

WE ARE MONITORING

Weekly Update PL-BY

04.05-10.05.23

The following study contains first-hand data from people participating in the events described. We would like to thank all humanitarian organisations operating in the Polish-Belarusian border area and individuals working with them for providing us with reports of their interventions. Our sources include organisations, informal initiatives as well as individuals, often wishing to remain anonymous, so we do not mention them by name unless they have given us permission to do so. Special thanks are due to all those on the move who have chosen to share their own experiences with us.

Humanitarian workers and those working with them emphasise that the difficult context and ethics of their work often prevent them from obtaining more detailed information about the stories and situations of people on the move. During interventions, many are in such a poor psycho-physiological state that it is not possible to obtain more data without putting them at risk of retraumatization or making them feel that they owe humanitarian organisations any answers to their questions by virtue of receiving material or legal support from them.

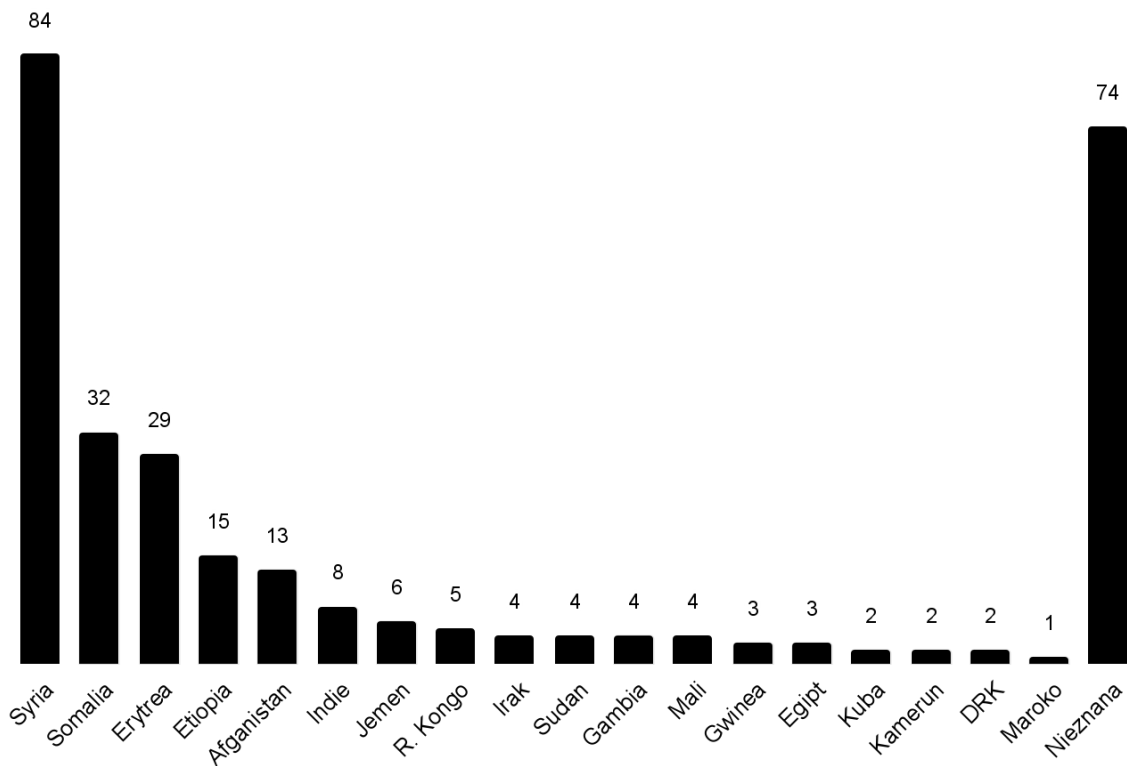
The described interventions and support provided to persons on the move took place on the territory of the Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships. For persons in Belarus, information is provided on the legal situation and access to procedures for applying for international protection in Poland and Belarus.

We hope that this brief outline of the context will help you to better understand the current dynamics of events in the border region with Belarus. For additional questions and recommendations from individuals or organisations who might also be interested in receiving the reports, please contact wearemonitoring@gmail.com.

Quantitative summary

	groups	individuals	children 0-17	women (inc. pregnant)
Total # of Requests	83	295	10	38 (2)
Requests from Belarus / including Sistiema	12 / 5	57 / 33	4 / 2	8 (1) / 7
Assistance provided	51	134	4	25 (2)
• in-kind support / including hospitals	50 / 12	118 / 12	4 / 1	25 / 6
• legal aid / including hospitals	12 / 9	19 / 9	3 / 1	4 / 4
• medical assistance PL / BY	6 / 0	7 / 0	-	3
Reported pushbacks	22	79	2	11
Reported missing persons	3	3	-	2
Reported PL/BY violence	5 / 14	11 / 35	2 / 3	1 / 3
Border-Related-Injuries	8	8	1	3
Number of interventions	63not applicable.....		

Countries of origin:



Demographics

This week, we received information requests from a total of 83 groups representing 295 people on the move. Among them were 10 minors. The youngest, children aged 7 and 9, came from Syria and traveled with their mother. The family reported them missing, but they were later found in one of the centers in Latvia. The age of one of the children, staying in the strip of land between the Polish barrier and the Belarusian Sistiema, in a large, 22-person group could not be determined. The remaining minors were between 15 and 17 years old. At least five of them traveled unaccompanied, including a 17-year-old Somali girl with a leg injury who was hospitalized due to the injury likely caused by crossing the barrier, and a 15-year-old Afghan boy next to the Polish barrier. At least two groups (seven people from Eritrea and five people from Somalia) were described as "teenagers and young adults" by those reporting from the field. Since it was not possible to determine their age, they were not included in the statistics. However, we do observe groups mainly from Somalia, but also from Eritrea and Ethiopia, consisting entirely of very young persons, often all under the age of 20.

Two girls and three boys from Somalia. All very young, among them a brother (17 years old) and a sister. They seemed like a good team that cared about each other. The girls feel safe [in the group]. One of them (non-sister) was in very bad condition - severe pain all over her body, vomiting, swollen ankle, very painful wrist. Her

companions said it was the result of jumping over a fence and walking for a long time in difficult terrain. She was very dehydrated. After about two hours her condition improved significantly. At least part of the group reached Belarus via Russia in April. They have been in the forest for 10 days and during this time they have eaten nothing but what they found in the forest. They talked about 4-5 pushbacks and violence from Belarusians who did not allow them to return to Minsk and forced them to cross the border to Poland. They did not talk about violence on the Polish side, other than destroying telephones.¹

There were also at least 38 women in the groups that asked for information and help, 2 of whom were reportedly pregnant. Most people (84) came from Syria, Somalia (32), Eritrea (29) and Ethiopia (15). Compared to previous weeks, the number of people from Afghanistan (13) and Yemen (6) has decreased. The rest were from India, Iraq, Sudan or South Sudan², Republic of Congo, DRC, Mali, Gambia, Guinea, Cuba, Cameroon and Morocco. The nationality of 74 people could not be verified, they were traveling in large groups of more than 20 people, who could not be reached by organizations operating in the field.

Belarus and the border zone

33 people reached out from the border zone between the Polish barrier and Belarusian fortifications. Groups consisted of 1 to 22 people. Both people in the so-called Sistiema and those who met on Polish territory reported the ongoing activity of Belarusian authorities. At least four groups reported that the military did not allow them to leave the border zone and forced them to cross the border. To this end, they used physical violence (reported by three groups) and threats (one group). A total of 14 groups with 35 people traveling reported experiencing violence on the Belarusian side. The most common types of violence were beatings – reported by 13 groups, two of which were beaten with telescopic batons, and two more described the beating as "very severe". The last report of violence by the Belarusian authorities concerned a group of people from Syria who were ordered by the Belarusian services to strip down to their underwear in front of the cameras, under the threat of being beaten. One person staying in Belarus, a 16-year-old UASC, describes his experience as follows:

I come from the DRC because I am fleeing the war which is in the East of my country Precisely in [...]. I am an orphan of father and mother. They told me as soon as I was in Belarus I would have the facility to go to Poland so that the Pole[s] could help me. But when I arrived in Belarus, the Belarusian police beat me to death. Find me a solution I want to die soon please I'm a minor. I'm only 16 and I'm homeless³.

Another person, a middle-aged Syrian, was severely beaten on the Belarusian side. According to his account, the authorities ordered his group of people to line up, then beat them one by one, and took their money and provisions.

¹ An excerpt from a humanitarian intervention with a group of five young people from Somalia. Personally identifiable parts have been removed from the story.

² We are not always able to determine which country people come from

³ An excerpt from an interview with a person on the road. Identifiable parts have been removed.

Humanitarian, medical and legal interventions

Humanitarian organizations and collaborators who provided us with information were able to provide humanitarian assistance to 118 people traveling in 50 groups. In total, during this period, we received information about 63 humanitarian interventions, during which people on the road received basic clothes and food, and 5 with the participation of medics cooperating with Medicines Sans Frontiers and the Egala Association. Medical assistance was provided to 7 people traveling in 5 groups – including two Somali women with lower limb injuries (it was not possible to determine whether the injuries were a direct result of crossing the barrier) and a man with a cut from the razor wire.



Photo on the left by Wojtek Radwanski, photo on the right courtesy of the Egala Association

However, organizations and collectives operating in the field report that the vast majority of people encountered in the forests suffer from at least one, and often a combination of ailments such as: trench feet, stomach problems caused by drinking dirty water, wounds and scratches from the razor wire crowning the Polish barrier and numerous lower limb injuries, usually knees (swelling, pain, stiffness) and metatarsal bones (pain, fractures). Mosquitoes and ticks are also becoming a severe issue, especially in swampy areas.

Nineteen people were given assistance or legal advice – nine of them were in hospitals. The Ombudsperson's office intervened at the Border Police station in the case of three Indian citizens. They were detained after a randomly encountered person wanted to extort money from them and then called the Border Guard.

In the hospital, nine people were given legal aid and advice, including three victims of a tragic accident that happened between Trześcianka and Zabłudów on May 5⁴. As a result of the accident that occurred during the pursuit of the Border Guard officers after the car in which 11

⁴ <https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,29731787,wypadek-w-trzesciance-zwiekszy-sie-tragiczny-bilans-nie-zyje.html> [accessed on May 22, 2023].

people on the move were traveling, one died on the spot and the other in hospital after several hours during which the doctors were fighting for his life. Legal care and monitoring were provided by Egala Association case workers and Elil lawyers cooperating with them.

Other people who received support and advice in hospitals include: An unaccompanied 17-year-old Somali woman and another Somali woman with a serious leg fracture. A man from Syria, whose foot was in very bad condition and who, according to his own account, had previously experienced both violence and severe beatings on the Belarusian side, as well as a pushback and a ten-day stay in the forest. He was referred to an open center for foreigners. Despite his serious condition, the Border Guard initially applied for a closed facility. Only a medical consultation and doctor's referral to the hospital forced them to withdraw the notion..



Photo: Wojtek Radwanski

Deportations and violence of the authorities

A total of 22 groups representing 79 people reported being pushed back during this reporting period. Those include two minors and eleven women. 11 of these people additionally reported experiencing physical violence from people they identified as officers of the Polish uniformed authorities. The violence reported during the deportations included beatings (6 people), stripping naked and destroying telephones (3 people), hitting with a truncheon on a leg broken as a result of a fall from a wall (1 person), spraying with pepper spray (1 person). Two people, against the recommendations of doctors, were pushed back after visiting the hospital and putting casts on the fractures. One of them, thanks to the publicity of the case and social pressure, was allowed back to the other side of the fence. The man was right next to the barrier located in Poland, within sight of the Polish Border Guard officers, whom he asked for help. In response, they told him to move away from the barrier, but the man was unable to move on his own. The case was reported, among others, by the Chlebem i Solą initiative and the No To Ci Pomogę Association. As stated:

In his pocket, the gentleman had an ampoule of glucose and a handkerchief with a handwritten inscription „I want to asylum here Poland. Please”.

In an interview with a journalist „Gazeta Wyborcza”⁵ Maciej Chołodowski, POSG spokesperson Katarzyna Zdanowicz initially denied for a long time that there was even a man by the fence who had been pushed there by the guards and needed medical help. Instead she said, that on another section of the border, Polish officers noticed a body by the fence on the Belarusian side and reported it to Belarusian border guards⁶.

Injuries sustained as a result of crossing the barrier

Of the reported injuries, it was confirmed that at least 7 people suffered them as a direct result of crossing the barrier. The Syrian treated in the forest had his ankle and knee damaged and swollen, he was moving with the support of his 19-year-old cousin. An Eritrean woman has her chin torn with razor wire. The woman injured herself while walking over the mountain and broke a tooth. Two men (originating from Ethiopia and Afghanistan) with fractures of the lower limbs, after splints were put on in the hospital, were transported to Belarus. Three other people – a man from Afghanistan and two women from Somalia – are also hospitalized with fractures.

⁵ <https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,29735965,kryzys-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej-uchodzca-ze-zlamana.html> [accessed on May 22, 2023].

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=613999044088756&set=pcb.613970827424911> [accessed on May 22, 2023].

Temperatures according to the Białystok weather station

<https://www.pogodowecentrum.pl/archiwum-pogody/szczegoly-miasta/122950-99999/bialystok>

