

WE ARE MONITORING

Weekly Update

08.06–14.06.2023

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

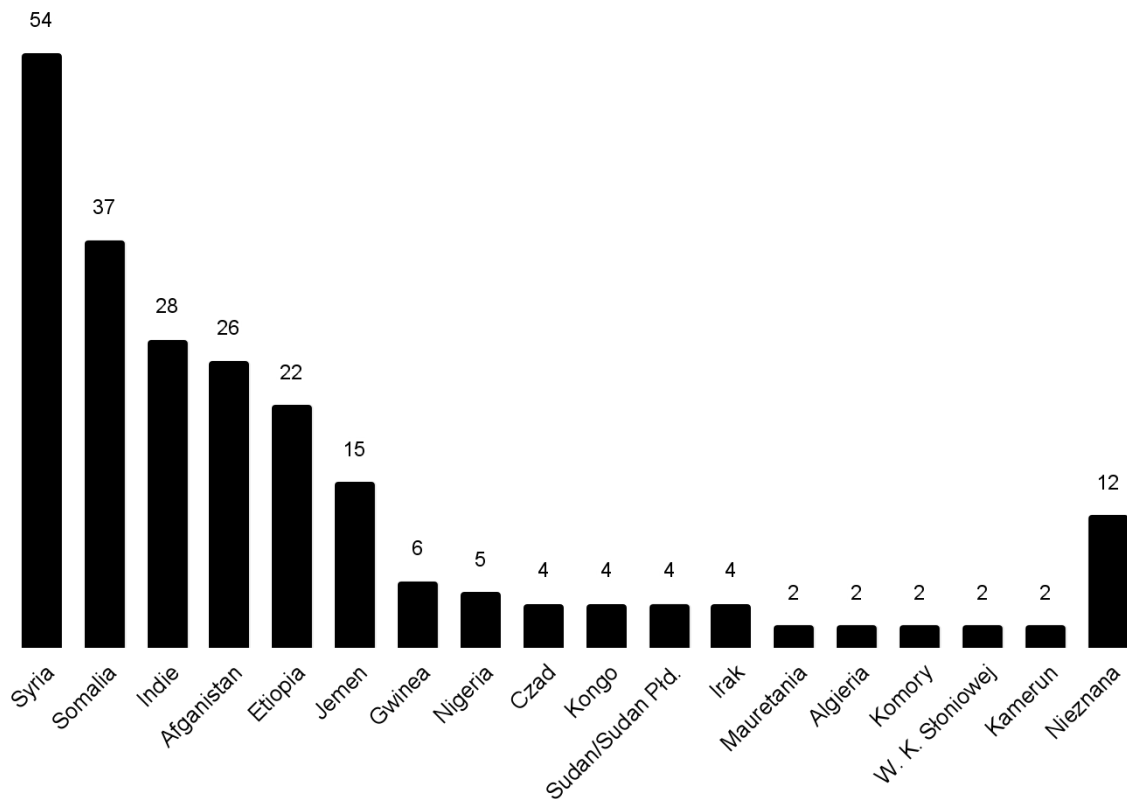
	groups	individuals	children (inc. UASC ¹)	women (inc. pregnant)
Requests - Total	63	246	11 (9)	34 (0)
Requests from BY/including Sistiema	5/2	17/10	1 (1)/1 (1)	13 / 8
Support provided	43	157	10 (8)	19 (0)
• In-kind support / including in hospitals	42/6	156/6	10 (8)/0	19 (0) / 5
• legal aid / including in hospitals	8/6	15/6	2/0	9/5
• medical aid PL/BY²	9/0	13/0	0/0	2/0
Pushbacks Reported	20	39	0	5
Missing Persons Reported³	3	4	0	3
Reported violence by PL / BY	8 / 6	33 / 20	1 / (1)	8 / 0
Border Induced Injuries	5	6	0 (0)	0
Total number of Interventions			58	

¹ Unaccompanied minors.

²The migrants were redirected to the organization Medics Without Borders, which operates in Belarus.

³We consider missing persons whose disappearance has been reported by their relatives.

Countries of Origin



Demographics

This week we received information about 63 groups consisting of a total of 246 individuals. Amongst them eleven were minors. The youngest were siblings, 5yo. boy and 6yo. girl, they were without care, as their mother was pushed back. In groups there were 7 other UASC between 13 and 17 years old. There were also at least 34 women in the groups and one person with chronic heart disease, without access to adequate medicine for over 3 months. The biggest number of people were from Syria (54), Somalia (37), India (28), Afghanistan (26), Ethiopia (22) and Yemen (15). In addition, there were also people from Guinea, Nigeria, Republic of Chad, Republic of Sudan or South Sudan, Iraq, Mauritania, Algeria, Comoros, Ivory Coast and Cameroon. Nationality of twelve people could not be determined.

Belarus and the border zone

There were 10 people who at the time of contacting us were in an area between polish and belarusian enforcement, called "sistiema". They were in a group consisting of: a lone man from Yemen, and the 9 people from Somalia – 8 women (including 16yo. girl UASC) and husband of one of the women. They reported poor health, two of them (man and woman) claim leg injuries after attempting to cross the polish wall. One person described their situation this way:

I have been here for 30 days, I haven't eaten my food for 10 days. There are girls from Somalia who broke their legs and are sick with braces. We fell from the high wall, we are asking you to help us, all the girls have been eaten by mosquitoes, they are all vomiting, the little [probably young] girls are [unclear] because of hunger.



On the photo, Polish Border Guard with the pepper gas container. Photo from Polish Border Guard Twitter⁴

The woman reports that the ones who were in better psychophysical shape, attempted to get close to the Polish wall, to ask for help and international protection on territory of Poland. According to their claims, in response they were attacked by people that they identify as Polish Border Guards, with some kind of tear gas. After a while, despite their concerns about violence that can be used against them, they decided once again to ask for help as their condition was bad. They showed marks of injuries to Polish Border Guards, but in response they threatened to use tear gas. It's how one of the women describes what happened:

We cried and even showed them [Polish Border Guards] the wounded bodies, swollen legs and tell them we are sick but the Polish border [guards] told us to leave or they will throw poison [tear gas] at us.

This is another confirmation that Polish Border Guards use tear gas against people on the other, Belarusian side of the wall. At the moment it's impossible to distinguish the specific type of the gas used against the group of women by the Polish Border Guards. Repetition of testimonies about the use of some kind of tear gas against people on the move may indicate systemic action.

⁴ https://twitter.com/Straz_Graniczna/status/1669231983757516800/photo/1 [accessed on June 20, 2023].

Humanitarian, medical, and legal interventions

Humanitarian organizations and collaborators who shared information with us were able to provide humanitarian assistance to 156 people traveling in 42 groups. 13 people from 9 groups were provided with medical assistance [by the MSF medics and the Egala Association]. Organizations and individuals, who provide material and medical support to the people on the move in borderlands regions, went to 58 successful interventions. According to the activists that act on Podlasie, the people on the move usually ask for water, clothes and anti-mosquito mixes. At least two of the people asking for medical help didn't receive it, as they were caught and transported to Belarus before medics got to them. Amongst them were a sick Guinea citizen who traveled alone as well as an Indian citizen who had fever and vomited.



Man from Syria presenting his arm and palm covered with marks of mosquito bites. Photo from archive of Grupa Granica sent by a person on the move.

Amongst people on the move that received help, there were at least eight UASC. These included a 14-year-old girl from Ethiopia, a 16-year-old from Congo, and a 17-year-old from Somalia.

Thanks to medical intervention provided by one of the humanitarian organizations the hospital took 25 yo. Somali woman. Medic on the field assessed her cognition as bad. She reportedly screamed and shook in pain. Intervention was especially hard because of the language barrier, as women have poor vision at the time so she cannot use a mobile translator, and the weak signal makes it impossible to contact the interpreter. The woman was diabetic in the hypoglycemia state. Medic said that even after receiving rehydration treatment, she was tangled and sleepy.

The contact was through her companion, who claims to know her from their city of origin. The man was in a state of severe stress. He repeatedly said that he promised her before that he would never leave her alone, after he pulled her out of the swamps. He was saying about two

pushbacks, that they experienced together, and the violence he suffered. On the Belarusian side, he was reportedly kicked and beaten with rifle butts. He was also attacked with tear gas by the people recognized by him as Polish Border Guards. It has not been established whether the woman was also a victim of violence.

Woman testified that she was pregnant (second or third month). However later she said that she might have lost the pregnancy as after the last deportation she had heavy vaginal bleeding. The medic in the forest surrounding assessed her condition as life-threatening, especially since the recent possible miscarriage could mean that an infection had set in. The woman was taken to one of the nearby hospitals, where she also received legal aid.



Medical interventions. Photos by Aleksandra Chrzanowska

Legal assistance with submitting international protection applications, has been provided to six people in hospitals, and to men with two young kids, whose wife has been taken to hospital because of her very bad psychophysical condition. In addition, the ombuds office intervened in the case of 4 women and 1 man from Afghanistan, who were taken to the facility, then pushed back to Belarus, after their attempt to ask for international protection near Terespol. It was not possible to determine whether this group had previously tried to apply for protection at the legal border crossing.

Pushbacks and violence by the authorities

Total of 20 groups, representing 39 individuals, reported pushbacks. In one case it led to family separation. A Syrian citizen, a woman traveling with two children, a 5-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl was captured and pushed back to Belarus, according to her companions. Her children stayed on the Polish side with the rest of the group. The diabetic woman later re-entered the Polish side. Humanitarian organizations providing support to people on the move managed to reach her. The woman expressed concern, mentioning that she doesn't know well the men with

whom the children were left. She hoped to reconnect with them the day after the intervention. Unfortunately, the next day we received information from her traveling companion, also a diabetic citizen of Yemen, that he had seen the woman recaptured. He himself managed to hide and saw people he identified as Polish Border Guards take her to the car. The Yemeni man also reported that the woman had in the meantime received information that the group with her children left Polish territory. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine the further fate of the woman.

Pushbacks to Belarus are often accompanied by physical and verbal violence. A Syrian citizen who experienced a brutal pushback in which he was beaten, his personal belongings taken away and his phone destroyed, describes his experience as follows:

“the Polish army caught us from the car and beat us and took our phones except this girl the girl hid it.. They took our bags and everything and took us back at night to the Belorussian lands again”

It was not his first pushback, according to the information he provided, he had already been pushed back to Belarus several times. In the group in which he traveled this time, there was, among others, a person with chronic asthma, who supposedly also experienced pushback.

According to his account, violence during the deportation was also experienced by an Algerian citizen traveling in the company of a Syrian. That man was captured the day after one of the humanitarian organizations provided him with material aid. People he describes as Polish services were to take away all his food and water and commit violence against a person who was in poor physical condition. This is what he said:

“The Polish police have committed an act of violence against a person who was close to death He took everything from me to eat and the water you helped me with.”

According to the reports provided by people on the move, the most common forms of violence used by the Polish services were beatings, which were reported by 14 out of 33 people reporting violence by the Polish services and gas spraying (13 people), both during push backs and through the wall.

Verbal violence and destruction of properties were also common. Three men from Somalia, Syria and Yemen were sprayed with gas over a fence. They did not meet the services in Poland, they crossed the border in a group of 50 people, about half of whom managed to avoid capture. They also experienced violence on the part of Belarusians, in their claims (similarly to the above-quoted example of a man traveling with a woman who was taken to the hospital) there is beating, kicking and hitting with rifle butts. The Syrian had previously tried to apply for visas to EU countries and Canada. The official path cost him, as he reported, about \$8,000, despite the fact that he lived in a Syrian war zone. He was met only with negative answers, so he decided to travel through Belarus.

Border induced injuries

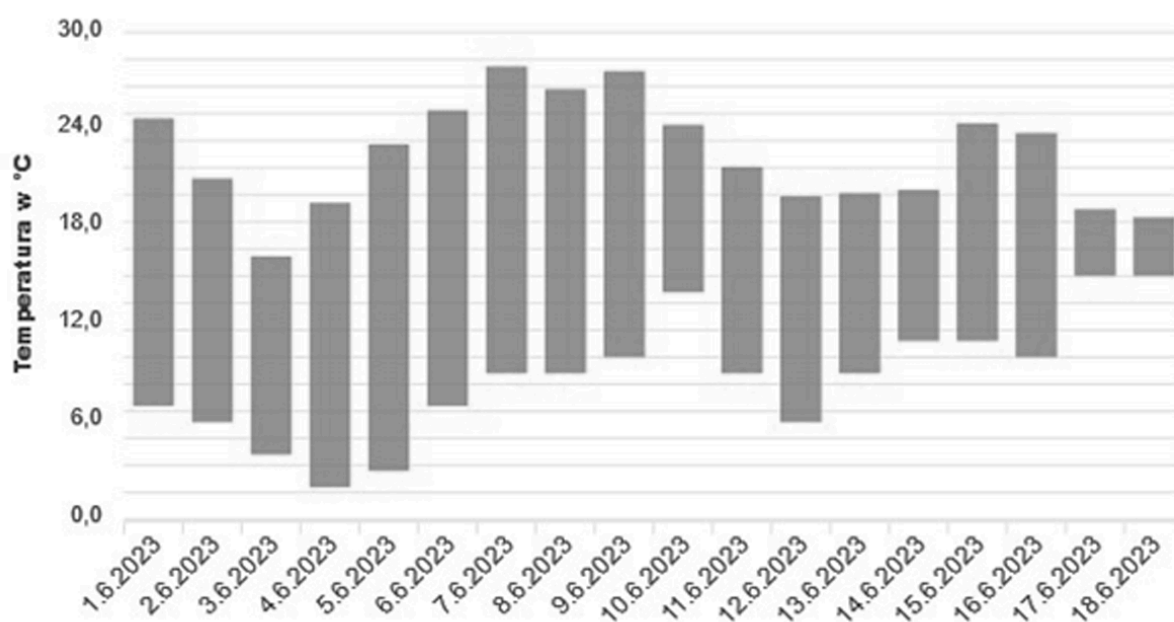
This week, 6 people reported injuries resulting from falling from the wall. It was two men with bruised knees; 3 men with sprained ankles, including two with very swollen and bluish feet and

ankles, unable to walk; one Somali woman stuck in Sistiema. Her group reported that a woman had a broken leg after falling off the wall. Three people with injuries typical of a fall from a wall were also hospitalized, but it was not possible to obtain confirmation that their injuries were inflicted this way. They were a Somali woman with a broken forearm bone, another Somali woman with a tibia and metacarpal fracture, and an Afghan man with a foot fracture.

Relevant events

In addition, local residents as well as NGO employees have noticed an increased number of services patrolling the areas near the dam and roads in the forests for several weeks. In the media, there was information about sending soldiers from the GROM⁵ unit to Podlasie

Temperatures⁶



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

⁵ <https://www.onet.pl/informacje/onetwiadomosci/onet-opinie-1606/5ryxw48.79cfc278> [accessed on June 20, 2023].

⁶ <https://www.pogodowecentrum.pl/archiwum-pogody/szczegoly-miasta/122950-99999/bialystok> [accessed on June 20, 2023].