

France to close borders, Germany to cut benefits as refugee crisis escalates

By Alex Lantier
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The major European powers are escalating their attacks on refugees fleeing from war-torn countries in Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced Tuesday night that France would reestablish its borders, while German officials moved yesterday to slash benefits for asylum seekers arriving in Germany from other EU countries.

These announcements came as the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) revised upwards its estimates for how many hundreds of thousands of people are fleeing to Europe. “In 2015, UNHCR anticipates that approximately 400,000 will seek international protection in Europe via the Mediterranean. In 2016, this number could reach 450,000 or more,” it reported.

It said that the largest group was Syrian refugees, who had fled the war and were now forced to abandon refugee camps in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan due to the funding shortfall in aid programs for these camps. It indicated that its projection was likely to be an underestimate of the total, as it assumed that refugees would cease attempting the journey as the weather gets colder. Already this year, it said, 366,000 have made the voyage.

With at least four million Syrian refugees abroad facing escalating hardship, and Washington and the EU set to escalate the war in Syria, the refugee crisis seems set to escalate indefinitely.

The response of Berlin and Paris to the crisis, as well as the savage attacks on refugees carried out by the Eastern European and Balkan states through which they are passing, underscore the callous and brutal response of the EU to their plight.

Speaking to the French National Assembly, Valls announced the recruitment of 900 police in order to

prepare to reestablish border checks and deny entrance to migrants. German police have started carrying out border checks of people crossing into Germany from France, which had also already reestablished border checks along the Franco-Italian border against immigrants crossing from Libya to Italy and into France.

“France will not hesitate to temporarily reestablish border controls,” Valls said, citing Germany’s decision to reestablish border controls and temporarily close its borders to thousands of migrants. “We have already established temporary border controls this spring at [the Franco-Italian] border. We will not hesitate to do it again, as the Schengen rules allow us to do each time circumstances require it, if it is necessary, in the coming days or weeks.”

He announced that France would also carry out 16,000 forced deportations this year, compared to 14,000 last year. He claimed that this was critical for France to afford aiding refugees that are arriving in France, announcing only €279 million in extra funding for 2015-2016 to deal with the crisis.

France’s decision came as countries across Europe reestablish border controls. Beyond Hungary, which is building barbed wire and wall defenses across its southern border, Denmark has closed its border with Germany, Austria has closed its border with Hungary, Slovakia has closed its Hungarian and Austrian borders, the Czech Republic has closed its Austrian border, and Poland has declared that it is ready to restart border controls immediately.

While many of these border closings are said to be temporary, to continue only as long as the refugee crisis persists, this clearly means there will be a lasting suspension of the free travel between EU countries supposedly guaranteed by the Schengen accords.

Reports emerged yesterday that Berlin plans to slash benefits for refugees, as part of its preparation for the escalation of the refugee crisis.

German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière is planning sharp cuts to public benefits for asylum seekers in a bill now being fast-tracked for passage that was leaked to AFP yesterday. Refugees who travel to Germany from other EU countries would only receive travel tickets and provisions, not the full benefits guaranteed by law. Immigrants who seek to avoid deportation by refusing to name their country of origin would be refused the right to work and lose social benefits.

“The government’s draft will make partition, deterrence, and homelessness all part of the program,” declared Pro Asyl, a pro-asylum seeker campaign group, on its web site.

Manfred Schmidt, the head of Germany’s office for migration and refugees, resigned yesterday, after declaring in a radio interview earlier this week that he had not predicted “some effects” of the refugee crisis. “You can now say I have failed because that’s how it is,” said Schmidt, who has been the target of criticism from local authorities in Germany who charge him with failing to give them adequate resources to deal with the arriving refugees.

German police reported yesterday that 7,266 “unauthorized border crossings” had taken place on Wednesday, twice as many as Tuesday, while 4,600 refugees are waiting in Austria to cross the border into Germany.

With refugees being turned away from Hungary, which has closed its border for 30 days after the brutal crackdown by Hungarian police Wednesday on refugees trying to cross the Hungarian-Serbian border, thousands are now seeking to cross into the EU from Serbia via Croatia. With thousands of refugees walking towards the Croatian capital, Zagreb, Croatian authorities cited fears that they will stray into minefields left behind from the 1990s war with Serbia.

A police raid on refugees in Croatia’s Tovarnik rail station, reportedly aimed at putting women and children into buses bound for Zagreb, ended with a stampede in which at least one person died of a heart attack.

Riad, an Iraqi refugee from Baghdad, told Reuters in Tovarnik that he had been separated from his wife and

child. “Only women and children are now allowed onto buses. My wife and child are gone and [police] do not allow me to join them. My phone does not work.”

Croatian Interior Minister Ranko Ostojic threatened yesterday that Croatia would close its border with Serbia if another 8,000 people were to cross the border into Croatia in one day. Nevertheless, attempts to block hundreds of refugees from entering Croatia by closing border crossings ended in failure, after refugees clashed with Croatian border police forces at two crossings and succeeded in forcing entry into the country. With neighboring Slovenia threatening to close its borders, however, refugees in Croatia still face many obstacles before reaching Germany or Scandinavia.

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