photographic material allegedly taken from the refugees' mobile phones and declared the refugees to be "a serious threat to Poland's national security." In the event, his "evidence" quickly turned out to be completely fabricated.

Such false accusations are being used to introduce a harsh regime that strictly denies any refugee the right to claim asylum. Instead, people seeking protection are simply driven illegally back across the border into Belarus. Interior Minister Kaminski stated that since the beginning of August

there have been "more than 9,400 attempted illegal border crossings." Twelve hundred refugees have been taken to guarded reception camps and in 8,200 cases a crossing has been prevented.

In most cases, these were illegal deportations. "The situation is completely irregular and against the rules. And we observe with alarm that with the rules of the state of emergency, access is made even more difficult and impossible. We are trying to gain access at least for ourselves and some other organisations," declared Rafal Kostrzynski of the Polish branch of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

For its part, the Polish government is seeking to extend the state of emergency in the border region for another 60 days, thereby further excluding aid organisations and journalists. The refugees would then remain without food and protection and continue to be helplessly exposed to abuse by soldiers and border police.

This barbaric policy of refugee rejection by the Polish authorities has the full backing of the European Union. A spokesperson for the EU Commissioner for Migration, Ylva Johansson, stressed that cooperation with Poland was of great importance to ensure the protection of the EU's external borders in the interest of all 27 EU member states. He cynically added that the Commissioner had "once again underlined the importance of protecting EU values and fundamental rights."

In fact, Johansson also blames Lukashenko for the crisis in the border region and defames refugees as terrorists. "We should not fool ourselves about this. What Lukashenko is doing may well lead to terrorists and other criminals coming to the EU. That's why everyone who comes to the EU must be registered and checked."

As one of the leading European powers, the German government plays a key role in enforcing the EU's murderous exclusion policy. In a statement reeking of cynicism, the German government spokesperson Steffen Seibert declared a week ago that "humane solutions for these people have to be found quickly... in line with European and international law." He then repeated the mantra that the government in Belarus was responsible for "instrumentalising refugees and migrants," in a manner that was "completely unacceptable."



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