

BELARUS/POLAND

Migration crisis on the Belarus-Poland border

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Thousands of migrants have been arriving to the Belarusian border since July 2021 (BBC 15/11/2021). As at 13 November, an estimated 20,000 migrants and asylum seekers are present in Belarus (NYT 17/11/2021; The Economist 13/11/2021). At least 5,000 people are stuck on the Poland-Belarus border without adequate access to services or assistance (BBC 19/11/2021 a). Migrants and asylum seekers (mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria) intending to cross into the EU have arrived in Belarus since late July (Vox News 14/11/2021; BBC 26/11/2021). Some have been stranded in the border areas for weeks because of 'pushback' policies by Polish border control and coercion by Belarusian officials to cross again.

The crisis started when Belarusian authorities, through tourist agencies, began promoting tours with accompanying tourist visas to Belarus in the Middle East (BBC 22/10/2021). Smugglers also spread misinformation through social media to encourage travelling to Belarus (NYT 22/11/2021). Once people arrived in Belarus, misinformation led them to believe that they could easily enter the EU by crossing either the Polish, Lithuanian, or Latvian borders.

In response, the three countries deployed border patrols and put up fences to dissuade crossing (The Economist 09/11/2021). Lithuania declared a state of emergency for a month starting 10 November (CNN 11/11/2021), while Latvia declared a state of emergency for three months starting 11 August (France 24 10/08/2021). Polish authorities reinforced border control and prevented migrants from entering the country. The Polish Government, the EU, NATO, and the US blamed Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for manufacturing the crisis in retaliation for the EU sanctions imposed over the arrest of dissidents, which happened amid disputed elections in Belarus and a crackdown against the opposition (CNN 09/11/2021; DW 13/11/2021; AP News 11/11/2021; BBC 19/11/2021 b).

On 2 September, Poland declared a state of emergency covering 183 localities in a 3km strip along the border with Belarus in the provinces of Podlaskie and Lubelskie (Polish Republic Service 31/08/2021). Restrictions include a ban on staying in the area covered by the state of emergency; the prohibition of recording and photographing objects and areas, including border infrastructure, border control officers, police, and soldiers; and limited access to public information on activities carried out in the area. The state of emergency was extended by 60 days on 30 September (bne IntelliNews 01/10/2021). Only Polish Border Guards, ambulances, and residents are allowed to enter the 3km exclusion zone along the border (The Guardian 21/10/2021). There have been documented instances of ambulances failing to enter the area. Reasons include unclear locations and the ambulance used by activist doctors being refused entry (KII 23/11/2021 b).

In October, Belarus reported stopping 5,000 attempts to cross the border, while the Polish Border Guard recorded 11,300 (DW 09/11/2021; Schengen Visa 11/10/2021). In comparison, the Polish border agency recorded only 88 attempts in 2020 (BBC 16/11/2021).

In November, a group of migrants attempted to reach Poland by going through Ukraine but was stopped by border control (KII 23/11/2021 a)

Belarus-Poland border crossings



Source: AFP, see full map on page 5.

Key findings

- **Migrants and asylum seekers are in critical need of shelter and NFIs, protection and legal assistance, medical care, food, and water.** They urgently need adequate shelter as winter has begun. The first snow has fallen, and the temperature drops below zero during the night. The border area has harsh winters with extremely cold temperatures and heavy snowfall.
- **Access to the affected population is constrained on both sides of the border.** In September, Polish authorities imposed a state of emergency on 183 localities within 3km of the border with Belarus, blocking humanitarian organisations from accessing the affected population. Grassroots movements and community members are leading the humanitarian response in areas outside state of emergency zones. On the Belarus side, the 3km area closest to the border is only accessible to military and security officials (HRW 24/11/2021). Humanitarian access is sporadic and controlled by authorities.

About this report

Aim: this report outlines the living conditions and needs of migrants and asylum seekers stuck in the Belarus-Poland border area as a result of a political crisis and instrumentalised migration policies.

Method: the report is based on secondary data review and three key informant interviews conducted in November with humanitarian actors and activists present in Belarus and Poland.

Limitations and information gaps: access to information on the crisis is limited on both sides of the border. Both Polish and Belarusian authorities have imposed policies restricting access to the border areas, making it impossible to independently verify figures and information about conditions in the affected areas. There is no up-to-date information on the number of migrants and asylum seekers or of attempted crossings in Poland or Belarus.

HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

On 11 November, 3,000–4,000 migrants and asylum seekers, including at least 600 women and 200 children, were stranded at the Bruzgi crossing in Belarus on the border with Poland (Al Jazeera 12/11/2021; AP News 11/11/2021). Among this group were pregnant women, children, and people with disabilities (UNHCR 12/11/2021; KII 24/11/2021).

Since the beginning of the crisis, at least 13 people have died, including two children (IRC 22/11/2021; Save the Children 17/11/2021; The Guardian 18/11/2021). In most cases, no information is available about the cause of death. At least one person died of hypothermia; another died while attempting to cross a river between Poland and Belarus (Euronews 16/11/2021; News 18 13/11/2021). The exact number of people who have died is difficult to confirm because of the length and remoteness of the border and because governments deny media access to some areas on both sides of the border (CBS News 18/11/2021; Al Jazeera 18/11/2021).

Migrants and volunteer groups present on the border have reported that Polish and Belarusian guards have been perpetrating abuse and violence against migrants (KII 24/11/2021; HRW 12/11/2021; Info Migrants 15/11/2021 and 22/11/2021).

On 16 November, there was a standoff between the Polish Border Guard and a group of migrants and asylum seekers. The latter threw stones and other objects at the guards and tried to cross into Poland. The Polish Border Guard responded by using a water cannon and

tear gas (France 24 16/11/2021; CNN 17/11/2021). While there is no information on migrants and asylum seekers injured, at least seven officers were injured during the clashes, according to the Polish police (CNN 17/11/2021).

On 18 November, Belarusian authorities cleared the migrants' camps on the border. The Government opened temporary shelters in a transport and logistics centre near the Kuznica-Bruzgi checkpoint (NYT 18/11/2021; BBC 19/11/2021 a). There are at least two logistical centres on the Belarusian side: one in the Grodna region, in the northwest of Belarus, and another in Svitanak, near the Lithuanian border. At least 1,800 migrants are in one centre, including 380 women and 325 children (KII 23/11/2021 a). Overall, there are between 6,000–7,000 migrants in one area of the border on the Belarusian side, including those in government centres (KII 23/11/2021 a).

On 18 November, at least 100 migrants were detained by the Polish security forces after crossing the Polish border (DW 18/11/2021; France 24 18/11/2021).

Actions to reduce movement to Belarus

- On 10 November, the EU decided to increase sanctions on Belarus for “those responsible for, or contributing to the crisis” (EU 10/11/2021). Sanctions included the creation of a blacklist of travel companies “involved in the trafficking and smuggling of migrants” (Reuters 23/11/2021 a).
- The national Belarus flight carrier Belavia announced that it would ban citizens from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen on its flights from Dubai to Minsk (Belavia 14/11/2021). Turkey's Civil Aviation Authority also barred citizens from Iraq, Syria, and Yemen from travelling to Belarus (DW 12/11/2021 a).
- Visa applications for Belarus are suspended in Iraq and will not be issued anymore, as Iraq has revoked the license of the Belarusian honorary consul in Bagdad (DW 12/11/2021 b).

Return movements

- Iraq has been arranging flights for its citizens stranded on the border and wishing to leave Belarus since 18 November (DW 15/11/2021). Iraqi authorities have indicated that around 1,000 people have returned to Iraq as at 26 November (NYT 26/11/2021; AP News 26/11/2021; Euronews 18/11/2021). More flights for around 800 migrants are expected to depart on the week of 29 November (RFE/RL 27/11/2021).
- IOM is providing Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration on the Belarus side (UNHCR 12/11/2021).

Access constraints

- Migrants and asylum seekers have no regular access to services and health assistance because of fear of being exposed and pushed back by border guards. Disruptions have prevented communications between migrants and responders. Migrants communicate with activists in Poland via text message services and transmit their location in the hope of receiving assistance. This method presents issues as the activist groups have been tracked by the Polish Border Guard and may unintentionally lead the guards to the migrants, who will subsequently be pushed back to the Belarusian side (KII 24/11/2021).
- In Poland, various humanitarian organisations have requested the Government to grant access to the migrants, to no avail (KII 23/11/2021 b). There has been a medical response by the Polish Center for International Aid. Overall, the response mostly consists of grassroots movements run by activist groups, volunteers, and community members (KII 24/11/2021; DW 21/11/2021). They do not have access to the zones covered by the state of emergency, where most migrants are stranded. The Polish Red Cross has had access to the area in some instances when accompanied by an ombudsperson. The response is very limited and not sustainable in the long term.
- In Belarus, humanitarian organisations can only visit specific centres where the migrants are allowed to stay by the Government. They do not have access to other centres where migrants are also staying. Access is granted on an ad hoc basis, and Belarusian authorities accompany humanitarians at all times during their visit, which prevents them from conducting confidential interviews with migrants (KII 23/11/2021 a). Aside from the Belarusian Red Cross, no other organisation has access to the border area on the Belarusian side (KII 23/11/2021 a).
- The media do not have access to the main areas on the Polish side of the border. Journalists have been treated violently by the police and detained for violating the state of emergency (Al Jazeera 18/11/2021; IPI 18/11/2021).

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

The lack of disaggregated data makes it challenging to provide adequate and tailored needs-based assistance to the migrants according to their needs (KII 23/11/2021 a).

Activist groups in Poland have received at least 3,000 requests for assistance from the migrants since the crisis started. At the peak of the crisis, between the end of October and early November, they received 1,000 requests per week (KII 23/04/2021 b). The number of requests has decreased in the past weeks but is increasing again, which shows that the crisis is continuing (KII 23/04/2021 b).

Shelter

People continue to attempt crossing the border and are stranded in the forest, sleeping outdoors in harsh weather conditions they are not prepared to withstand. They need shelter and other materials for warmth and protection from the elements (Al Jazeera 21/11/2021).

Shelter needs are higher on the Polish side of the border, where all the migrants are stranded in the forest and humanitarian assistance is currently very limited (KII 24/11/2021).

In 2017, the entire territory of Belarus was affected by extreme weather, reaching -29°C in January and affecting 50,000 people (IFRC 18/08/2017). In January 2021, the Belarusian town of Grodno, near the border with Poland where some of the migrants currently are, also experienced a wave of cold temperatures (Belta 17/01/2021). With the first snow already recorded on 23 November (Reuters 23/11/2021 b), there is an urgent need to provide adequate shelter to the migrants before winter (December–February) and the coldest temperatures set in (Weather & Climate accessed 16/11/2021).

Video evidence shows at least one of the warehouses to be overcrowded and warehouse shelves turned into makeshift beds (DW 20/11/2021; ABC News 21/11/2021). This situation causes a safety issue for migrants and their possessions.

NFIs

Given the already cold weather, migrants need specialised equipment to survive outdoors, especially as temperatures are quickly dropping (UNHCR 12/11/2021). The majority of them are unprepared and ill-equipped for cold weather; some migrants report not even having shoes and having had frostbite (Info Migrants 26/10/2021; Al Jazeera 22/11/2021). The Polish and Belarusian Red Cross have distributed blankets and warm clothes to the migrants, but the NFI response remains insufficient given limited access (KII 23/11/2021 a).

Protection and legal assistance

There are multiple reports of violence committed against the migrants and asylum seekers by both the Polish and Belarusian border guards (Info Migrants 18/11/2021; HRW 12/11/2021; KII 23/11/2021 b). By trying to cross the border, migrants are exposing themselves to more violence.

Legal protection and assistance are needed, as people are pushed back when they arrive to Poland, which is potentially in violation of international law (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor 21/10/2021). The Polish Government recently passed legislation legalising pushbacks at the border (Reuters 14/10/2021). Polish activists continue to provide legal assistance, including

assistance in requesting asylum when necessary, but even the asylum seekers filing official asylum applications have been pushed back to Belarus (KII 24/11/2021).

Families have been separated at the border, with some reporting losing their children in the forest while attempting to cross the border (KII 24/11/2021; Al Jazeera 22/11/2021). Some migrants reported having their personal items confiscated by Belarusian guards (KII 24/11/2021; BBC 09/11/2021; NYT 26/11/2021).

Video evidence suggests that at least one of the warehouses in which the migrants are kept is non-segregated, and there are no walls to ensure privacy (DW 20/11/2021). This situation poses a risk of sexual and gender-based violence as a result of crowded conditions and migrants and asylum seekers being in a vulnerable position. There are anecdotal reports of sexual violence relayed to the activists on the border (KII 24/11/2021). Available numbers suggest that a bigger part of the migrants are male. For example, there were approximately 600 women out of 2,000 migrants in one camp in Belarus on the border (CNN 14/11/2021).

At least 200 children are among the migrants in one area of the Belarusian border (CNN 14/11/2021). Children are being pushed back or detained at the border between the two countries and are exposed to abuse and neglect (UNICEF 09/11/2021). At least two children have died since the beginning of the crisis (Save the Children 17/11/2021).

There are people with disabilities among the migrants in need of additional protection assistance (KII 24/11/2021).

Health

Medical care is urgently needed. Migrants and asylum seekers are at high risk of hypothermia, as the temperature comes close to zero degrees Celsius at night (CNN 14/11/2021). In December, the mean temperature is expected to drop below zero, which will put the migrants camping outside at risk of hypothermia.

Doctors in Poland have been treating migrants and asylum seekers outside of the exclusion zone for hypothermia, dehydration, hunger, food poisoning, and trauma (Al Jazeera 11/11/2021 b; CNN 11/11/2021). Some of them require hospitalisation. There have been instances of migrants avoiding hospitalisation in Poland, as border control takes them from the hospital and forcibly displaces them back to Belarus (KII 23/11/2021b). Migrants have sustained wounds from violence and attempts to cross barbed wires and the forest (Al Jazeera 11/11/2021; KII 23/11/2021 b).

The Polish Center for International Aid – the main health responder in the area – has no access to the area covered by the state of emergency and reports difficulties accessing the area because of the terrain and the forest (RMF 24 17/11/2021).

The lack of access to drinking water is putting the migrants and asylum seekers at risk for various diseases (Al Jazeera 11/11/2021 c).

Three out of five migrants in Lithuania arriving from Belarus that talked to WHO required medical treatment for a health condition during their journey (WHO 12/11/2021).

As people continue to be stranded at the border in harsh conditions, their physical and mental state have started to deteriorate, with more acute medical assistance and psychosocial support needs reported because of isolation, exhaustion, and the lack of access to services that include communication (Reuters 24/08/2021; KII 24/11/2021).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Terrain

Podlaskie province on the border with Belarus is the coldest and least populated region of Poland (Britannica accessed 24/11/2021). The Białowieża Forest that migrants go through covers both the Polish and Belarusian territories. The biggest portion of the forest is occupied by wet grounds and swampy meadows on areas periodically flooded and with the presence of wildlife (Polska accessed 24/11/2021). The composition of the forest makes access difficult for humanitarian responders trying to provide assistance. There is also a safety risk for the migrants that are stranded in the forest; as per Polish tourist regulation, staying in the forest at night is forbidden for safety reasons (BPN accessed 24/11/2021). Some migrants report walking through the Białowieża Forest on the Belarus-Poland border through swamps, marshland, and difficult forest terrain in an attempt to reach Poland (HRW 12/11/2021). The Bug River going through Belarus and Poland forms the southern section of the natural border between the two countries; migrants have risked crossing it despite the cold weather. At least one migrant has died trying to cross the river (Euronews 16/11/2021).

COVID-19

In Poland, COVID-19 cases have increased over the last three weeks, with the fourth wave reaching its highest level at an average of 21,607 cases each day as at 25 November 2021 (Reuters accessed 25/11/2021). In Belarus, statistics on the number of COVID-19 cases are likely to be underreported.

In Belarus, at least one migrant has tested positive for COVID-19 and was sent to the hospital for further treatment (KII 24/11/2021). There is no information on the exact number of migrants being tested. In Poland, policies to curb the spread of COVID-19 are used as justifications for pushing migrants back (KII 23/11/2021 b).

Belarus-Poland border crossings



- ◆ Road
- ◆ Train
- ◆ Pedestrian



Source: AFP