

Russia calls for international investigation into Poland's treatment of refugees on Belarus border

Russia has called for a “thorough international investigation” into allegations of abuses by Poland of migrants and refugees who have been trying to cross its border from Belarus.

The Russian demand comes in response to claims made by a Polish soldier who earlier this month fled to Belarus seeking asylum. In interviews with Belarusian and Russian state media he has claimed that Poland has carried out mass killings of migrants.

There is, however, no evidence supporting his claims, which closely fit Belarus and Russia's propaganda narrative regarding Poland. The soldier fled Poland ahead of an appeals hearing against his conviction for abusing his mother and after being caught driving under the influence of alcohol and narcotics.

On Monday this week, the Polish soldier – who can be named only as Emil Cz. under Polish privacy law – was interviewed on a Russian YouTube channel financed by state broadcaster RT.

He claimed that he and other soldiers had been forced to “shoot [migrants] by the dozen”. Being turned into a participant in “genocide” had left him unable to “look in the mirror”.

The soldier made similar unevidenced claims during an earlier interview with Belarusian state television. However, even the organisations and individuals who have accused Poland of mistreating migrants have not made claims of deliberate killings or mass deaths.

Emil Cz. has also previously claimed that Polish forces killed two humanitarian volunteers near the border. But there have been no reports of any volunteers going missing. Polish news website Onet notes that Emil Cz.'s claims of the

numbers killed at the border have been escalating in successive interviews.

According to accounts from border crossers, Belarusian officials – who have orchestrated the border crisis – have often treated migrants brutally. In one case, a Syrian man drowned at the border after Belarusian guards reportedly forced him and a colleague into a river, despite them not being able to swim.

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The Belarusian KGB used fake social media accounts to fuel the crisis on its border with Poland, says @Meta (formerly known as Facebook)

The profiles, which posed as journalists and activists, accused Poland of abusing migrants trying to cross into the EU

In response to Emil Cz.'s claims, the spokeswoman for Russia's foreign ministry, Maria Zakharova, yesterday called for a "thorough international investigation".

"If [our] Belarusian colleagues initiate a probe into the flagrant facts revealed by the serviceman, we will render the required support to them," said Zakharova, quoted by Russian state news agency TASS. "We would want our Western partners to show that they are right-minded people and behave decently."

Zakharova also accused Poland of "trying to discredit this man" in order to "distract attention" instead of "providing substantiated replies" to his claims.

After Emil Cz.'s escape to Belarus, Poland's defence ministry noted that he had been facing legal problems. In September, he was convicted of physical and psychological abuse of his mother, and earlier this month he was detained for driving under the influence of alcohol and marijuana, reports Radio Zet.

In the former case, he had been awaiting an appeals hearing at the end of December. That took place earlier this week, with Emil Cz. absent. The judge upheld the guilty verdict against him, as well as the sentence of six months community service and one-year ban on approaching his mother.

"The accused abused alcohol and started rows, which took the form of mental and physical abuse of his mother," said the judge, quoted by Polsat News. "The man insulted his mother, humiliated her...hit her repeatedly, put both hands around her neck...[and] threatened to take her life."

This week, Polish prosecutors who are investigating Emil Cz. for desertion issued an arrest warrant against him. A spokesman said that it is possible an extradition request will be made to Belarus, reports TVP Info.

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