

Refugees confront appalling conditions in the Balkans

By Martin Kreikenbaum
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Many people have been shocked by the police brutality of the Syriza government against refugees on the Greek island of Kos. The pictures of half-starved migrants being forced into a sports stadium by police, attacked with batons, tear gas grenades and fire extinguishers, have provoked revulsion. But the dramatic scenes on the small island are only the tip of the iceberg of Europe's inhumane treatment of refugees.

The pictures would have been unimaginable in Europe since the end of the Second World War. The long trail of those seeking refuge stretches from Greece, through Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary towards central Europe. Refugees often travel large sections of the 4,000 kilometres between Syria and Germany, France and Sweden on foot.

The reaction of the European governments to the humanitarian crisis created by their war policy is to further seal off the borders by expanding border defences and the border police. The European Union's (EU's) ruthless and aggressive treatment of refugees, leaving them to their fate without food, water, accommodation and sanitary facilities, is breathtaking.

Last week, German interior minister Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democrats, CDU) announced an intensified programme of deterrence heralding worsening accommodations; the cutting of financial support; and the restriction of resources and escalated deportations.

Greece

By the end of July, the European border protection agency Frontex had registered 130,500 migrants at the Greek border. In July alone, the figure was 49,500, compared to 41,000 for the whole of 2014. According to Frontex, 90 percent came from Syria and Afghanistan. The remaining 10 percent were mainly Iraqis and Pakistanis.

In the Aegean, where the Turkish border can be seen with the naked eye from the Greek islands, the refugees mainly land on the islands of Kos, Samos, Lesbos and Chios.

Inhumane conditions, like those recently made public on Kos, were also reported on Lesbos in July by the organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF). "It is totally unacceptable that people are left to their own devices in dilapidated buildings and on rubbish tips, where there is hardly any access to water and certainly not to toilets, putting the health of these people at risk," Elisabeta Faga, coordinator of MSF's emergency intervention on Lesbos, told the German organisation ProAsyl.

The situation on Lesbos "was the worst he had ever seen in

Europe," an MSF spokesman reported. The island's reception centre, where up to 1,000 migrants were arriving every day, is overflowing. There are hundreds of tents in front of the camp, and a further 3,000 in a temporary tent camp nearby.

An Afghan refugee told ProAsyl that a catering company brought only 150 meals once a day for over 1,000 people. Long lines formed in front of the few badly smelling showers. "The situation has driven some crazy. I didn't wash a single moment there."

It takes days for the refugees to be registered and brought to Athens. There, many sleep in the open air. A worker from an aid organisation told ProAsyl about the conditions in the Greek capital: "The situation is extremely critical. There is no support on the part of the government.... Women, children and men lack the most basic essentials: they lack food, water and medication. Some [Greek] residents have started bringing clothes, shoes and other things for the refugees, but this falls well short of what is required."

From Athens, the refugees have to travel on foot through Thessaloniki to the city of Idomeni, where many arrive totally exhausted, including families with small children, pregnant women and the elderly.

The Syriza government has shown no interest in improving the conditions for the refugees. On the contrary, riot police units are being transferred to the islands. The Greek minister for population protection, Yiannis Pangasius, intends to increase measures to prevent refugees from arriving. To this end, so-called push-back operations are to be revived, which are totally illegal under international law.

The Syriza government halted these missions in February, in which boats were brutally forced back to the Turkish coast. But in July, a news blog published an official document which directed coast guard units in the Aegean to implement measures "to prevent arrival on Greek territory" if a refugee boat is discovered.

The German daily *Tageszeitung* recently reported four incidents in which masked Special Forces units of the Greek coast guard boarded refugee boats and removed the engine or confiscated petrol, according to information from the refugee organisation Watch the Med. The boats then drifted helplessly until the Turkish coast guard picked them up and returned them to the Turkish coast.

According to a report from the Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet*, Turkish fishermen even witnessed the Greek coast guard sinking a

boat carrying 50 Syrian refugees.

Macedonia

At the border, refugees have to survive outside in the scorching summer sun until they are registered. An Iraqi father from Mosul told *Deutschlandfunk* about his odyssey: "I never thought that I would have to live through something so terrible. In Greece, in this miserable camp, I couldn't even recognise myself and I asked myself, what was the hell that forced me to go through all of this. But it was hell which forced me to leave my home."

His goal was to reach England, but "there is no legal route for us refugees," he complained. "We have to go illegally from border to border."

The army of refugees travelling through Macedonia has grown continuously since the beginning of the year. In June, hundreds were travelling through the country every day, and in August it was 2,000. The route directly through Macedonia carries many dangers. At the end of April, 14 refugees walking along the main railway line were hit and killed by a train.

In addition, the Macedonian police are notorious for blackmailing refugees to give them money, mistreating them and arbitrarily deporting them or detaining them in a refugee camp near the capital, Skopje.

Until the end of June, it was illegal to assist refugees with their onward journey. The use of public transport by refugees was also forbidden. Now, to ensure that they do not stay in Macedonia, refugees have been granted the authorisation to pass through the country and the right to use the trains if they leave within 72 hours.

Serbia

The city of Presovo lies on the Serbian-Macedonian border and is the refugees' next waypoint. Around 2,000 refugees arrive there daily, but the local police authorities are totally incapable of registering and caring for them. The Serbian Red Cross is not able to adequately care for the people forced to camp in front of the police station.

The foodstuffs distributed are sufficient for only a third of the refugees. Mohammed, who fled Damascus with his seven-member family, told the online magazine *Sieh die Welt*, "We have nothing! We give the children and elderly our food." As in Greece, residents of Presovo have sought to assist, organising empty buildings and collecting food for the refugees.

If the refugees reach the capital Belgrade, they have to sleep in the open once again. Next to the main bus station in a park, hundreds of Syrians are stuck without toilets. According to a report by Austria's *Standard* newspaper, children are sleeping on cardboard sheets under park benches.

"Why should I be scared of death? Behind me is only death, and if death is all that lies ahead, then it makes no difference to me," Maher from Aleppo told the *Standard*.

"The declaration that a barrier is to be built on the border between Serbia and Hungary has resulted in refugees trying to reach western or northern Europe even more quickly," stated Hans Schodder, head of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Serbia, explaining the growing number of refugees.

Hungary

For many refugees, Hungary is currently the main entry point into the EU. More than 100,000 people have already been registered in the country this year, but very few remain there. At no point are there more than 10,000 to 15,000 refugees in Hungary. The repressive asylum policy of the far-right government of Prime Minister Victor Orban has encouraged refugees to quickly leave the country for Austria, Germany, France, Sweden or Britain.

Refugees are criminalised as illegal immigrants and detained in Hungary. In response to the growing number of asylum seekers, the government is building a four-metre high barrier on the border with Serbia, armed with barbed wire. Prisoners and social welfare recipients have been forced to work for the army in building the barrier.

In addition, the Orban government is planning the mass deportation of refugees to Serbia. The Serbian government is clearly working with the EU to establish reception centres for refugees at its borders. A humanitarian catastrophe therefore seems inevitable. "It cannot be that Europe has learnt nothing from the tragedies of the twentieth century," commented an exasperated Schodder to the *Standard*.

If people flee to Austria or Germany, they will once again be registered, kept in camps with inhumane and unhygienic conditions, provided with inadequate food and denounced as "social tourists" and "asylum abusers." Claudia Roth, vice president of the German parliament and deputy for the Green Party, was on the Greek island of Kos over recent days.

Roth found the conditions there to be humiliating and inhumane. "I have experienced a lot; I have been in many refugee camps around the world. But what I have experienced in the middle of Europe was really hell," she stated.

She avoided mentioning her own party's responsibility in creating these hellish conditions. It was the Greens that, during the Social Democrat-Green Party coalition from 1998 to 2005, assisted in the devastation of parts of the Balkans with the NATO bombardment of Serbia, and the destruction of its infrastructure.

This same period saw a series of initiatives, measures and guidelines that are now making life difficult for refugees established at an EU level supported, and even initiated, by the Social Democrat-Green government. These included the creation of the EU border protection agency Frontex.

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