



Monthly report on human rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Serbia and Macedonia

The aim of this Report is to present the current situation regarding the protection of human rights and freedoms of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers passing through, or staying in Serbia and Macedonia. The data in this Report were obtained from 24 civil society organisations from Serbia and Macedonia, within the "Help on the Route" network.

Situation in Serbia

The trend of increased inflow of refugees and migrants continued in this reporting period as well – almost two thousand new arrivals were registered in July. Migrants are waiting for registration for several days in order to be sent to reception and asylum centres.

Newly arriving migrants pass through Serbia hoping to continue their journey to west European countries through Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The main migrants' flow moves to the south and the routes that go through Albania and Montenegro towards BiH are activated. The number of newly arrived unaccompanied minors also increased. The minors who arrive on Friday or during the weekend have to wait for registration until Monday, but many go and try to cross the border during that period.

When it comes to the right to asylum and access to the asylum procedure, the number of official actions taken to apply for the asylum was higher in July than in the previous months. It can be said that the Asylum Office demonstrates greater efficiency in its work, thus providing users with a better and faster access to the asylum procedure, and exercising of basic rights pursuant to the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection.

The number of migrants who are trying to cross illegally into Bosnia and Herzegovina has increased. In addition to the new arrivals, those who have spent months, and some even years in the accommodation centres in Serbia also come to BiH. Near the Drina River, that is, the border between Serbia and BiH, several tens of migrants, mostly single males from Pakistan and Somalia who intend to cross into BiH illegally gather on the Serbian side. Some of them sought assistance and accommodation, and others expressed the desire to stay and soon try to cross the Drina by boats. The asylum centre in Banja Koviljača accepts these migrants, that is, the "emergency accommodation" is in force, which means that the centre accepts migrants who are not registered and do not have a document on the intent to seek the asylum. By the rule, these migrants do not stay in the centre for a long time, only a few days, and go to the border to try to cross the river by boat.

While talking with persons who repeatedly tried to cross the Serbian border with Hungary, Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, the members of the HoTR Network learned that there was no abuse or beatings by the police officers. However, according to the information obtained from the field, people without documents are placed in closed camps in BiH. It is not known whether these persons were deprived of the right to asylum and whether they asked for it at all when entering the territory of BiH.

The number of refugees and migrants in Serbia increased in July to **3,529** (UNHCR data on July 22nd, 2018). Most of them (88%) are accommodated in 18 transit-reception and asylum centres, while others are staying in Belgrade or in the areas close to borders with BiH, Croatia and Hungary.

UNHCR continues to record a larger number of new arrivals: 1,998 in June, and 1,984 in July. Due to departures from the country the overall number of refugees and migrants has not changed significantly. They arrive to Serbia mostly from the direction of Macedonia, from the direction of Bulgaria and by plane.

During July, an increased number of forced returns from BiH were registered. Several testimonies of minors and adult men were recorded about that: on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina near Banja Koviljača, people in boats are not allowed to land on the shores of the neighbouring country, but they are signalled to return. The returns also take place after a successful crossing to BiH: *"I tried to cross into Bosnia and I succeeded. I was there for several days and even met the two girls who helped me. However, I still did not manage to stay and the police took me back to Serbia. I will try again."*

The concern among the assisters due to reduced funding, both for public/state and non-governmental services and services that have been made available to migrants so far has been felt the most during this month since the beginning of the year. There is a reduced presence of translators that makes work more difficult; there are no means of transporting migrants to a doctor, for example. This situation causes increased anxiety among migrants, as many do not have sources of funding and are worried about the ways to meet their basic needs without additional assistance.

Accommodation in the reception and asylum centres

In the centre of Krnjača, there is still the concern about the crossing of the Hungarian border, or more precisely, the concern that it does not get completely closed for legal crossings. Migrants in Krnjača are expecting to have a complete ban on crossing the Hungarian border, that is, they expect that the current permitted weekly passage of 5 people will soon be abolished. Quite a lot is talked about this topic, migrants mostly feel like in agony that does not stop at all.

Describing the current situation in one of the accommodation centres, one female resident said that the centre is a large village where no one trusts anyone. *"Everyone is talking behind each other's back and they smile at each other in the corridor. It's very unhealthy to live in this kind of climate. I'm thinking how to get out of here as soon as possible."* Also, she said that people look at her as "weirdie" because she is a woman and she travels alone.

Only a few people stayed in the centres in the south. The children are passive and sad because their friends have gone. Adults also find it hard to struggle with the monotony that rules. Many people complain about the lack of finances and cash cards. The problem is also that some non-governmental organisations have left the accommodation centres due to the completion of projects. On the one hand, there is a lack of activities and organisations that will implement these activities, and on the other hand, people who would participate in the activities are missing. The general atmosphere is quite monotonous, but calm. The only thing that contributed a little to the mood was watching of the World Football Championship in the shared premises.

"I would like to get to my relatives in France, but I cannot get further than Serbia. It makes me constantly tense and nervous, I do not know what to do, I do not have peace at all ..."

- A.M. from Afghanistan

"My trip from Turkey to Europe so far has cost over 5,000 Euros. Now I hope to go to Šid and further on through Bosnia. Croatia is, according to my sources, still better than Bosnia."

- M.P. from Pakistan

"We thought that during the World Cup finals, everyone would watch the match and that we would cross the border more easily. Unfortunately, there were more police and military personnel at the border than usual. They let us enter Croatia and walk for a while, then they stopped us, introduced themselves, took us to the station, wrote down some of our data and returned us back to Serbia."

- A family from Afghanistan

"It's simpler for me to go across Bosnia, because the border is longer. There is also less risk of being caught, because in Croatia they even have drones for surveillance."

- J.M. from Afghanistan

The situation in Macedonia

In July the routes and directions of movement remained rather the same: refugees coming from Greece with the intention to continue to Serbia (and EU countries) and refugees coming from Serbia, either voluntarily to be transferred to Greece or pushed back by the Serbian police. Bigger groups of refugees from smuggling routes were encountered by the police. Refugees are mostly coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran with smaller numbers coming from Iraq, Syria, Bangladesh, Libya, Morocco, Algeria and India.

The number of refugees in transit centres of Vinojug, Gevgelija and Tabanovce, Kumanovo, did not exceed 40 in each camp. In Gevgelija, for example, about 34 refugees arrived at the camp at the beginning of the month. However, most of them were “deported” to Greece, and the number of refugees in the camp was about 24 during the rest of the month. In Tabanovce, however, there is a higher frequency of movement and during July about 135 refugees arrived at the camp. Most of them left the camp very soon, and the number of those who remained in the camp did not exceed 40. The practice of illegal deportation of refugees towards Greece is continuing. According to the observation by the field monitors, at least 145 refugees coming from Syria, Iran, Iraq and Morocco were pushed back to Greece by the Macedonian police. Among them were families, pregnant women and children. Mixed police patrol teams are still active in Gevgelija and Gevgelija region.

All refugees and migrants who arrive to the camps are immediately offered medical aid, accommodated and provided with food and clothes. The opportunity to seek asylum is available and explained to all the refugees and migrants who enter the camps.

A critical case was registered with a refugee coming from Iraq who at the beginning of the month suffered an electric shock on the railway tracks in Gevgelija and received severe burnings to his whole body. He was initially taken to the hospital in Skopje. However, he was soon released with severe wounds on his body. He was then brought to the camp in Tabanovce and immediately taken to the hospital in Kumanovo, due to pain and bleeding. However, doctors in the hospital in Kumanovo refused to admit him in the hospital claiming that the hospital in Skopje should be responsible for treating him. He was then returned to the transit camp. His condition remains critical since he has burning wounds and suffers pain.

Police reports

The field monitoring and the police reports clearly show that the movement of migrants/refugees across the country is still active. Six incidents took place during July, concerning smuggling and migrants. The first two events took place on July 2nd: the police officers tried to pull over a vehicle on the Negotino - Radovish road. The driver suddenly stopped and escaped while 12 migrants from Pakistan and 6 from Afghanistan were found inside. In the second case, the border police noted two persons from Afghanistan. While talking to the police, they said that earlier that day they were met by 4 people and attacked, and two mobile phones and 700 euros were stolen from them. The third case (16.07.2018) concerned a vehicle found by the police near Kumanovo, with 18 migrants from Afghanistan and Pakistan found inside. The driver was not found. Two days later, mixed patrol teams of customs and border police saw a vehicle on the Gevgelija - Skopje highway. The driver stopped and escaped while 44 refugees from Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India were found inside the vehicle. On the 22nd, the police pulled over a vehicle on the Skopje-Veles highway, with 13 migrants from Afghanistan, 3 minors in it. Two days later, the police stopped 8 refugees from Iran near the train station in Tabanovce. They reported that they had entered the country illegally from Greece several days before that. On the same day, near the Serbian border, they were attacked by two persons holding knives and robbed of 8.000 euros.

On July 6th, 69 refugees were brought to the transit camp in Tabanovce in a police vehicle, after being caught with smugglers near the village of Lojane. Among the refugees there were 61 single males, one woman and seven unaccompanied minors. Most of them come from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Algeria, Libya, Bangladesh and Iran. They were all registered and accommodated in the camp, but 54 of them left the camp the following day.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Serbia:

- It is necessary to continue efforts aimed at ensuring the observing of the right to asylum and access to the procedure, as well as efficient asylum procedure and protection of persons who need international protection.
- Adequate protection should be provided to those refugees and migrants who are outside the system, who are not registered or accommodated in the way that will enable them to exercise their basic rights.
- Preventing of smuggling and human trafficking remains high on the list of priorities, with advocating prevention of harassment of refugees and migrants by the authorities or civilians along the refugees' route.
- An efficient providing of comprehensive assistance requires co-ordination of activities between the civil society organisations and service providers from the public sector. The feasibility and impact of activities reach the maximum if they are co-ordinated between all the key stakeholders.
- The activities of information dissemination, linking, learning about and intercultural exchange are of great significance in order to bridge the distance between local and refugee communities. In the context of the beginning of the school year it is important to inform and co-operate with parents of local children and refugee children for the purpose of better preparation and preventing of misunderstanding, prejudice and fear.
- Basic human rights and freedoms of refugees and migrants should be promoted, observed and protected at all times by all the institutions and citizens.
- It is necessary to invest efforts to prevent discrimination towards migrants and to respond adequately to cases of proven discrimination so that they do not repeat.
- There is a large need in the reception and asylum centres to organise free time and provide for occupational, recreational and other activities for migrants.

For Macedonia:

- The practice of illegal “deportation” by the police must be immediately terminated.
- Medical assistance in the case of serious injuries must be provided to all refugees/migrants in the territory of the country, without any prolongation or refusal. Migrants/refugees who have suffered any injuries must not be left to suffer in pain without proper medical treatment or protection.
- The Ministry of Interior must disclose to public the detailed statistical data about migrants/refugees who have entered and left the country (transited) according to their gender, age, country of origin and disability.

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