

JANUARY 2025

Report from the Poland–Belarus border

I came to Belarus to find asylum in Europe to save my life. I sent many emails to UNHCR to get asylum. I went to the Polish border, I sought asylum in Poland, I was unsuccessful, I returned injured. I have injuries on my legs and I can't walk. I was beaten badly by the Polish border police. I am in a difficult situation. If I stay like this I might lose my legs. Now I am in Belarus. I have no life. My life is in danger.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Somalia, January 2025

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Introduction

The following study is based on first-hand data obtained from persons involved in the described events. Our sources comprise organisations, informal initiatives, as well as individuals—the latter of whom often wish to remain anonymous, hence we do not mention them by name unless they have given us permission to do so. We owe special thanks to all those in transit who chose to share their own experiences with us.

Humanitarian workers and those who collaborate with them emphasise that the challenging context and ethics of their work often prevents them from obtaining more detailed information about the stories and circumstances of people on the move. During interventions, many such people are in such a severe psychophysical condition that it is not possible to obtain detailed information without risking retraumatisation or making them feel obligated to provide answers to humanitarian organisations simply because they have received support.

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.

For additional questions and suggestions from individuals or organisations who might be interested in receiving reports, please contact: dane@wearemonitoring.org.pl

Definitions

A glossary of terms and the definitions we have adopted can be found at the end of the report.

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Since 2021, we have been collecting reliable information regarding the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border. Your support will allow us to continue this work.

Demographics, trends and requests

In January 2025, the low number of support requests, typical of the winter months, continued, as in previous years, due to severe weather conditions, in which those who choose to travel (or are forced to) are much more likely to suffer serious injury, hospitalization or even death from hypothermia. For 10 days, the average daily temperature in January in Bialowieza did not exceed 0°C, while on warmer days it reached a maximum of +7°C. Altogether, it rained or snowed there for 13 days¹.

According to accounts from individuals who contacted humanitarian organizations during the reported period, despite the difficult conditions, there are still people in the strip of land between Polish and Belarusian border barriers². We have also received further accounts from people who have been pushbacked despite their stated will to apply for international protection in Poland.

REQUESTS JANUARY 2025				
	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Total³	112	227	13 (10)	42 (7)
in Poland	1	1	0 (0)	0 (0)
in Belarus	99	177	14 (11)	35 (6)
incl. in <i>muharrama</i>	6	24	0 (0)	3 (1)

¹ Data from the IMWM-PIB Hydrology System database, <https://rafalraczynski.com.pl/imgw-archiwum/> [access: 11.02.2025]

² In addition to the 5,5 metres high Polish barrier, there is also a smaller fence on the Belarusian side delineating a strip of land, mostly about 1 kilometre wide, most of which lies on the Belarusian territory (the Polish wall is not built directly on the border, so there is a narrow strip between the border and the wall, which lies on the Polish territory and where people on the move should be able to request asylum. However, this is usually not respected). This zone between Polish and Belarusian barriers is controlled by Belarusian forces. People on the move are often trapped there, unable to cross the border to Poland (or being pushed back numerous times) and not allowed by the Belarusian forces to withdraw to Minsk or other Belarusian cities. This zone is often referred to by people on the move with an Arabic word *muharrama* – no man's land.

³ In addition to requests from both sides of the border barrier and those from Belarusian cities, Polish humanitarian organizations also receive requests for support from people in Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, and Finland.

In January 2025, we recorded requests from 227 people in 112 groups. This is another month with a similar overall number of requests for support. Since October 2024, the number for each month has remained around 200–210 individual requests from people traveling in about 80–90 groups. By comparison, in January 2024 we recorded 60 individual support requests, while in January 2023 and 2022 it was 382.

During the reported period, women made up almost 19% of the total number of requests – there were 42 women out of 227 people reporting a need for support, 7 of whom declared being pregnant at the time of contact. Reports from minors accounted for almost 6% of all requests for support (10 of the 13 minors seeking help in January were traveling without a legal guardian).

75 (out of 227 total) requests in January were from people from Somalia. There were also 21 requests from Ethiopians, 20 from Congolese, 14 from Sudanese, and 13 from Cameroonians. January is another month in which the vast majority of requests for support were coming from people from African countries, particularly those from the Horn of Africa – a trend that has continued for more than six months now. Until the summer of 2024, the majority of people contacting aid organizations were from Middle East countries. In the case of 39 people, due to difficult interviewing conditions, the country of origin could not be determined.

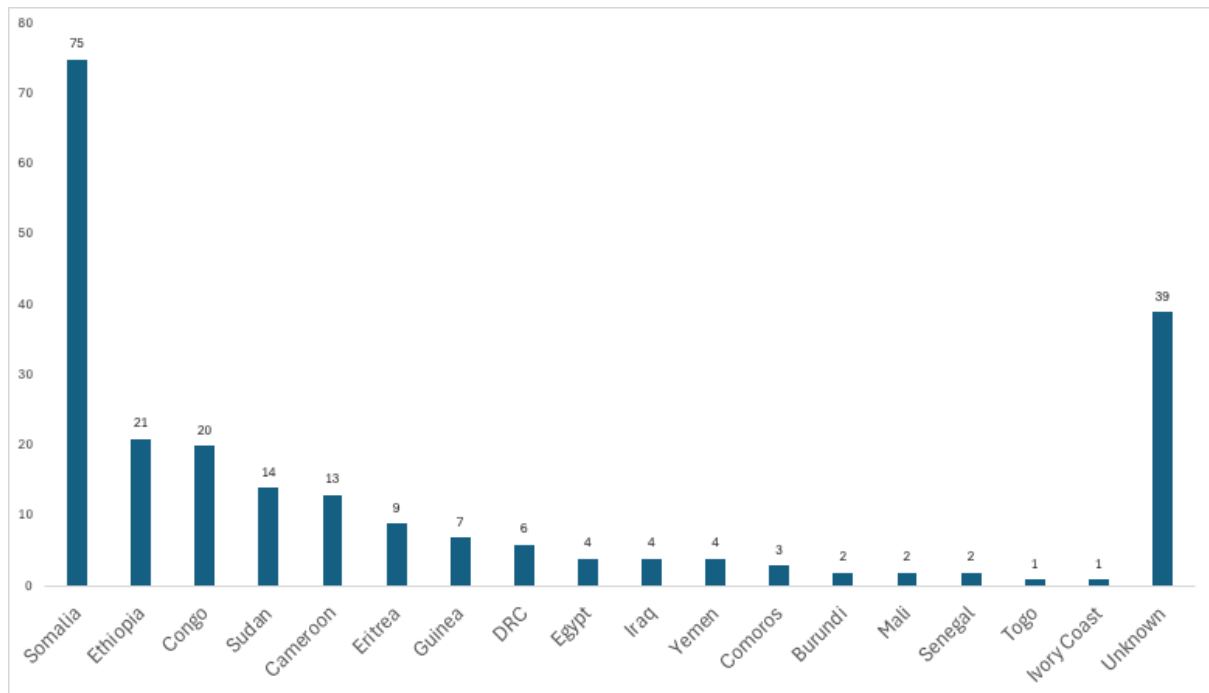


Fig. 1. Countries of origin of people who requested support in January 2025.

Previous months have brought a similar overall number of reports, but in January the number of people contacting humanitarian organizations from the western side of the border barrier dropped significantly. Throughout the month, the organizations registered

only one such request. In the first week of January, a lone Somali person asked for regular humanitarian assistance. While requesting support, the man also declared his intention to apply for international protection in Poland. Unfortunately, when the humanitarian aid team arrived at the location from which the need for assistance was reported, they found only footprints, resembling ones typically left after a pushback. As of the date of publication of this report, there was no contact with the man.

Belarus and muharrama

Of the 112 groups that requested humanitarian support in January, 105 were on the eastern side of the border barrier when the contact was made. Most of them were in major cities in Belarus. 6 groups were located in the strip of land between the barrier located on Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side – those groups consisted of 24 people, 3 women, 1 of which declared being pregnant at the time of contact⁴.

It is worth noting that more than 27% of those requesting support (63 out of 227 total) declared a need for medical assistance. People contacting from Belarus repeatedly reported health problems – exhaustion and weakness caused by a prolonged exposure to harsh conditions in the forest, injuries from beating and sustained during attempts to cross the border barrier.

There are handicapped people among us [...] There is a woman who was beaten up and she keeps bleeding. I received a blow to the head.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Cameroon in a group of 5 people on the eastern side of the border barrier, January 2025

Unfortunately, even returning to Belarusian larger cities does not ensure safety or access to medical assistance for people on the move. Migrants contacting humanitarian aid workers report a lack of access to asylum procedures and safe health care in Minsk, as well as other cities.

I am in difficulty, I have tried several times to pass the Polish barriers but I am mistreated by the Polish police and beaten by the Belarusians, I have nowhere to

⁴ We emphasise that these figures are not complete and do not allow us to estimate, at least approximately, the actual number of people residing in the belt between the dams at any given time. We present them because they allow us to identify downward and upward trends and to note moments of increased migration activity in the Polish–Belarusian border area.

go or where to sleep, the snow will kill me if you do not help me, I will die of hunger, please help me, a 15 year old orphan, Someone brought me back to Minsk to get treatment but the hospital didn't accept because I have no money, I'm going to die.

Excerpt from a conversation with a 15 year old boy from Guinea, January 2025

I am abandoned, please help me sir, I am coming out of a very unfortunate story after being tortured and beaten to death until breaking my leg at the border when I tried to enter at the end of July in 2024 [...] I am coming out of a trauma because of everything I experienced at the border and there Belarus is also asking me to leave the territory when I have no help or assistance. My cast was only removed in December, I have barely started walking again, still limping.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Cameroon,, January 2025

I came to Belarus on December 17 2024 and I've been in the forest and got assaulted and hit by soldiers. My pelvic bone is damaged and now I can't even walk properly and I didn't get enough medical treatment.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man (unknown country of origin), January 2025

Pushbacks and violence

During the reported period, humanitarian organizations received reports of pushbacks from 50 people traveling in 27 groups. This number includes 3 minors and 5 women. 22 of those individuals experienced more than one pushback. A total of 133 pushbacks to Belarus was reported in January.

PUSHBACK AND VIOLENCE JANUARY 2025

	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Reported pushbacks	27	50	3(3)	5 (1)
Reported violence PL	18	31	2(2)	3 (1)
Reported violence BY	15	25	3(1)	6 (0)

While recounting violence accompanying pushbacks, people on the move highlighted the brutality and ruthlessness of border guards from both countries. As in previous months, they described primarily: physical and verbal violence, humiliation, intimidation, theft and destruction of property; they reported incidents of pepper spray use and detention in the cold after having been forced to remove their clothes. In January alone, 31 people reported experiencing violence allegedly perpetrated by Polish uniformed services. In the same period, 25 people said they experienced violence which they believed to be perpetrated by Belarusian services.

Polish forces beat us every time we ask for asylum. When I was in trouble at the border between Belarus and Poland, I had the opportunity to cross into Poland for help. But I met the police when I asked for asylum, the police in Poland beat me. They threw me back as I was very sick. [...] But every time the Polish border troops beat me, they threw me into Belarus. They turned me away 11 times when I asked for help and asylum in Poland.

Excerpt from an interview with a man (unknown country of origin), January 2025

I am injured, my eye was injured. I was killed by the Polish army. My arm and back hurt. Now I am in Belarus. Please help. How can I get help? I need to come to Poland, how can you help me? My pain is getting worse and worse. I can't see anything.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Somalia, January 2025

It is noteworthy that people on the move repeatedly report increased aggression from Belarusian border guards against those who return to the eastern side of the border barrier, after being pushed back by Polish officers.

I was shot poland army me and my friend [...] belarusian kills me, their dog bites me and army kill me. [...] They kill me and they back to me in Belarus.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Somalia, January 2025

I was captured by Belarusian guards and subjected to beatings and cold water spraying—some of the worst torture—before being deported to Lithuania's borders.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Sudan, January 2025

Additionally, messages from women who contacted humanitarian organizations during the reported period included information about experiencing sexual violence from Belarusian border guards.

And after that we decide to come to Belarus and when we arrived here things are changed it is not like we expected. and we tried to crossed the board but we couldn't.. belarusian police catch us and they throw us in the Lithuanian border and they harassed us sexually... [...] And we observe that crossing border is not good for girls like us.

Excerpt from a conversation with a woman from Ethiopia, January 2025

I live in Belarus but now my visa is expired I can't to go back my country because of I don't have money and my family they are poor I try to pass the border 5 times but I can't Belarus police they catch us and they did sexual Harassment they abuse me now I am suffering psychological and emotional leaving me in trapped in a dark and painful existence.

Excerpt from a conversation with a woman from Somalia, January 2025

Pushback Testimonies

“You’re a football now,” one laughed, as they kicked me between each other like an object. Sari’s Pushbacks. January 2025.

In January 2025, over the course of about 14 days, an Ethiopian named Sari made three attempts to cross the border wall. The first, unsuccessful, ended when Polish border guards used pepper spray on the man. Sari recalls that, due to his asthma, contact with the irritant was a particularly difficult experience for him.

Two weeks ago, I made my first attempt to seek safety. I was stranded at the border in freezing conditions, with no shelter, food, or water. During this time, border guards sprayed me directly with pepper spray. As someone with asthma, I collapsed, gasping for air, convinced I would suffocate. My throat burned, my vision blurred, and I prayed for death to end the agony.

He made another attempt a few days later. This time he managed to cross the wall. Sari reports that he spent three days in the Polish forest and was then caught and beaten by border guards.

Days later, I tried again. This time, I was lost for three days in the wilderness, disoriented and starving. When guards found me, they beat me relentlessly with batons and boots. “You’re a football now,” one laughed, as they kicked me

between each other like an object. My ribs cracked, and I vomited blood, but they only mocked my pain.

The last attempt described by the man was made in the second half of January. This time, Polish border guards, after catching Sari, forced him into the river, where they then threatened him with a gun and mocked his skin color and age. After he got out of the water, they beat him so much that he was unable to walk on his own.

Last week, I tried once more, and it nearly killed me. Guards dragged me to a freezing river and forced me to stand waist-deep in icy water until my clothes froze to my skin. My legs went numb, and I begged to move, but a guard pressed a gun to my head and snarled, "Stay or I'll shoot you here." I stood paralyzed, tears freezing on my face, as they ridiculed my Black skin and youth. When I finally crawled out, they beat me until my legs gave out, leaving me broken and unable to walk. They laughed as I writhed in the snow, calling me "worthless."

We were so weak that we couldn't help him. So we stayed by him for 15 minutes, and that's how he died. Bakari's Pushback. January 2025.

Bakari made six attempts to cross the Polish border wall. Four times he managed to get to the western side. Each time he experienced violence from Polish border guards and was taken back to Belarus. During one of the border crossings, on January 1, 2025, he crossed the river with his traveling companions and was then caught by guards, beaten and pushed back to Belarus. One of his companions died. Bakari describes this day in his report.

We tried six times in total, and managed to cross four times. I will tell you about the time when I lost my companion because it still haunts me, along with the mistreatment I experienced here, in Belarus. It was the night of January 1, 2025. Five of us left the city of Grodno in Belarus to make our way to Poland. It took us around 20 hours, I think. We got to the forest, we walked for almost five hours, without light. We used touch and phone to navigate in the dark, everything was fine. So we got close to the Belarusian border, climbed the fence and moved on. After 15-20 minutes from crossing the fence, we saw a watercourse. On the other side of it there was a barbed wire, which signaled the beginning of the Polish border. In order to get to the other side, we had to get into the water. The five of us got into the water, the water was up to my shoulders. We all crossed the water, and after the water the barbed wire. We tried to sneak through it. We all managed to get through, and immediately we heard the sound of the alarm. The guards arrived immediately and we ran away into the forest (on the Polish side). They spent a lot of time searching for us, but they couldn't find us until

other guards, with dogs, came. After over an hour, the dogs tracked us. We were all soaked, with our wet clothes on. When we got detained, guards asked us in English - "Where are you from?". Each of us told them where we were from and what nationality we were. After a few minutes they started beating and kicking us, then, after destroying our phones, they opened the gate and pushed us out, to the Belarusian side. We had to go back to Grodno. It started to snow and my companion walked without shoes, which he lost when we were crossing the watercourse. We walked for about two hours, back to Grodno. He had no shoes on and at one point his foot started to swell. He fell down and his nose started bleeding. We were so weak that we couldn't help him. So we stayed by him for 15 minutes, and that's how he died. We were exhausted, so we kept going. Far ahead we saw a truck coming towards us. The driver spotted us and, because we were exhausted, he put us in the back of his truck, and we told him everything that had happened.

Definitions

Total requests — The total number of reported groups/persons on the move, located in Poland, Belarus, Lithuania or Latvia. It does not consider persons staying in other European countries during the reporting period, as the report aims to illustrate the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border and the related migration route.

Groups — number of groups that consist of individuals travelling together at the time of reporting and/or humanitarian/ legal/ medical intervention. These persons may or may not be related by family or social ties.

Individuals — number of individual members of groups.

Children — all persons whose confirmed or declared age is 0-18 years.

Unaccompanied minors — Persons under the age of 18 travelling without an adult legal guardian, and therefore also minors travelling with older siblings or other relatives who are not their guardians under the law of Poland.

Requests from Sistiema — reports of groups/persons staying in the strip of land between the border fortifications of Poland and Belarus, commonly referred to as the *sistema*.

Muharrama — a term used by Arabic-speaking people on the move for the strip of land located between the Polish border barrier and the fortifications on the Belarusian side. *Muharrama* in Arabic means 'forbidden'. People on the move also use the longer term المنطقة المحرمة "forbidden zone". In Polish, this area is commonly referred to as *Sistiema*.

Aid provided — total number of people reached by organisations and entities operating in Podlasie who agreed to share information with us (GG + Ocalenie, unaffiliated residents and inhabitants of Podlasie, collectives, individuals, POPH)

Material aid — support in the form of basic humanitarian aid packages - food, clothing, water, information. Including support at the hospital.

Legal aid — support in procedures relating to the prevention of pushbacks and deportation and enabling the submission of an application for international protection. Including support at the hospital.

Medical aid — professional support provided by medically qualified persons.

Medical first aid — support provided by people with basic rescue training, such as washing wounds or dressing trench foot.

Aid in hospital – material and/ or legal aid

Reported pushbacks – pushbacks reported to us during the reporting period by persons who experienced them directly or witnessed them directly.

Reported violence PL – reported cases of violence experienced directly by persons on the road, the perpetrators of which, according to the victims' accounts, were members of the Polish uniformed services: Border Guard, Police, Polish Army, Territorial Defence Forces.

Reported violence BY – forms of violence directly experienced by persons on the road, the perpetrators of which, according to the victims' accounts, were people belonging to the Belarusian uniformed services.

Number of interventions – number of humanitarian interventions undertaken by field teams in response to a report of a need for assistance or a chance encounter of persons on the road in a border area.

Number of deceased – number of persons on the move who died from August 2021 on the Polish side of the Polish-Belarusian border and those cases from the Belarusian side of which we are aware. The data will be verified and supplemented. We expect that there may be data on more deaths from the period considered here as well.

Number of missing – persons whose disappearance has been reported by next of kin or companions on the road, with a declared lack of contact of at least two days.

Injuries from the wall – injuries which, according to the declaration of persons on the road, occurred while crossing the security at the Polish-Belarusian border.

Persons from vulnerable groups – vulnerable persons on the following grounds:

Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- minors- unaccompanied minors- persons over 45 years of age- senior citizens aged 60 and over
Medical reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- pregnancy- chronic illness- disability

Protection Needs*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- victims of sexual violence- victims or persons subjected to gender-based violence- victims of torture- victims of human trafficking
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* virtually impossible to identify at this stage