



Refugees victimised in EU-Belarus ?hybrid war?

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ON THE border between Belarus and its EU neighbours; Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, refugees from the global south are once again being used as pawns in a vicious inter-state power struggle.

Embattled Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko has been accused by the EU of manufacturing a migrant ?crisis? for the EU in retaliation for sanctions placed on his regime. The EU has stated that the sanctions are in response to the fraudulent nature of the August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, repression of anti-regime protesters and journalists, and the grounding of a Ryanair jet flying over Belarusian airspace to arrest two opposition activists.

The Belarusian state has committed numerous acts of repression against its population. On 24 September, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet pointed to 129 civil society organisations that have been closed down, including the Belarusian Association of Journalists, and to persistent allegations of the ?widespread and systematic torture? of the country?s 650 political prisoners.

MIGRANT SURGE

Since early summer, neighbouring EU countries have reported a ?surge? of migrants attempting to cross their borders from Belarus with the intention of claiming asylum. Eyewitnesses and border police confirm that Belarusian security forces are organising transport to the border and encouraging people to cross, after drawing them to Belarus on the promise of passage to Europe.

The migrants hail from the Middle East and North Africa, with higher numbers of Kurds, Syrians and Afghans reported. Although the numbers of migrants crossing are not in any way overwhelming (up to 10,000 across the three countries), they are considered by some in these states to represent a major social disturbance. This is the result of a strong trend of ethnonationalism fuelling irrational fears about the impact of these migrants on these countries? ?ethnically homogeneous? societies.

The Governments of Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have responded with varying degrees of repression. All three have used various measures, including building fences and heightened police and military presence, to discourage the crossings and have declared states of emergency along the border.

Poland has gone furthest along this path, forcibly removing migrants who have already crossed the border. Some migrants remain stuck between the border forces of the two countries without access to water, food or shelter. This is clearly in breach of the right to claim asylum under international law, and has been criticised by Amnesty International and other human rights groups.

On 25 August, the European Court of Human Rights ordered Poland to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants and refugees at their borders, renewing the decree on 27 September. Poland has so far failed to comply with the Court?s order and at least six deaths have been verified by human rights groups.

In Lithuania those who enter the country are being kept in temporary facilities. With pre-existing migration centres unequipped to handle the new numbers, migrants were initially housed in forest encampments or disused schools and later rehoused in re-purposed public facilities, including former prisons. Poor hygiene, lack of water and heating have

been reported in many of these facilities.

The legal basis for indefinite administrative detention of all those crossing the border is not clear. Officials are also engaging in diplomatic efforts to prevent migrants leaving their home countries in the first place. In August, Lithuanian officials flew to Baghdad and negotiated a stoppage of commercial flights from Iraq to Minsk.

IMPERIALIST CHESS GAME

Although the EU must maintain the pretence of enforcing human rights law, its main interest is in demonstrating to Lukashenko and his Russian backers that this manufactured migrant surge will be met with an aggressive response. Any individual cases escalated to the European Court of Human Rights will take months or years to resolve. In the meantime, each state is getting on with policing the border of Fortress Europe.

Meanwhile, Belarus is pursuing what EU officials have called a 'hybrid war' of disinformation to foment social discontent in the EU states. This has included attempts to stoke anti-migrant sentiment by alleging that migrants have links with terrorist groups or are producing child pornography, and accusing Lithuanian border officials of beating up and even killing migrants.

Although narratives of social discontent proliferate in the international media, there have also been outpourings of solidarity on the ground. In Lithuania, a variety of humanitarian aid organisations, including the Red Cross, Caritas and faith-based groups, have been overwhelmed by volunteers and donations. Additionally, on 17 October, large demonstrations took place calling for more humane policies towards the migrants. In Warsaw, an estimated 3,000 people gathered under the slogan 'Stop the Torture on the Border'.

There have also been solidarity efforts abroad. On Sunday 17th October, several hundred people gathered at the Polish embassy in London to protest against the government's illegal pushbacks of migrants across the border. The demonstration was organised by humanitarian organisations like Amnesty, alongside Polish groups including Polish Migrants Organise.

However, even among those committed to providing humanitarian aid, the distinction in the public consciousness between 'legitimate' refugees who are fleeing war and persecution and 'illegal' economic migrants persists. There have also been few attempts to question the logic of borders and the rights of states to police them. This demonstrates that the poison of racism is alive and kicking within the working class. Racist ideology is disseminated by the ruling class as a tool to divide and rule the workers and to prevent them from recognising that their true enemy is not the workers of other countries but instead the system of global capitalism which oppresses all workers.

Other European states are also preparing to repel a new surge of refugees from Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover. Greece has recently completed a fence and surveillance system on its border with Turkey. Greek Citizens' Protection Minister Michalis Chrisochoidis said on a visit to the island of Evros: 'We cannot wait, passively, for the possible impact. Our borders will remain inviolable.' This again demonstrates the hypocrisy of the EU, which calls for the human rights of migrants to be respected while simultaneously fortifying its borders and allowing the corpses of migrants to pile up on the beaches of the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, it is the migrants fleeing unimaginable poverty and war, who are suffering the consequences of this imperialist chess game. The labour movement, whether in Poland, Greece or anywhere else, must stand shoulder to shoulder with these migrants and fight for a world in which racist borders are cast into the dustbin of history, along with the global system of capital on which they rest.