

FEBRUARY 2025

Report from the Poland-Belarus border

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Excerpt from a conversation with Aden from Somalia, February 2025

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 February 2025, we registered reports from 248 people traveling in 140 groups. Among them there were 52 women, accounting for more than 21% of the total number of reports. 6 of these women were pregnant. Reports from minors accounted for nearly 5% of all requests for assistance, and 4 of the 11 minors were traveling not accompanied by a legal guardian or carer.

The typical low number of requests for assistance in the winter months continued, which, as in previous years, is related to severe weather conditions. For 21 days in February, the average daily temperature in Białowieża did not exceed 0 °C, while on warmer days it reached a maximum of +4 °C. It rained or snowed in the Białowieża Forest for 13 of the 28 February days¹.

REQUESTS FEBRUARY 2025				
	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Total	140	248	11 (4)	52 (6)
incl. in Poland	1	6	0 (0)	1 (0)
incl. from Belarus	120	194	5 (3)	44 (6)
incl. from Muharrama	10	25	4 (1)	3 (0)

People who attempt to cross the border in winter are much more likely to suffer serious injury, hospitalisation or even death from hypothermia. For this reason, as in January, the vast majority of groups that requested humanitarian aid in February were on the eastern side of the border barrier when contact was made. Most of them, 194 people, were in larger cities in Belarus. Migrants reported a lack of access to asylum procedures, as well as a complete lack of systemic support. In Belarus people on the move don't have access to safe housing, they often report having to share rooms with many people in a similar situation or spending nights on the street. The refugee 'housing market' is largely controlled by smugglers and thus rife with abuse. Individuals, especially women and minors traveling unaccompanied, become exposed to serious danger and are dependent on smuggling networks, which often have links to human trafficking.

¹ Data from the Institute of Meteorology and Water Management: <https://rafalraczynski.com.pl/imgw-archiwum/> [dostęp: 13.03.2025]

I went to the Belarusian forest. We were 6 people trying to cross to Poland. There, the Belarusian army caught us. We managed to run and escape far away, but then they caught two of us and we escaped. I found this young man who was with us in the forest. [...] He was sleeping on the road. His clothes were torn and he was sick. He had marks from beatings on his legs and was hungry. He had no place to sleep. I took him with me to the apartment. Now he is sick and does not eat. They tortured him with electricity. He is now in a state of shock. He does not even speak. I do not have money to take him to the hospital.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Sudan, February 2025.

We have 16 women and 61 boys. There are 2 sick women, who have difficulty even walking. 6 boys [...] there is even 1 who is hospitalized.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Eritrea, February 2025.

At the time of contact 10 groups were in the strip between the barrier located on Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side². These groups comprised of a total of 25 people, including 4 children and 3 women³. A huge problem for people stuck in the strip between Polish and Belarusian fortifications is also very limited access to medical care. People often retreat to Belarusian towns precisely because of health problems – exhaustion caused by their prolonged stay in the forest, injuries from beatings or acquired during attempts to cross the border barrier. More than 28% of all those asking for support declared a need for medical assistance. Unfortunately, even returning to major cities of Belarus does not ensure safe access to medical aid for people on the move.

I am currently in Belarus. About a month ago, I have surgery. I don't even have clothes to wear now, so the wound is getting cold and susceptible to infection. Our current situation is that i am stranded on the streets, i don't even have clothes to wear, we don't have food, i don't have family to send us food.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Ethiopia, February 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 We emphasise that these figures are not complete and do not allow us to estimate, even approximately, the actual number of people stuck in the strip between the border fortifications at any given time.

The first time they caught us and turned us around. We went back to Minsk, we slept at the metro station until the dispatchers told us what was there. We turned around in the forest again, they let the dogs loose on us, and one of them bit me on the arm next to the blow, and my brother, they bit him on the leg and on the hips. The guards found us there, they hit us, and one of the guards hit my brother with a pistol and he lost a tooth, and they returned us to a certain level and left us there the next day, my brother got seriously ill, we had no medicine or money to go to the hospital, 5 days later he died. We decided to bury him there in the forest, and now I am alone.

Excerpt from a conversation with a person from Guinea, February 2025.

Out of the 248 reports, 64 were from people from Somalia, 27 – people from Ethiopia, 22 from Sudan, 19 from Erytrea and 16 from Burundi. Because of the unfavorable conditions of the conversations, the country of origin of 60 people could not be determined.

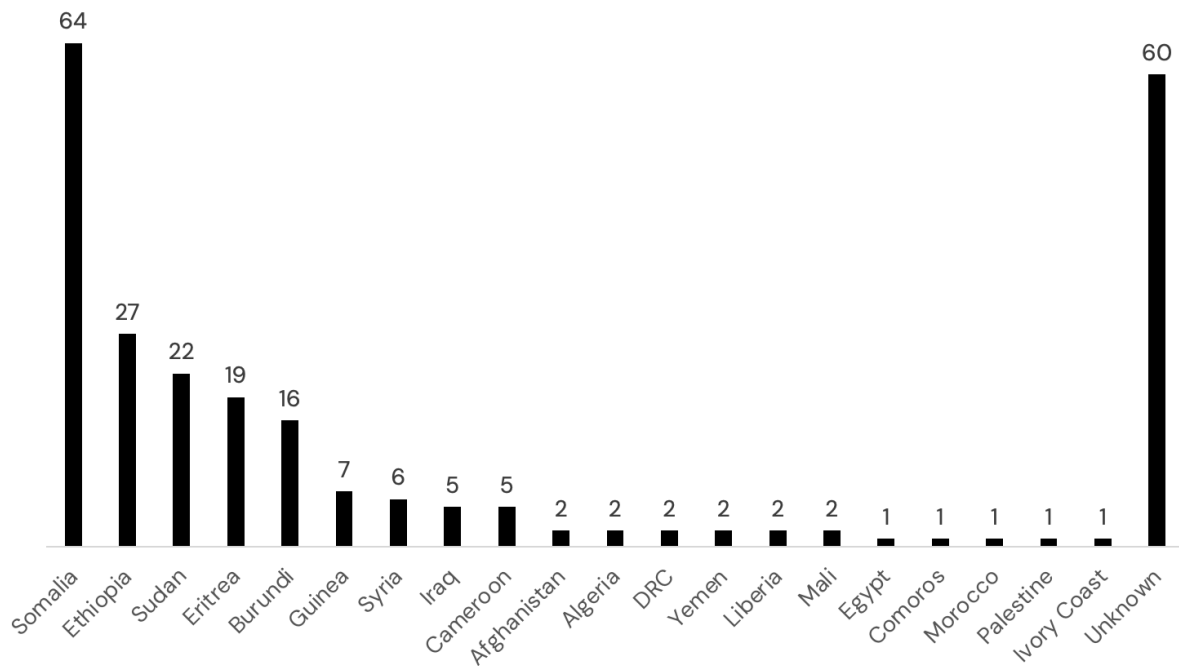


Fig. 1 Countries of origin of those reporting a need for support in February 2025

Pushbacks and violence

PUSHBACKS AND VIOLENCE FEBRUARY 2025				
	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Reported pushbacks	25	40	0 (0)	8 (0)
Reported violence PL	13	25	0 (0)	3 (0)
Reported violence BY	14	38	1 (1)	3 (0)

According to the border guard's official response to an enquiry by Grupa Granica, between 1 and 28 February this year, BG committed 173 pushbacks of persons on the move from Poland to Belarus.

In the same period, humanitarian organizations received reports of pushbacks from 40 people traveling in 25 groups. This number includes 8 women. 13 of these individuals experienced more than one pushback to Belarus – the total number of reported pushbacks was 70. People on the move, reporting violence accompanying these expulsions, described instances of beatings, the use of irritant substances by officers, and being held in freezing temperatures or unheated rooms after being forced to remove their clothing. In February alone, 24 individuals reported experiencing violence allegedly perpetrated by Polish uniformed services. At the same time, 37 people spoke of violence committed by Belarusian authorities. In total, during the reported period, we recorded 74 reports of violence experienced in the Polish–Belarusian border region.

I came twice but my phone was broken, I was sprayed with poison and thrown into the forests of Lithuania. I hope that I will receive international protection in Poland. I will ask you for help. I am not giving up hope as long as I am alive. I am very sick. I was injured after my previous travels. [...] Yes, I went to Poland, they pushed me into Belarus without a phone, the Belarusian army threw me into the forests of Lithuania without a phone, without food, in the winter.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Ethiopia, February 2025

I reached the Poland–Belarus border, hoping to request asylum in Poland or any other European Union country. But as soon as I crossed, the border guards caught me and the group I was traveling with. I was already injured—my leg was in terrible pain, and I could barely walk. The border guards took us to an immigration detention center. They

searched us, forced us to remove our clothes, and left us wearing only our underwear. Then, they put us in a freezing cold room. We stayed there for 12 hours straight—with no food, no warmth, nothing but the unbearable cold. They only gave us water. My body was shaking, my leg was throbbing, and my hope was fading. Then, in the morning, without saying much, they took us and dumped us back at the Belarus border. Just like that. No explanation. No asylum. No mercy. I was devastated. I had nowhere to go. The freezing air cut through my skin, and I had no shelter, no protection from the cold.

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

It started with the dogs biting us and having us on the ground – Aden’s pushback⁴

Aden crossed the border on December 22, 2024 during the evening, around 9 p.m. As he describes, at that time he was traveling in a group of eleven adult people from Somalia. The group included one woman. While crossing the border through the barrier, one member of the group suffered a serious injury:

When we were crossing the border, I would like to mention that we used makeshift stairs or ladder made of wood that we made ourselves, and we climbed to the top. [...] one guy that was with us just jumped from the top to the bottom and his legs snapped in half, his bone was sticking out of his foot.

Aden recalls that the officers who found the injured man shortly afterwards did not give him medical attention, but only transported him to the other side of the border wall:

And I would like to mention that the Polish border guards were merciless, as they took this guy and just opened the door and pushed him out with this injury without giving any care.

Meanwhile, the rest of Aden's group ran ahead, moving away from the barrier. Aden knows what happened to his traveling companion right after he fell from the wall because he was pushed back to Belarus a few hours later through the same gate, along with the rest of the group.

[...] this one guy among us was injured, this was his first time crossing and he just jumped over, the place is high so he broke his leg. They put him outside via this door and we had gone in, but once they rounded us up, they kind of pushed us through the same door so that we would be able to assist the one guy.

As reported in the testimony, after crossing the barrier, Aden and the others ran off about 2 kilometers farther into Polish territory. The group contacted a humanitarian aid

⁴ The respondent's name has been changed.

organization and waited for the arrival of the aid team for over seven hours. Before the humanitarian assistance arrived, Aden's group was caught by four masked officers, dressed in green uniforms. The officers were accompanied by dogs.

There were four soldiers with masks who caught us. [...] They said "Stop, stop!", but even before the guards came to us, what came faster was the dogs, and they let them loose, and the dogs were the ones that bit us and had us on the floor, rolling on the floor, and when the officers came to where we were, they just started hitting us and beating us, thereafter is when they handcuffed us and took us to the border to be thrown back.

One of the people from Aden's group ran in another direction and avoided contact with officers. To Aden's knowledge, the man is currently in a center for foreigners in Poland.

The eleventh guy had run a separate way and he wasn't with us anymore and they asked us: "Is this just you?" and we said "Yes, this is our whole group".

Aden describes that officers brutally beat, kicked and trampled him and the rest of his group from the very first moments of contact. He emphasizes that he still suffers consequences to his health from the violence he experienced from the forces at that time.

It started with the dogs biting us and having us on the ground and kind of struggling with us. And after came the officers, they made us lay on our chests to the ground and they started stomping on our backs and kicking us for a while. Afterwards, they raised us and they started punching us on the face, on the head. And one of them hit me with a boot to the side of my jaw. Currently, I cannot pass my jaw past a certain few centimetres. Just opening my mouth wide is difficult.

As reported, all the persons caught by the officers were beaten.

Among us that were caught, they beat all of us. They did not leave the girl who was with us.

Officers also used pepper spray on Aden and the rest of the group, as well as they seized and broke their phones. Aden stresses that he and his companions were carrying almost nothing at the time of their apprehension. They lacked food and, in the case of some people in the group, clothing as well.

They searched us and they took our phones and broke them. [...] we did not have much of ourselves, even the food that we had, we had already used up the last bit. One of the boys didn't even have shoes because his shoes got stuck when he was crossing the border and they did not even give him any shoes and it was very cold. His legs

darkened and he has some sort of problems with his foot now. Right now they are suggesting that his foot be cut off as when they were being thrown outside they were thrown into cold water.

Aden and the other people who were stopped were then transported to the border barrier in two camo green cars, with sirens on the roofs and writing on the sides. The ride lasted about 15 minutes. The officers then beat the individuals in Aden's group again, and before doing so cuffed them using plastic zip ties.

When they took us to the border in the vehicles, they took us out, they handcuffed us and this is when they beat us, this is between the main border wall and the second one, the smaller net, between there is this sort of [inaudible] and this is where they put us on the floor and beat us. And after that they pushed us outside the border.

[...]

When they were beating us, this was when we were handcuffed. But I would like to mention, this is not the metallic one for the officers. It's more like the plastic one. And when they were throwing us from the border, this is when they cut them off.

Aden recalls that when he and the others were forced by officers to cross the barrier, it was snowing. It was the morning of the next day after the group crossed the Polish border, Aden estimates it was around 8 or 9 a.m. on December 23rd, 2024.

It was snowing and it was quite cold, I would say about negative seven degrees. [...] when they were pushing us to the border they opened the door for us and pushed us into a sort of a pool of water and this pool of water was approximately to the chest and it was extremely cold and it was very, very scary.

After crossing to the other side of the barrier, the group was near border post 420 – in a swampy area, east of Zalew Siemianówka. Soon after finding themselves on the eastern side of the border wall, Aden and his companions had contact with Belarusian forces, from whom they experienced further violence, including being forced several times to cross the Lithuanian border.

When we were on the other side and when we got to the Belarusian border and we made contact with some sort of barrier, when we made contact with this there was an alarm and officers came. And they also beat us, after a while they threw us in a vehicle and took us somewhere where they said it was Lithuanian border and there was a river in between. They asked us to cross this river. We waited for them to leave, as soon as they left we tried to back track and walk back into Belarus, after walking for about six kilometers, there were two officers waiting for us there from Belarus, they pushed us back to where we started walking from and they asked us to get back into Lithuania. We crossed the river and as soon as we entered it was extremely cold. When we were on the other side the Lithuanian officers caught us and they also told us "Go back to

Belarus", so we crossed the border...This whole process of these events even happening took us about three days. And this time when we were just walking we didn't have phones as they were broken when we were on the Polish side. We started following the tire tracks that we saw and we were just hoping that they lead somewhere.

Aden and his companions managed to reach a Belarusian town thanks to the group of migrants they met by chance while walking along the border. When asked what else he wants to mention, Aden notes that he suffered damage to his health as a result of the officer's aggression and exposure to the cold he experienced in Poland .

Yes, what I can add is that my injuries, I would like to describe them. I would like to mention that my jaw as well as my back teeth are injured, this is from the beating I received and my hands and feet are not okay and this from the cold I experienced walking [inaudible] during the winter.

Aden also mentioned that he had experienced one or more pushbacks from Poland before. In the past, he was caught by the forces during an intervention of a humanitarian organization. Aden describes that he did not expect officers to use violence against migrants in the presence of witnesses and neither that they would prevent them from providing humanitarian assistance.

In one of his previous trips the officers caught them while the foundation was there and the foundation wasn't even able to help them, they were beaten with the foundation members present and this was very shocking for him and he was asking how is this possible? And also he previously thought that humanitarian help will be able to be offered by foundation members but he found out that with police officers present while foundation members were there no assistance could be offered.⁵

⁵ Third-person form is the result of the interpreter's paraphrase.

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

* virtually impossible to identify at this stage.