

# Migrants and Refugees Find Squalor in Bosnia, Croatia closed



A rising number of refugees and migrants heading through Bosnia face dire conditions, their way forward blocked by heavy-handed Croatian police.

It was almost lunchtime at a dormitory on the outskirts of Bihac in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina and an Afghan woman sheltered from the rain in a tent before joining the queue for food.

The dormitory was unfinished. Its windows had no glass, the water pipes leaked and there were holes in the upper floors. The stench of smoke and urine hung in the air.

“This is not a camp, and that is not food,” said the woman, who did not give her name.

Bihac is no stranger to crisis.

Twenty-five years ago this city was under siege, its mainly Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) residents trapped on all sides by Bosnian Serb forces for whom control of Bihac would strengthen supply lines between themselves and their ethnic kin fighting a rebel war just over the border in Croatia.

Yugoslavia was collapsing in bloodshed, and Bihac’s proximity to road and rail communications made it a strategic prize. Today, that location means it is a magnet for migrants and refugees from Asia, Africa and the Middle East carving out a new route through the Balkan peninsula to Western Europe.

For around 1,000, the squalid dormitory and the sodden tents out front are a temporary home, their way forward into European Union member Croatia blocked by police whom rights groups accuse of using heavy-handed tactics to keep them out.

The numbers heading north from Greece via Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia have doubled since last year, with Bosnia now struggling to provide accommodation and food to around 5,000, 3,000 of whom are in Bihac.

The numbers do not compare with 2015, when hundreds of thousands streamed north from Greece through Macedonia and Serbia. But with that route largely shut down, smugglers are hemming closer to the Adriatic.

It has put a particular strain on Bosnia, still in the long process of recovery from a 1992-95 war that killed 100,000 people and left the country divided along ethnic lines.

### **Memories of suffering:**



Improvised shelter in the suburb of Bihac, Borici settlement. Photo: Anja Vladisavljevic

When BIRN visited Bihac, on July 23, the rain did not stop. Clothes and blankets were soaked.

Residents stood in line for their meals, eating in shifts as the dining room, which doubles as sleeping quarters at night, is too small for all of them. That day, the Red Cross served breakfast for 900 and 1,150 hot meals for lunch and dinner. There are just six toilet and shower cabins.

Children played near the road with stray dogs. When the sun comes out, they swim in the emerald waters of the nearby River Una, though even this escape was blighted by tragedy on July 5 when one person drowned.

Their own memories of war and deprivation still fresh, some residents of Bihac and elsewhere in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been quick to help, organising volunteers and donating food and clothes. But the situation has stirred fear and prejudice in others.

“In the consciousness and narratives of the local population, there are strong associations and comparisons with their own suffering in the war of the 1990s, the experience of being besieged, dying and want,” said culturologist Hajrudin Hromadzic, born in Bihac and now an associate professor at the University of Rijeka in Croatia.

The region, he said, had been thrust into a situation of “spontaneous coping and experimentation”.

Some 200 were originally housed in a retirement home in the city centre, but were moved to the dormitory on the edge of Bihac on July 17 when mayor Suhret Fazlic said the retirement home was unsafe.

Bosnia has only two official asylum centres. The EU, trying to keep down the flow over its own borders, has pledged to help create another, but Bosnian officials have struggled to agree a location.



Bihac city centre. Photo: Anja Vladislavljevic

Dozens of local councillors and mayors from northwestern Bosnia staged a protest on Thursday in Sarajevo over the state's handling of the situation.

"They sleep in parks, on benches; they turned our stadium into a toilet, our children have nowhere to play," said Fazlic.

"We are not against migrants, we understand their problems, but we ask the Council of Ministers to find adequate accommodation and to get them off the streets," he was quoted as saying by local media.

Hromadzic blamed the country's "chronic state dysfunction".

The peace deal that ended the war in Bosnia bestowed a complicated and unwieldy system of ethnic power-sharing that critics say has left government often ineffective and sometimes prone to paralysis.

Whether addressed at the local, cantonal, federal or state level, said Hromadzic, "none of them can find solutions to this delicate challenge."

### **Police violence:**



Improvised shelter in the suburb of Bihac, Borici settlement. Photo: Anja Vladislavljevic

One thing is for sure. None of the dormitory's residents want to stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are regular attempts to cross the border into Croatia, but the obstacles are formidable, from forests and rivers, to uncleared landmines and an unwelcoming Croatian police force.

Amnesty International, as well as a number of Croatian non-governmental

organisations and media, have documented cases of police using disproportionate force.

BIRN heard similar stories from the refugees and migrants it spoke to. Refusing to be named, they spoke of physical violence, of possessions being confiscated or destroyed and money and cell phones seized.

“My son and I have tried to cross the border several times, but the police are pushing us back,” said an Afghan man, father of a four-year-old boy. During the last such ‘push-back’ they escaped with “only” a broken smartphone, he said.

A Pakistani man, who said he was a student of computer science and architecture, said he had crossed the border five times, even reaching Croatia’s northern neighbour Slovenia. But each time he and his friends were sent back.

Trying to evade police, many swim across rivers. On July 2, Croatia’s interior ministry said that over the last 18 months, 12 had died trying to cross the border into Croatia. Some NGOs give a higher figure of 16, but say they fear the real number is even greater.

On July 19, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Cresecent Societies said that dozens of people were being treated daily for injuries sustained while trying to cross from Bosnia and Herzegovina into Croatia.



Improvised shelter in the suburb of Bihac, Borici settlement. Photo: Anja Vladislavljevic

A Red Cross spokesperson in Bihac, Nicole Robicheau, said conditions near the border were “grossly inadequate”.

“People don’t want to stay here but they are effectively stranded,” Robicheau said in a press release. “Each day, people try to move onwards to Croatia but many return with injuries.”

On Tuesday, Croatian Defence Minister Davor Bozinovic dismissed allegations of police brutality, saying authorities acted only in accordance with Croatian and EU law.

But Julija Kranjec, of the Croatian rights organisations Center for Peace Studies,

said a simple denial was not enough in the face of multiple eye-witness accounts given to reputable international organisations.

“If there’s the good technical equipment they go on about so much – drones, thermographic cameras – why not show what’s really going on?” said Kranjec.

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