

Refugees trapped in Europe's "death zone"

Needs and challenges of the local organisations providing humanitarian assistance at the Polish-Belarusian border.

Since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021, local actors have recorded nearly 20,000 requests for help from refugees, migrants and asylum seekers crossing into Poland. Nearly 9,000 violent pushbacks to Belarus were experienced by individuals, including pregnant women and young adults. During this time 82 deaths were recorded. While all refugees are crossing the border irregularly, leaving people to suffer without access to humanitarian aid cannot be allowed to continue. Despite promising signals of policy change following the 2023 elections in Poland, recent events have shown the situation to be deteriorating again.

Beginning of the crisis in 2021

Since June 2021, thousands of refugees – mainly from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Eritrea, and Somalia – have been trying to reach the European Union by irregularly crossing the border between Belarus and Poland. This terrain is very challenging and is covered by dense forest and swamps. People trying to cross this border are experiencing multiple pushbacks and spend protracted periods in the *Sistiema*, which is the stretch of land between the two border fences, referred to by refugees as the 'death

zone' or 'muharrama'. Those trapped in the *Sistiema* and along the border are exposed to extreme temperatures, with insufficient access to food, clean water, shelter and medical care, which exacerbates existing physical and mental health problems.

The popularity of this new route has been steadily growing as it is considered to be safer than other informal pathways into the EU. In response, Poland built (and is now expanding) a five-meter-high fence topped with razor wire along 186-km section of the border with Belarus and has significantly

increased border patrols by sending additional military troops to the area.

In August 2021, as a reaction to a rapidly increasing number of refugees crossing irregularly from Belarus, Polish authorities amended a law to provide a legal basis to justify expulsions (pushbacks). The new act was deemed unlawful under the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, the Geneva Convention, the common European asylum system, and under the European Convention on Human Rights by lawyers and international organisations. In practice, refugees were (and in some cases still are) prevented from applying for asylum in Poland. Once they had crossed into Polish territory, refugees were being escorted to the barrier and forced to cross back to the other side of the fence.



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On 2 September 2021, the government announced a state of emergency and introduced the exclusion zone (which was lifted in June 2022), limiting the freedom of movement of local communities and effectively banning humanitarian workers and press from accessing the area. Humanitarian assistance was de facto criminalised with several legal cases brought against people who were providing first aid and lifesaving assistance to the people on the move.

NRC response and localisation of the humanitarian assistance

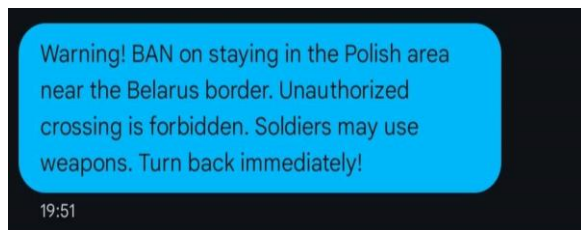
Most INGOs, including NRC, that came to Poland after 22 February 2022 focused on Ukrainian refugees with funding for the Ukraine response. With its newly established presence in Poland, NRC was the first international humanitarian organisation that started supporting local partners providing lifesaving humanitarian assistance to the people on the move at the Polish-Belarusian border with technical expertise and financial support. Following a risk assessment, NRC began supporting We Are Monitoring (WAM) in late 2022 for their information, analysis and coordination work, followed by Egala Association in January 2023 for their life saving interventions in the forest and case management work. An important part of Egala's interventions is the provision of Power of Attorney documents in several languages to support those who crossed to Polish territory to process their asylum claim once received by the border guards.

Since late-2022 NRC has been leading the private advocacy efforts to raise awareness of the humanitarian crisis and needs of local organisations at the Polish-Belarusian border. In cooperation with local actors, NRC established a working group to better coordinate the response and information exchange among organisations working or planning their response at the Polish-Belarusian border. NRC currently has three partnership agreements with local organisations operating in the Podlaskie area: WAM (We Are Monitoring), Egala Association and Dialog Foundation.

Egala is the key actor in the Podlaskie region with the largest number of humanitarian workers conducting interventions in the forest to provide first aid and lifesaving assistance.

Current situation at the border and humanitarian access

While there were signs of improvement with the new national government, civil society has observed and reported that the situation has deteriorated. Since the spring of 2024, attempts to breach the fence at the border have increased, so too have the number of assaults during these attempts, such as: throwing sticks, stones, and using makeshift slings to throw objects towards Polish Border Guard and soldiers. In one instance, a Polish soldier was fatally stabbed during one of the crossing attempts. This has further complicated the narrative and discussions around the rights and needs of refugees crossing the border. In response to the attack on the soldier, on 13 June 2024, the Polish government re-introduced the exclusion zone along 60 km of the Polish-Belarusian border for 90 days – preventing access to, on average, a zone within 200 metres of the border fence.



Alert message received by foreign SIM cards logging in the area near the Belarusian border, June 2024

The re-introduction of the exclusion zone has also further hindered efforts by local organisations to monitor the situation of people on the move trapped in *Sistiema*, which remains inaccessible. Since the beginning of the crisis, no organisation has been able to access refugees trapped in the ‘death zone’ to provide them with humanitarian and life-saving assistance.

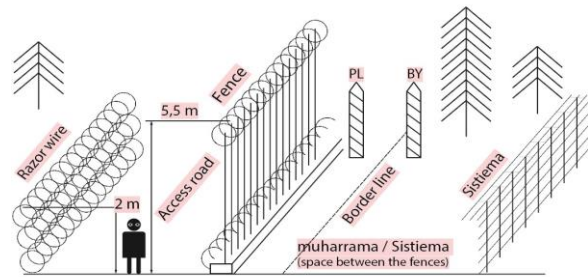


Illustration of the border area.

Since the re-introduction of the exclusion zone, NRC partners report increased violence against people on the move by uniformed personnel, including pushbacks of people who already declared the will to apply for international protection.



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According to data from We Are Monitoring, 56 individuals asked for international protection in the presence of humanitarian workers since the re-introduction of the exclusion zone (as of 30 June). Out of those 56, at least 28 were pushed back, including five from hospitals, including one minor. This is a significant deterioration of the situation compared to the time before the zone was re-introduced, when partners had noticed an improvement in relations with Border Guard and their support for receiving asylum claims.

As of writing, Egala has not received approval from the Border Guard to enter the exclusion zone with humanitarian assistance.

Needs and challenges faced by the local organisations:

- Restricted humanitarian access to the people in the exclusion zone and in the *Sistema*;
- Activists and local residents reporting cases of violence, harassment and intimidation from the Polish and Belarusian services; several legal cases against activists/humanitarian workers in courts;
- Limited financial and human resources for the response at the Polish-Belarusian border;
- Challenge with needs assessment due to fluctuating number of people asking for support; and
- Anti-refugee narrative repeatedly used by political parties for political gain during election campaigns in Poland (Autumn 2023/Spring 2024).



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NRC recommendations

For the Government of Poland:

- Humanitarian workers, including local organisations, need flexible access to the exclusion zone and Polish territory on the other side of the barrier to provide legal and life-saving assistance to the people on the move.
- People seeking protection must have access to medical care, and to asylum and protection procedures.
- Safe and legal pathways must become a reality for all in need of protection. Poland should adhere to the Geneva Convention, the European Convention on Human Rights and the common European asylum system by receiving all claims for asylum lodged inside its territory.

For the donors:

- Flexible, long-term funding should be available to the local and international organisations responding to this crisis so they can continue providing humanitarian assistance to the people in need at the Polish-Belarusian border.

For the international organisations:

- Continue advocacy efforts and awareness raising on the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border.
- Continue to push for accountability with the Government of Poland and keep them up to the same standards as the previous government.

For the European Union:

- Learn from the Ukraine response and the benefits to host countries and Ukrainians of the Temporary Protection directive. The increased reception capacity clearly shows what the EU can do, if there is political will.
- Support Poland financially to increase its reception and processing capacity at the border with Belarus.
- Enhance regular and alternative safe pathways, including job matching, education opportunities, family reunification and humanitarian visas.
- Address root causes of displacement through humanitarian and development assistance, and diplomatic engagement.

Links to other relevant information:
www.wearemonitoring.org.pl/en

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