

WE ARE MONITORING

Weekly Update PL-BY

11.05-17.05.23

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.

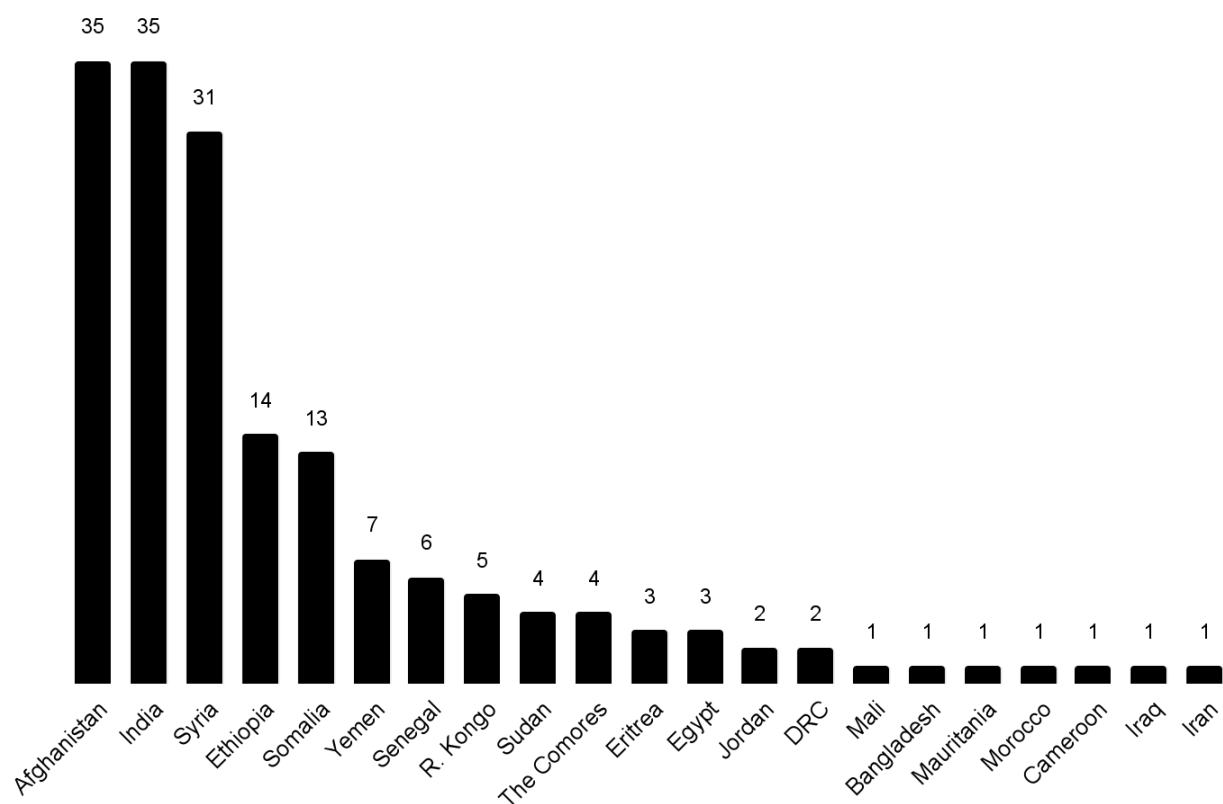
The described interventions and support provided to persons on the move took place on the territory of the Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships. For persons in Belarus, information is provided on the legal situation and access to procedures for applying for international protection in Poland and Belarus.

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	55	178	13	12
Requests BY/ incl. Systema	7 / 1	19 / 3	3	1
Support Provided:	38	130	12	9
• in-kind support / including hospitals	38 / 2	130 / 2	12 / 0	9 / 0
• legal aid / including hospitals	4 / 2	9 / 2	0	0
• medical assistance PL / BY	5 / 0	11/0	2/0	0/0
Reported pushbacks	1	2	-	x
Reported missing persons	4	5	1	1
Reported PL/BY violence	2 / 3	2 / 10	1 / 4	0 / 0
Border-Related-Injuries	5	5	1	1
Number of interventions	44not applicable.....		

Countries of origin



Demographics

This week we were contacted by 55 groups of people on the move representing a total of 178 individuals. Amongst them twelve were minors between 13 and 17 years old and one was a 2-year-old girl from Syria. The child was traveling with her mother, the family reported both of them missing. There were also at least 12 women in the groups. The biggest number of people came from Afghanistan (35), India (35), Syria (31), Ethiopia (14), Somalia (13) Yemen (7), Guinea (7) and Senegal (6). In addition, there were also people from the Republic of the Congo, Sudan and/or South Sudan, the Comoros, Eritrea, Egypt, Jordan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Bangladesh, Iran, Mauritania, Iraq, Morocco and Cameroon.

Since February, we have been observing an increasing diversity among the nationalities of migrants. Interviews with them show that a significant number of people had come to Belarus and Poland relatively recently, between 10–30 days prior to the interview. In this reporting week, for the first time since the fall of 2022, people from Syria and Yemen make up far less than half of all people on the move in our statistics. The vast majority of them, according to data collected by organizations operating in the field and those published by the German police, still fly to Moscow

and from there, usually by land, set off to Minsk and then to the border with Poland. However, there are still some, mainly from Somalia, who travel the direct route from Dubai to Minsk.

Belarus and the border zone

This week, the majority of people reaching out from outside of Poland were located in major Belarusian cities. Most often they sought legal and medical support. One of the individuals contacted us from inside of the Belarusian facility, another asked for support in connection with the chronic illness of his younger sister. Two people asked specifically for information on the procedure for applying for international protection. One of them, a young woman traveling alone, described her motivations as follows:

I came from [country] because my brother and father are forcing me to marry an old man, and I refused, and they threatened me if I did not accept, they would kill me, and I ran away and came, I do not want to marry I want to be free from my father and brother, and I want to live my life and complete my studies.¹

At least one of the persons stranded in Belarus, a man from Yemen, expressed the will to return to his home country. This was due to his prior experience from the Poland-Belarus border that caused poor overall psychophysical condition. He had reportedly experienced violence, prolonged exposure to lack of food, water and rough conditions in the forests. Another man, met by one of the groups providing humanitarian assistance in Poland, confirmed the recurring Belarusian authorities not allowing migrants to freely leave the border area and return to Minsk.

Interventions

Humanitarian organizations and collaborators who provided us with information were able to provide humanitarian assistance to 130 people traveling in 38 groups. 11 people (including 2 minors) from 5 groups were provided with medical assistance by the MSF medics and the Egala Association. Migrants most often traveled in groups of 1-5 people, of which a significant part (11 groups) were people traveling alone. For the last several weeks we have been observing the continued appearance of UASC, most often teenage boys and girls from Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. This week it was two Somali nationals (aged 15 and 17) . Below is an excerpt from a meeting with one of them:

L. from Somalia, 15 years old, 16th birthday in 3 months. He was alone. General physical condition good. He drank warm tea with us, had some soup, he saved leftovers for later. He was soaked from the waist down from crossing the river. Two-day trench feet. Sore knees. (...) L. traveled alone from Somalia. His village was under fire from terrorists. He doesn't know where his mother is now. He flew via Dubai to Belarus. He walked under the first wall and "jumped" through the second one thanks to the ladder. He said that he had been in the forest for 9 days, 7 in Belarus, 2

¹ an excerpt from an interview with a person on the go. Country of origin removed to ensure her anonymity.

in Poland. He said he was with a [larger] group of people, but only three, including him, jumped over the wall. The two were caught by the guards, while he managed to escape. Yesterday he ate nothing all day. He only had a small bottle of water with him, which he filled in the river.²



Photos thanks to the courtesy of the Egala Association

A significant number of people met by field teams complain of pain and injuries to the lower limbs. Knee injuries, severe ankle sprains, bruises and swelling of the legs are the most common. In most cases, due to language barrier and a limited amount of time, it is not possible to precisely specify the circumstances of the occurrence of all injuries. However, it is worth noting that they are characteristic to the ones suffered most commonly as a direct result of crossing the barrier.

At least the men who, according to our knowledge, ended up in one of the hospitals in Podlasie this week, were transported there due to fractures of the lower limbs. People on the move often suffer also from severe weakness and exhaustion as well as gastric problems resulting from prolonged lack of access to fresh water and food. One of the interventions is described below:

(...) she met two exhausted, boys [young men] on the road. They could barely walk. We arrived quickly with a powerbank, water and a packed lunch. At the same time, a medic left Bialystok. They were lying very close to the path, on both sides of it, quite visible from the trail. The older one is unable to move at all and has a very professionally bandaged finger on his hand. We give him fruit puree, then painkillers and water, and we go for the other. He is barefoot, only in wet socks, and very weak, but we manage to carry him under our arms. We give him food, painkillers and water, and we're back for the first one. He's a little stronger now. We both serve water with electrolytes and fish pita. We talk for a while, but they both fall asleep very quickly.³

² a fragment of a humanitarian intervention report. Personally identifiable information has been removed.

³ a fragment of a humanitarian intervention report. Fragments containing sensitive and identifiable data have been removed.

When the men felt a little better, the team managed to determine that they were from Senegal, one was an unaccompanied minor.

One is 17 years old, he says that they have been traveling together since the beginning, they are friends from the same village. He says that he comes from a very poor family, they eat no more than one meal a day. His father died a long time ago, his brother died too, and he was left alone with his mother. He cries talking about it. He sacrificed a lot to leave and help his mother. He has a childhood friend and goes to see him. The second one looks older, but is in worse condition, it is difficult to talk to him (...) Both are dehydrated and exhausted, very sore – especially feet and whole legs. They don't seem to understand the question of how they got here (...) The 17-year-old just keeps saying that this [journey] required a great deal of sacrifice from him.

Legal aid was provided to, among others, five Indian citizens and a Bangladeshi citizen who were detained by the Polish Border Guard officers during one of the humanitarian interventions. Due to the threat of pushback, the Ombudsperson's Office intervened in their case.

Deportations and violence of the authorities

This week, only one of the groups directly reported the experience of recent pushback. The information came from two Syrian citizens who voluntarily gave themselves up to the police and were then handed over to the Border Guard. They reportedly acted so in accordance with the provisions which state that international protection may be sought: At any time from the territory of Poland by visiting any branch or facility of the Border Police⁴. According to their account, despite a clearly expressed request for asylum they were then transported to the other side of the barrier. Both are currently in Minsk.

However, other groups met by the field teams reported prior experience of pushbacks they or their travel companions had experienced. Two groups also reported that they witnessed a manhunt by the uniformed authorities on the Polish side.

As in the case of interviews concerning the circumstances of the injuries, also in the case of pushback reporting, language barrier and the limited amount of time allocated to interventions in many cases make it difficult to obtain complete history of the groups. This is shown in the following excerpt from the humanitarian intervention report:

They still can't answer the question about pushbacks, but their gestures show that some people were caught and thrown. To this day, they do not know what happened to the two people from the group in which they traveled at the beginning of the road. They claim that they managed to hide and that since then they kept walking and walking without food or drink until they reached where we are.

Particularly noteworthy is the story of a 15-year-old Somali citizen traveling alone, met in Poland. The boy connects the experience of pushback with the violence he experienced from people he

⁴ <https://help.unhcr.org/poland/pl/dostep-do-ochrony-miedzynarodowej/>

identified as officers of both Polish and Belarusian uniformed services (the Polish Border Guard and an unidentified Belarusian uniformed formation, respectively). After having his knee bandaged and a stabilizing dressing applied, he related his experience as follows:

At the first pushback, they took his power bank, sim card and destroyed the charging nest on the phone. He said that both Polish and Belarusian police beat him, but with disarming honesty he stated that he understood it and was used to it, because in Somalia police and army also beat people.



A photo of one of the phones, according to reports destroyed by Polish officers. From the archives of the Egala Association

Violence by persons identified as officers of the Polish uniformed services (Border Guard) was also reported by other citizens of Somalia.

Earlier, after crossing the river, he was stopped by two guards (a man and a woman) who pointed guns at him and ordered him to sit with his hands behind his head. At gunpoint they asked where his group was. Crying, he explained that he was alone. They then gave him a backpack, food and clothes and told him to disappear.

Nine people, from two different groups, reported violence from people who were identified as officers of the Belarusian uniformed services. Four of them, Indian nationals, had visible signs of

beatings, chest injuries, and possibly broken ribs. They reported breathing problems and the injuries corresponded to the description of experienced violence.

A 17-year-old Senegalese citizen also spoke simply about experiencing violence by the authorities on the Polish side during his journey:

He says that when the police see them, they chase them and beat them, then you have to run and hide. They beat him a bit too.

Three Syrian citizens traveling together mentioned the incident with people wearing uniforms who, standing on the Polish side of the barrier, sprayed irritating gas at them.

Injuries sustained as a result of crossing the barrier

In the case of five people, it was possible to establish beyond any doubt that the injuries suffered by them resulted directly from the existence of the Polish barrier. They were:

- An Ethiopian man who injured his knee painfully while jumping off a barrier.
- An Ethiopian man with a knee injury
- A woman from Syria who, as a result of crossing the barrier, tore her face and injured her foot

Very wet and cold. They have been in the forest for 7 days, before that they spent about 7 days in Minsk. They crossed the Polish border for the first time, they did not meet [Polish] authorities. On the other hand, they were treated very badly by the Belarusian army - they drove them to some camps and kept them there for many hours (no shelter), and then forced them to cross the Polish border. They did not allow to return to Minsk. B fell jumping from the fence, cut her forehead painfully above the eye; she also has a painful foot after a fall, she cannot really walk. It is raining harder and harder, we make a tarp hut for them under a fallen branch - there we change them, feed them, dress their wounds. A. is recovering after tea and hot soup, he is delighted with the soup - he asks twice for more.⁵

- Unaccompanied minor from Somalia, 17 years old. - bruised knee as a result of a fall.

In addition, two men, citizens of India and Afghanistan, were hospitalized in Podlasie with fractures of the bones of the lower limbs. The nature of their injuries is typical of those caused by falling or jumping off the barrier. A Syrian man, who had suffered a fractured metatarsal bone in the forest 7 months earlier also asked for help, however the exact circumstances of the injury are not known. Despite his visible disability, he managed to cross the Polish border again. He was using crutches to support himself and walk.

⁵ a fragment of a humanitarian intervention report. Removed passages allowing for identification of people.

Temperatures according to the Białystok weather station

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

