

WE ARE MONITORING

Statistics

29.06–12.07.2023

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.

Demography

During the reported period, we received information about 58 groups consisting of 283 people on the move, which is quite a significant decrease from previous weeks. Among them were seven minors, including five unaccompanied minors. The groups asking for help included a family with children aged 3 and 10 and a woman in late pregnancy – both of which were in the strip between the Polish and Belarusian fortifications (Sistiema), so there were no means to help them. We also received a help request from a family of five located in Latvia. Most of the people asking for help were from Syria, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and Eritrea. The country of origin of 19 people could not be determined.



Things left behind in the encampment. Photo: archives of the Border Group.

Belarus and the border area

Compared to the previous reported period, there was a fairly significant decrease in requests from the territory of Belarus and the strip between the Polish and Belarusian fortifications (sistiema). At the end of June and the beginning of July, we received requests for help from 54 people in sistiema (making up 9 groups) and 4 people (making up one group) – from a location deep inside Belarus. One of the groups staying in the strip between the fortifications (having already experienced a pushback from Poland and the violence that followed) expressed their fears of violence, persisting even if they were to retreat deeper into Belarus:

We are 8 persons. And there is others. We can reach Poland but they will hit us and get back us to porder. If we try to back minsik bellaros military hit us badly. With out our clothes and our food and our phons. They take everything. In Poland. [We] are starving to death.

Requests for help were phrased in a way that showed the desperation of those trapped between the two lines of fortifications, people asking for help also referred to difficult and drastic experiences:

We haven't had food for 20 days. The dog has killed us. We need medicine. We cannot go back to Belarus. Dogs killed us. Women are dying. Please help us. What do we do only you can help us.

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible for NGOs to provide assistance to those living between the wall (or razor wire) on Polish territory and the Belarusian sistema.

Humanitarian, medical and legal interventions

The humanitarian organisations and cooperating individuals who provided us with information managed to provide in-kind support to 186 people travelling in 40 groups. In addition, 3 people in 3 groups were provided with specialist medical assistance thanks to the involvement of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) medics and volunteer medics in Podlasie. Organisations and individuals providing in-kind and medical support to people on the move in the border areas took part in a total of 46 successful interventions. According to humanitarian workers and people active in Podlasie, people on the move most often asked for water, clothes and mosquito repellent.

In terms of health complaints, we were mainly reported bruises, skin abrasions, pains resulting from long walking and being in forest conditions. In addition, there were complaints of drinking contaminated water – stomach pains, vomiting, diarrhoea. All those in need were given pre-medical first aid. One person reported severe pain in her ankle and an ambulance was successfully called to her. The person in need of advanced medical care was illiterate. Throughout the intervention humanitarian workers remained in contact with her thanks to an interpreter who was on call.



Photo by M. Klemens

Pushbacks and violence by uniformed services

During the period covered by this report, a total of 12 groups (consisting of 65 people) reported the experience of pushback. Among those pushed back to Belarus were at least 4 women (including one pregnant) and 3 children (all of which unaccompanied by the adults responsible for them). According to accounts of people on the move, pushbacks to Belarus were often accompanied by physical and verbal violence.

One person also reported that his money was stolen by Polish officers. Those who were provided with help also declared that Polish officers had destroyed their phones, powerbanks and that they had cut a captured man's shoes with a knife. Stories about being incapacitated with pepper spray were also very common. All of these practices have repeatedly come up before in the accounts of people being helped. One group at the beginning of July reported their experience via communicator as follows:

We are starting to go crazy and my friends are in euphoria over returning Belarus. Because they beat us a lot [w Polsce]. My friends are considering suicide. We will do a hunger and drink strike here. I accept everything. I can no longer bear to sit here in the woods. Me and my friends or we will commit suicide in this forest. They took our phones and tore up our passports.

The people from the group described above have successfully applied for international protection in Poland.

One of the people subjected to pushback describes the experience, as well as the verbal and physical violence by the Polish services, in the following report:

In first and second try to Poland police spray pepper on our face and burn our eyes, they took my passport and my money +my bank card and ID + my phone. When I pushed back to forbidden Belarus catch me and humiliated me, hit me and left me without clothes (they said you rubbish die here in forbidden). My health condition is bad, I am suffering from chronic dizzy and lost almost 15 kg.

During the reporting period, there were many examples of practices used by the Belarusian services in the accounts of the victims. These included being beaten with a metal bar and being threatened by dogs. During medical interventions concerning victims of said violence, medics bandaged legs with visible swelling at the level of the knees and provided assistance to a victim who reported being beaten and bruised at the level of the ribs (according to accounts – in both cases as a result of beating by Belarusian officers).

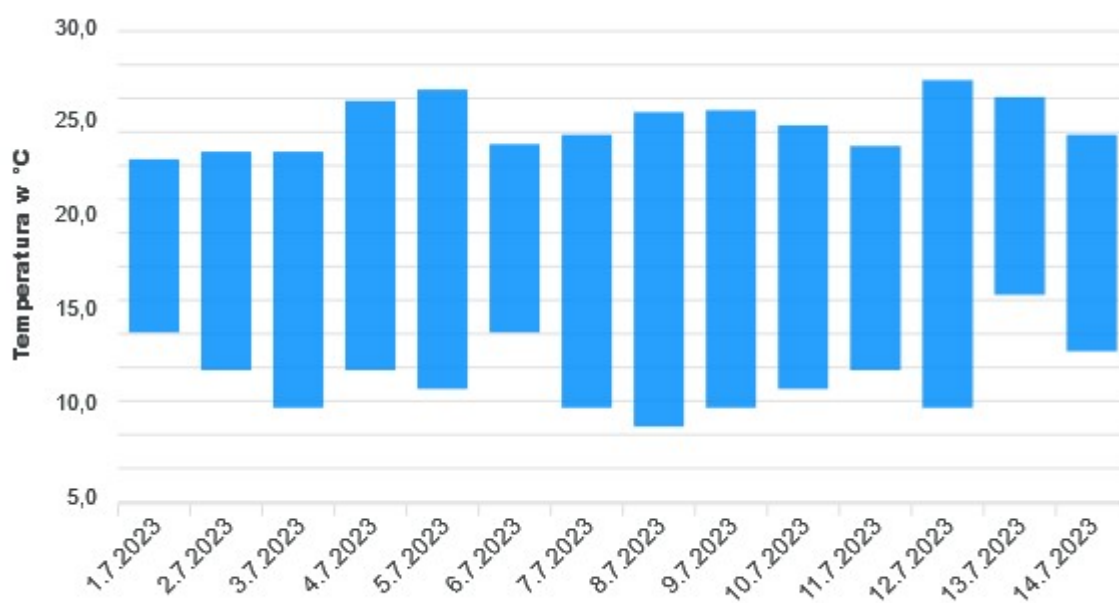
Some victims perceived the behaviour of the Belarusians so badly that even the pushbacks carried out by the Polish services appeared to them as something neutral. Members of one of the groups assisted in the forest on the Polish side of the border declared that the Polish Border Guard officers had simply opened a 'small door' in the fence and ordered them to cross to the other side. Prior to that, the Belarusians tore up their passports and destroyed their telephones (as the victim described it – *Belarusians are not people...*). At the same time, it is worth noting that people who found themselves on the Polish–Belarusian border quite often spontaneously try to compare the behaviour of the Polish and Belarusian services and, depending on the group and its experience, this assessment comes out against the officers on one side or the other. In the reported period, the accounts of people who were helped featured expressions like *"compared to what happened in Belarus, the Poles "only" smashed our phones" or "the Belarusians only barked dogs, while the Poles beat, robbed and insulted us."*

Injuries sustained as a result of crossing the barrier

Three people reported injuries resulting from falling off the wall, two men and one woman, who deeply cut her hand with barbed wire (according to humanitarian workers' reports – deep enough that tendons were visible). At the same time, the other woman travelling with her had a sprained ankle joint, but we are not sure if the injury occurred as a result of crossing the barrier. The two injured women, whose interventions were carried out in cooperation with the Ocalenie Foundation, were taken to a local hospital, where they were able to successfully apply for international protection.

Temperatures recorded by weather station Bialystok¹

The graph shows the daily maximum/minimum temperature on a given day in °C in the first half of July (which almost exactly corresponds to the reported period). Given the time of year, and according to the accounts of those asking for help, it appears that it was not the low temperatures that were the biggest problem at this time, but rather the heat and lack of rain – which increased the number of those affected by the weather, who reported dehydration.



¹ <https://www.pogodowecentrum.pl/archiwum-pogody/szczegoly-miasta/122950-99999/bialystok> [dostęp z dn. 17.07.2023 r.].

Quantitative summary 29.06–05.07.2023

	groups	individuals	children (UASC ²)	women (pregnant)
Requests - Total	33	150	6 (4)	24 (2)
Requests from BY/including Sistiema³	8/7	48/44	2 (0)/0	5 (2)/4 (2)
Support provided	22	96	4 (4)	18 (0)
• in-kind support / including in hospitals	22/3	96/3	4 (4)/0	18 (0)/0
• legal aid / including in hospitals	3/3	3/3	0/0	12 (0)/0
• medical assistance PL/BY⁴	2/0	2/0	0/0	0/0
Pushbacks Reported	8	28	2 (2)	4 (1)
Reported missing persons⁵	1	1	0	0
Reported violence by PL / BY	5/9	11/34	0/0	0/5
Border Induced Injuries	1	1	0 (0)	1
Total number of Interventions			25	

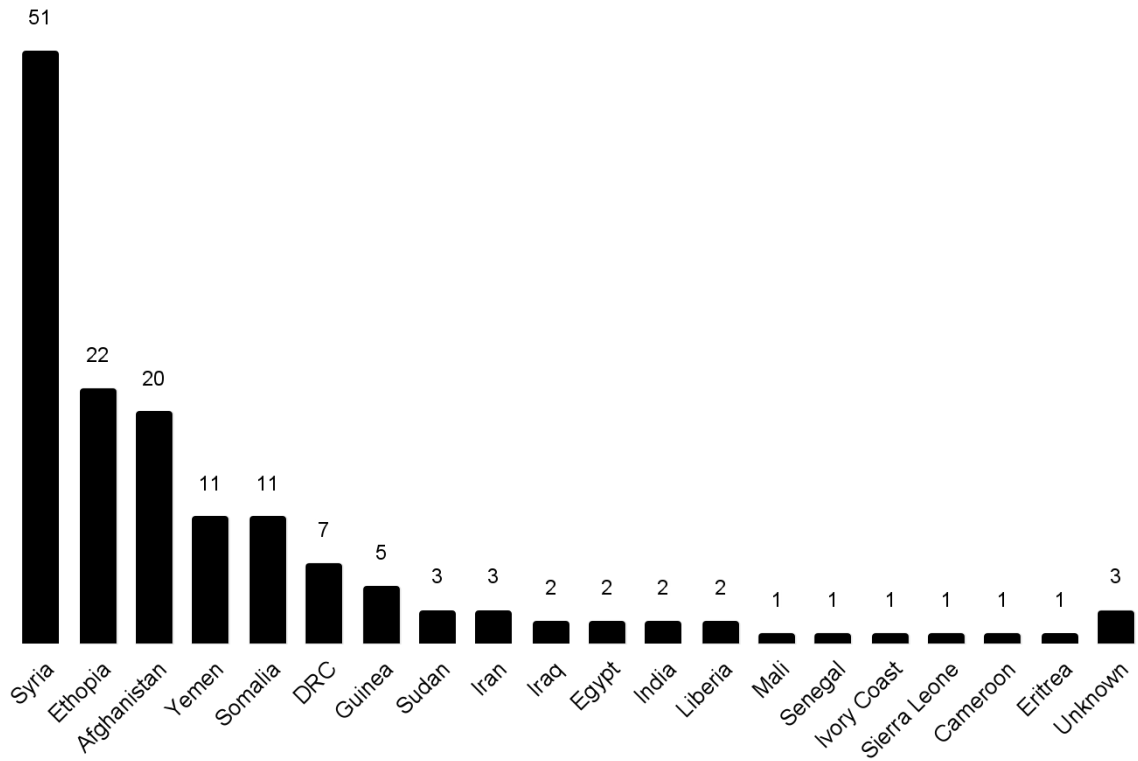
² Unaccompanied minors. Persons under the age of 18 travelling unaccompanied by legal guardians.

³ Sistiema is a colloquial term for the area between Poland and Belarus in the strip between the two countries' border fortifications.

⁴ The migrants were redirected to the organization Medics Without Borders, which operates in Belarus.

⁵ We consider people to be missing when they have been reported missing by their relatives in circumstances where they have had no contact with the reported person for at least three days.

Countries of origin 29.06–05.07



Quantitative summary 06.07–12.07.2023

	groups	individuals	children (UASC ⁶)	women (pregnant)
Requests - Total	25	133	1 (1)	0
Requests from BY/including Sistiema⁷	2/2	10/10	0	0
Support provided	18	90	1 (1)	0
• in-kind support / including in hospitals	18/3	90/4	1 (1)/0	0
• legal aid / including in hospitals	5/3	7/4	0/0	0
• medical assistance PL/BY⁸	1/0	1/0	0/0	0
Pushbacks Reported	4	37	1 (1)	0
Reported missing persons⁹	0	0	0	0
Reported violence by PL / BY	5 / 7	25 / 34	0	0
Border Induced Injuries	2	2	0	0
Total number of Interventions			21	

⁶ Unaccompanied minors. Persons under the age of 18 travelling unaccompanied by legal guardians.

⁷ Sistiema is a colloquial term for the area between Poland and Belarus in the strip between the two countries' border fortifications.

⁸ The migrants were redirected to the organization Medics Without Borders, which operates in Belarus.

⁹ We consider people to be missing when they have been reported missing by their relatives in circumstances where they have had no contact with the reported person for at least three days.

Countries of origin 06.07-12.07.2023

