

European rights envoy urges Bosnia to act to avoid migrant humanitarian crisis

SARAJEVO (Reuters) - A humanitarian crisis was unfolding in northwestern Bosnia where up to 3,500 migrants may end up sleeping rough in cold weather, a top European human rights envoy said on Friday.

Dunja Mijatovic, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner, said in a letter to Bosnian officials that a lack of action and coordination between the country's multiple governments could have serious effects for migrants and asylum seekers left without housing, food, and medical care.

Ethnically-divided Bosnia has become a transit route for migrants and refugees from Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa since European Union countries shut their borders to new arrivals in 2015. Many have made their way to Bosnia's northwest hoping to slip into EU member Croatia just to the west.

There are up to 10,000 migrants in Bosnia now, a quarter of whom sleep rough in the woods, abandoned buildings, and by roadsides, keen to move on westwards because Bosnia has few resources to provide them.

In October, the authorities in the northwestern town of Bihac closed its biggest migrant centre and moved hundreds of people to the Lipa camp 50 miles away, which was already full.

The International Organisation for Migration, which oversees all migrant facilities in Bosnia, on Friday stopped funding the Lipa camp because the authorities have failed to ensure the necessary conditions to make it suitable for winter, IOM head Peter Van der Auweraert told N1 television.

He said the government needed to provide an alternative centre for some 1,500 people from the camp, otherwise they would have to join another 1,500 people already sleeping rough.

Bosnia's authorities cannot agree on where to accommodate the migrants. All migrant facilities are in the autonomous Bosniak-Croat Federation, while the

other region, the Serb Republic, refuses to take in any migrants.

The European Union delegation has also urged action amid the coronavirus pandemic to avert a humanitarian crisis.

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