Anger mounts at Ukrainian security forces' treatment of Africans fleeing war

Kumaran Ira
9 March 2022

While the US and European press present NATO intervention against the Russian war in Ukraine as a defence of democracy, anger is mounting across Africa at reports of racist targeting of Africans by Ukrainian security personnel and border guards as they try to flee the country. About 16,000 African students were studying in the country before the Russian invasion, according to Ukraine's ambassador to South Africa.

Scores of African citizens have been blocked from leaving Ukraine. France 24 interviewed several African students at the Lviv train station in western Ukraine who said they were turned back by Ukrainian border guards while attempting to cross into Poland.

"They stopped us at the border and told us that Blacks were not allowed. But we could see White people going through," Moustapha Bagui Sylla, a Guinean student, told France24. He said he fled his university residence in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, when the bombing began.

Bagui Sylla walked for hours in freezing temperatures heading for the Polish border village of Medyka, where he was ordered to turn back. He reported that Ukrainian border guards said they were merely following instructions from their Polish counterparts. Officials in Warsaw denied the claim, however.

Barlaney Mufaro Gurure, a space engineering student from Zimbabwe at Ukraine's National Aviation University, fled Kyiv after Russia launched the military intervention on February 24. She told Al Jazeera that she had finally reached the front of a nine-hour queue at Ukraine's western border crossing of Krakovets after an exhausting four-day trip.

When her turn came to cross, the border guard blocked her and four other African students at the border for hours, giving Ukrainians priority. "We felt treated like animals. When we left [Kyiv] we were just trying to survive," she told Al Jazeera. "We never thought that they would have treated us like that … I thought we were all equal, that we were trying to stand together," she added.

The UN estimates 2 million people have fled Ukraine since the Russian invasion began. Queues along the border are dozens of kilometres long. Some African students told Al Jazeera they have been waiting for days to cross amid freezing temperatures and with no food, blankets or shelter.

There are mounting reports, as well, that Polish far-right nationalists are attacking African, South Asian and Middle Eastern people who have crossed the Ukrainian border into Poland. In Przemy?l, attackers dressed in black tracked down groups of non-white refugees, primarily students who arrived at a train station in Poland from Ukraine after the war began. Police said three Indians were beaten up by a group of five men, leaving one of them hospitalized.

"Around 7 p.m., these men started to shout and yell against groups of African and Middle Eastern refugees who were outside the train station," reported two Polish journalists from the OKO press agency. "They yelled at them: 'Go back to the train station! Go back to your country.'"

Police and riot officers were sent after groups of men arrived chanting "Przemy?l always Polish."

"I was with my friends, buying something to eat outside," said Sara, a 22-year-old Egyptian student in Ukraine. "These men came and started to harass a group of men from Nigeria. They wouldn't let an African boy go inside a place to eat some food. Then they came towards us and yelled: 'Go back to your country.'"

Polish police also warned that far-right groups are spreading false information about crimes allegedly

committed by African and Middle Eastern citizens fleeing Ukraine. On Twitter, Przemy?l police said: "In the media, there is false information that serious crimes have occurred in Przemy?l and the border: burglaries, assaults and rape. It's not true. The police did not record an increased number of crimes in connection with the situation at the border."

Ukrainian and Polish officials have denied reports of racial discrimination at the border. A spokesperson for the Ukrainian border guards claimed that only Ukrainian men aged between 18 and 60 were stopped from leaving the country, as they are required to join the war against Russia. However, footage on social media have shown acts of discrimination, abuse and violence against African and other foreign citizens fleeing Ukraine at its border posts.

Amid mounting anger in Africa, African officials have expressed concern over discriminatory treatment against their citizens. Videos and tweets under the hashtag #AfricansinUkraine have flooded social media, prompting numerous crowdfunding initiatives on Telegram and Instagram to help students at the borders.

Last Monday, in a statement, the African Union declared: "Reports that Africans are singled out for unacceptable dissimilar treatment would be shockingly racist and in breach of international law." Similarly, the Nigerian government said that a group of Nigerians had been refused entry into Poland. A South African foreign ministry spokesperson said that a group of South African nationals and other Africans were "treated badly" at the Polish-Ukrainian border.

The ill treatment of many Africans by security officials and far-right mobs exposes the hypocrisy of the crocodile tears the NATO media are shedding for millions of people fleeing Ukraine as a result of Russian President Vladimir Putin's reactionary invasion of Ukraine.

Since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the NATO powers have attacked Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, destroying infrastructure and killing countless thousands. As people fled these countries, taking risky journeys via land and sea to seek shelter in Europe, the EU enacted increasingly draconian anti-immigrant measures, refusing to grant asylum to those who managed to arrive in Europe. As a result, tens of thousands of migrants and refugees have drowned when their boats capsized in the Mediterranean Sea or even in the English Channel.

In reality, draconian EU anti-migrant policies and the NATO powers' longstanding legitimization of far-right politics across Europe, and notably their support for the February 2014 Kiev putsch that brought to power a pro-NATO government in Ukraine, fuel anti-refugee hatreds. The NATO powers are not concerned about refugees' fate, but rather are exploiting their suffering to justify further warmongering against Russia.

Internationally, there is mounting opposition not only to the Russian invasion but to the US-NATO war campaign against Russia. Seventeen African countries, including South Africa, Senegal, Uganda, and Mali abstained from the UN vote to condemn Russia's "aggression against Ukraine." Several of them have suffered enormous losses during invasions launched by the NATO powers in nearby countries like Libya and Mali.

Last week, the Senegalese government issued a strongly-worded statement condemning Ukraine's policy in Africa. This followed attempts by Ukraine's embassy in Senegal to recruit volunteers via Facebook to join far-right Ukrainian nationalist militias fighting Russia; the Ukrainian embassy claimed that 36 Senegalese citizens had, in fact, enlisted. However, under Senegalese law it is illegal to recruit mercenaries on Senegalese soil.

On March 3, Senegal's foreign ministry said it had summoned the Ukrainian ambassador in Dakar after learning "with astonishment" about the Facebook post. The ministry said it had "firmly" condemned "this practice which constitutes a violation of the obligation to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving State." It told the Ukrainian embassy to withdraw its Facebook post.