

# RAS

REFUGEE AID SERBIA

FIELD

## Migration-related Context in Bosnia and Herzegovina

### Follow-up Assessment

May 2018.

*After the initial Report on the Migration-Related context in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the end of March 2018, Refugee Aid Serbia's Field Team visited Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) from 15-20th May in order to carry out a follow-up assessment on the migration-related context in BiH. Over 400 interviews were conducted with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Sarajevo, Goražde, Bihać and Velika Kladuša. During the visit, team has attended meetings with key stakeholders - government, international and local organizations, and volunteer groups - and assisted with various activities they were carrying out in Sarajevo and Bihać.*

## 1 Entry to Bosnia and Herzegovina

As of May 15<sup>th</sup>, migration flows into Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) come from two neighboring countries – Serbia and Montenegro. **In the past several weeks, the number of irregular border crossings into BiH has significantly increased, amounting to approximately 450 entries per week<sup>1</sup>. This is largely due to the outflows of migrants/refugees from Serbia, most of whom entered the territory of BiH via Mokra**

**Gora**, following roads and rail tracks leading to Višegrad area. Lower number of migrants enter BiH via Zvornik-Tuzla line.

None of the migrants/refugees interviewed during RAS Field Team's visit to BiH stated that they crossed the Drina River using boats of rafts.

Comparing the assessment carried out in Serbia and BiH, in recent weeks, **families with children find it much easier to reach BiH than single males, who often get pushed back 2-3 times on average** before they manage to cross the border successfully.

According to the statements of the officials of cantonal authorities<sup>2</sup>, in recent few months, no coordination or joint approach for the identification and registration of new arrivals has been established. As a result, local authorities often allow newly arrived migrants/refugees to pass through their jurisdiction without registering them, or even noting their presence. Local police believe that smugglers change their routes depending on how strongly protected certain border areas are, which is why they believe that the border between BiH and Montenegro is better protected today than it was in March, when the numbers of those arriving from Montenegro were significantly higher than those coming from Serbia (according to the data provided by the field office of the Service for Foreigner's Affairs in Gorazde, around 90% of those registered

1 From January 1st until the end of March, the authorities in BiH have registered 1.314 new arrivals.

2 Statement given at the meeting with police officials in Goražde, on May 15th.

during that period entered BiH via Montenegro).

According to the projections made by BiH government, it is expected that around 450 migrants/refugees per week will enter BiH in the coming months, reaching the number of 1,800 migrants in total. Still, considering that 80% of the newly arrived come from Serbia, there is a clear upper limit these numbers can reach as there is approximately 3,000 migrants/refugees residing currently in Serbia, so it is not realistic to expect such high numbers to be maintained for a longer period of time.

## 2 Legal Framework

According to the law, a person can ask for asylum immediately, at the first contact with the Border Police or the Service for Foreigners' Affairs. After registering, they are being issued an attestation of the expressed intention to seek asylum, which provides 14-days timeframe to reach asylum center and get registered as an asylum seeker, thereby getting an asylum-seeker card.

However, obtaining residence in the only Asylum center, located in Delijaš, is currently practically impossible because of the center's constant full to nearly-full capacity, which forces migrants to take residence outside the facilities of the asylum system - either in private or commercial accommodation<sup>3</sup> or sleeping rough.

Furthermore, **in order to gain asylum-seeker status, migrants/refugees residing outside the Asylum center have to register the address of their accommodation with the police or Service for Foreigners' Affairs. This process depends completely on the willingness of the property owner to formally confirm migrant's residence**

**and diverts the responsibility for the regulation of legal status in BiH from the migrant/refugee in question to external factors outside his or her control.**

## 3 BiH Government Strategy

The Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted a set of urgent measures and plan of action in light of the significantly increased presence of migrants/refugees. Relocation of those found residing in the park by the City Hall in Sarajevo to a reception center is one of the measures envisaged by this plan. According to Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees, **strengthening the capacities of border police remains in focus, as well as increased cooperation with neighboring countries.** In addition, provision of appropriate accommodation for all migrants/refugees sleeping rough in various areas in BiH is one of the priorities, as well as the creation of a network of partner organizations which will support the government in this mission.

According to the statement given by a representative of the government, beside the newly-opened center in Salakovac near Mostar, **the authorities are considering several other locations for increasing reception capacities in order to accommodate the increasing number of new arrivals. Locations mentioned include the village of Hadžići outside Sarajevo and Klokotnica near Dobož-Istok.** Some of these facilities have not been used in over two decades, so it is evident that significant investment – both financial and time-wise – will be needed before they can become suitable for sheltering migrants/refugees. For this reason, at this stage the au-

**“We do not want to make a comparison between BiH and Serbia because we just want to move forward. But we can see that families with children and even those without children are in a hostel and we are here in the park. All we ask is that we are treated the same. For us men, it's no problem but please, take women and children somewhere.”**

*- Syrian family, eight members*

3 Majority residing in UNHCR/IOM-sponsored commercial accommodation.

thorities are not promising that buildings will be provided as shelter for all migrants/refugees, but are also considering the provision of containers and tent-based camps.

At the coordination meeting at UNHCR, it was pointed out by representatives of international organizations that, **high costs of renovating and adapting unused facilities for reception of migrants raise concerns about cost effectiveness of such actions and leave the option of providing vouchers and accommodation in hotels and hostels as one of possible long-term solutions.** Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees and UNHCR agreed on continuing to use a dual system of accommodation: continue to house them both in hostels/hotels sponsored by UNHCR as well as in governmental facilities.

**18th, 269 of them were relocated to the reception facility in Salakovac.**

Between May 15th and May 18th, around 1.000 migrants/refugees resided in and around Sarajevo. These figures include the asylum facility in Delijaš outside Sarajevo where between 120 and 150 migrants/refugees are sheltered; UNHCR-sponsored hotels/hostels which currently accommodate up to 400 beneficiaries; accommodation provided by volunteers and locals, where around 120 people are sheltered; up to 350 migrants/refugees residing in the park near the City Hall, and an unknown number of those sleeping in squats around Sarajevo, which is not below 100.

**The demographics of 285 interviewed migrants/refugees that were met in Sarajevo were**



*Park near the City Hall, Sarajevo, May 16<sup>th</sup>*

## 4 Sarajevo

### 4.1 Overall Situation

Between May 15th and May 18th up to 350 migrants/refugees slept rough in Sarajevo city center (a park near City Hall), out of which approximately 40% (140) were women and around 14% (50) children under the age of 16. On May

the following: 33% (94) came from Pakistan, 24% (68) from Afghanistan, 15% (43) from Syria, 10% (29) from Iran, 12% (34) from Iraq, and 6% (17) from Algeria. In addition to single men, multiple families were also present in Sarajevo city center, which constitutes 45% (128) of the total number of respondents. Based on the interviews RAS Field Team conducted, beneficiaries on average spent seven days in the park

before heading towards the border with Croatia.

**Among those interviewed, 80% (228) have reached BiH via Serbia, while 20% (57) traveled through Albania and Montenegro.** Respondents report that the journey through Montenegro is easy and done without major obstacles. Among those coming via Montenegro, the majority (26 or 40%) were single males from Syria.

**Assessment has shown that 90% (256) of people found in this park were registered** in the police and have obtained a document which allows them to legally stay in the country for 14 days until they either have to register as asylum seekers (when the “yellow card” is being issued which grants additional 3 months of legal stay) or lose their legal residence in BiH.

tents.

There was no presence of organizations other than Pomozi.ba and MFS-EMMAUS in the park. Migrants were assisted by various volunteer groups and local population who occasionally and without any coordination brought and distributed donations. Additionally, there was no effective communication among different volunteer groups providing aid to migrants in Sarajevo.

In early morning hours on May 18th, police forces surrounded the park in order to carry out transfer of migrants/refugees from the park to a newly opened reception facility in Salakovac near Mostar. Relocation was conducted in a peaceful manner, without any incidents. By



*Migrant/refugee observing NFI distribution in the park near the City Hall Sarajevo, May 16<sup>th</sup>*

## 4.2 Park near the City Hall

In the weeks before May 18th, an increasing number of migrants started congregating in the park near the City Hall, reaching approximately 350 people, sleeping in more than 60

**7:30 am, five buses with 269 people headed towards the reception center.** Considering that federal authorities reported that only 18 out of 269 transported migrants/refugees were children and that RAS Field team detected at least 50 minors under the age of 16 residing in pre-

vious three days in the park, **it is evident that significant number of minors remained in Sarajevo and thus outside the existing protection mechanisms.**

### 4.3 Food Distribution

Until May 18th, food distribution was organized by various volunteer groups, including local organizations such Pomozi.ba, MFS EMMAUS, and independent volunteers. The type and amount of meals was exclusively dependent on private donations and was organized on a day-to-day basis. More specifically, while some migrants residing in the park received cooked meals, others received canned food and/or fruit and vegetables. For example, on May 15th, out of 500 distributed meals in the park near City Hall, 150 people received a cooked meal while others received canned meals.

**During this time, it was noticed that different volunteer groups provided food distributions at different times of the day without any coordination.** It was observed that this increased the risk of leaving more vulnerable and less mobile groups, such as women and children, without sufficient food quantities while others could take advantage of these multiple distributions.

To migrants/refugees staying in shelters provided by UNHCR and IOM food is being distributed once a day. However, as the food rations are not sufficient, it was noticed that persons accommodated in this way regularly visited food distribution in the park.

Besides distribution of food which used to take place in the park, other distributions, carried out by volunteer groups, are held in different locations in the city, such as the Central Railway station and Ilidža, which are visited by 60-80 persons on average.

Due to the lack of experience in crowd control, coordination and infrastructure, **food distributions in the park occurred in a rather chaotic manner and were prone to conflicts among beneficiaries.** It was observed that migrants who travel with families often refused to stand in line during the distribution because of safety concerns, and they consequently lost access to this assistance. On May 16th, during the evening distribution in the park, several migrants were involved in a physical altercation over the food portions, which resulted in volunteers in-

volving the police.

After the relocation of people on May 18th, all food distributions in the park have been halted. Independent volunteers, in coordination with volunteer-run shelter in Ilidža (called "House of All"), continued to distribute food at the Central Railway station. From May 19th, they are planning to conduct two food distributions per day aimed at 60-80 migrants/refugees. However, it was reported by migrants sleeping rough in the city center that the remoteness of the food distribution location prevents dozens of them to reach the distribution point.

### 4.4 Non-Food Items

Non-food items (NFIs), such as tents, blankets and clothing are being provided mainly by local citizens who sporadically visit places where migrants/refugees congregate, but also, in smaller measure, by different local and international volunteer groups. NFIs are being either distributed directly by locals or given to the volunteers present at the location.

Currently, distribution of non-food items (NFIs) takes place in a non-organized, uncoordinated manner. Such distributions were typically carried out immediately after food distributions, which resulted in increased tensions among queueing migrants.

Due to the lack of an established spot for collection and distribution of NFIs located away from both food distribution points and places of informal residence, it is still not possible to conduct an efficient and coordinated NFI distribution targeted primarily at the most vulnerable.

It is unclear if any collection point for NFIs brought by local population has been established, as there a vast majority of those willing to help by bringing NFIs were gravitating towards to the park near City Hall.

### 4.5 Accommodation

**Currently there are three types of accommodation provided in BiH: reception facilities in Delijaš and Salakovac, commercial, and private accommodation, and in squats around the city.**

Accommodation is provided by the state, UNHCR and IOM, independent volunteer groups and local community.

According to the interviews conducted in

Sarajevo, migrants are also residing in squats around the city. At this moment, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of migrants sheltered in this way, although RAS Field Team has noted the presence of at least 100 persons sleeping in these conditions. Location of majority of these squats and the number of migrants/refugees residing in them remains unknown, as there was no coordinated effort to map them.

UNHCR and IOM currently provide shelter to 400 migrants/refugees in hostels/hotels in Sarajevo. The agency stated that this number represents their full capacity and that they are unable to provide shelter for the incoming families and vulnerable persons.

The number of migrants/refugees staying in a shelter called “House of All” in the municipality of Ilidža varies between 90 and 100. This accommodation, run by volunteers, is designated only for families and vulnerable persons.

Based on the statements given by the government representatives, “House of All” will continue to serve as a viable form of shelter in BiH.

Taking all of these into consideration, it is evident that the issue of providing accommodation for migrants/refugees in BiH is not solved yet, as funds at the disposal of international organizations and quantity of available accommodation for provision of shelter is limited. Furthermore, current accommodation being provided in hotels and hostels is not in compliance with the asylum law in BiH which prevents persons staying there to obtain the status of asylum seekers. It is urgent that appropriate accommodation which complies with basic humanitarian standards is provided to all migrants/refugees in order to avoid deterioration of their mental and physical well-being, particularly taking into consideration that it is expected that significant number of them will remain stranded in BiH for

**“We don’t want to stay here [Serbia], we want to go to Germany, our cousins live there. Inshallah tomorrow we will be in Bosnia. I heard from there it is easy to get to Zagreb. And when you enter Bosnia, you only need to walk for 2 km and the police will take you to a camp. If there is no camp, they will rent a room in a hostel for you. We have friends who are in Sarajevo now, another family, this is what they told us. They say, before, there were no camps in Bosnia, if they catch you, they take you to a closed camp for 6 months. But now, Bosnia made an agreement with three countries, Germany, Switzerland, and another country I think. [...] We are planning to spend the month of Ramadan there and then go to Germany.”**

*- male, Afghanistan, traveling in a family of 10*

There are least eight independent volunteers who are constantly present at the location. Representatives of a local NGO “Vasa Prava” occasionally visit the shelter to provide free legal counseling. In addition, volunteers register newly arrived beneficiaries by taking them to the police station on a weekly basis in order to provide them with the access to asylum procedure.

Those in need of medical assistance are being transported to hospitals and private clinics by volunteers who occasionally cover the costs of the treatment. Although unstable funding sometimes limits the quantity of available food, beneficiaries had no major complaints.

extended periods of time.

#### **4.6 Sanitary Conditions and access to Health Care**

Those still sleeping in Sarajevo have no reliable access to toilets or showers, which make sanitary conditions in squats highly alarming. None of the migrants interviewed had any opportunities to take a shower during their stay in Sarajevo (extended for the period of up to two weeks), which in several cases resulted in serious skin conditions. Other beneficiaries reported that they occasionally visit one of the local

mosques to use toilets, however, these services are not available at all times.

There is no regular, well-established presence of medical aid workers in the city center. This leaves the most vulnerable people, especially those suffering from chronic diseases, at risk.

Volunteers report that primary health centers are willing to take migrants in need of medical assistance free of charge; however, several migrants reported illnesses and health problems which have not been addressed. Most of them were suffering from chronic illnesses and found it hard to maintain required frequent contact with the medical personnel after the initial consultation.

#### 4.7 Legal Aid

Apart from the initial registration done in police stations, interviewed people, both those staying in UNHCR-funded shelters and those sleeping in squats or other types of accommodation in Sarajevo have not been informed about their right or procedures related to their asylum claims. And those sleeping in squats reported not having any contact with any organizations or authorities which could provide them with legal assistance.

Frequent presence of local NGO “Vasa Prava” has been noted in “House of All” shelter.

#### 4.8 Protection

Prior to the relocation, peculiar conditions in the park were leaving migrants out of any protection system. In a similar manner, those migrants who continue to sleep rough in the city center feel even more vulnerable as a consequence of fragmentation of the community in much smaller groups.

**Since families with children still constitute a significant proportion of those remaining in Sarajevo city center, protection-wise, the situation remains critical as the locations of their residence remain unknown, as well as conditions these families are accommodated in.**

**According to UNHCR representatives, unaccompanied and separated children are at extreme risk of sleeping rough, as no legal guardians have been appointed to them to this date.** Without legal guardian it is impossible to

formally regulate the status of these minors in BiH and therefore obtain accommodation, as by law no one is allowed to provide any kind of services to them without the presence and consent of the legally-appointed guardian.

**It is still unclear whether any effective and inclusive system of providing information to the newly arrived migrants/refugees has been established in Sarajevo.**

### 5 Salakovac Reception Center

According to the information provided by the government, the reception center has the capacity to host 296 migrants. International Committee of the Red Cross is providing food in this facility. Freedom of movement will be respected and the camp will reportedly remain open.

### 6 Bihać

**It is estimated that between 450-500 persons currently reside in Bihać, divided between two locations in the city: one is an abandoned structure near Una river and the main city park, hosting approximately 90 persons; the other is an unfinished dormitory south of the city center, hosting around 250-300.**

Permanent presence of local and international organizations was noted at the dormitory. The national Red Cross and IOM have field offices there and UNHCR’s presence is expected to intensify as soon as the joint IOM-UNHCR office is established in Bihać on June 1st.

Among the migrants/refugees residing there, presence of 10 families with young children was noted. Current structure of the buildings makes it impossible to separate families and other vulnerable groups from single men, which is a cause for serious concern as frequent fights have been reportedly happening during the night.

At this location, cooked meals are being distributed once a day by Red Cross. Interviewed refugees/migrants stated that the quality of food is good, but that the quantity of the portions distributed does not satisfy the current needs. According to the Red Cross, during daily distributions approximately 350-400 food portions are handed out.



*“Dormitory” building, Bihać, May 20<sup>th</sup>*

Organizations present are currently working on improving conditions in building, primarily when it comes to the issues of safety and sanitation. While refugees/migrants agree that the conditions are far from adequate, they are reacting positively both to the presence of the organizations, and their ongoing efforts to improve the situation. Both showers and toilets are available, as well as electricity. Tents and blankets are available for the newly arrived refugees/migrants. Currently, access to water is an issue, as water outages are frequent.

**At the other location in the city, no presence of international or local NGOs has been noted, nor independent volunteer groups.** Those interviewed claim that the only support they receive – either in food or NFIs – comes sporadically and exclusively from the local citizens. They stated that the police come to the squat several times a day to pressure them to move to the other location, but they refuse to do so because of the fear for their safety – mainly fearing thefts and physical confrontations with different groups residing at the dormitory. **Refugees/migrants residing at this location have no**

**access to water, toilets or showers. They take baths in the river which is nearby and even occasionally drink river water.**

## 7 Velika Kladuša

It is estimated that between 300-350 reside in Velika Kladuša area. Migrants/refugees reside in different locations all over the city. Concentrated presence was noted in the city park, where approximately 50 persons were observed to be staying there; and a makeshift camp on the east side of the city, in neighborhood of Trnovi, where up to 100 persons reside. The others stay in private or commercial accommodation in different conditions – some rent rooms, some sleep in private garages.

In the makeshift camp in Trnovi, electricity (produced by gasoline-powered generator), toilets and showers are being provided by municipality. The camp is effectively an open field where people are free to set up a tent, with no presence of solid infrastructure. Food is being distributed several times a day by local citi-

zens who spontaneously bring food and NFIs. Migrants/refugees interviewed at this spot reported that the quantity of available food is satisfactory. Interviewed migrants stated that the situation in the camp is peaceful and reported no occurrences of physical conflicts or tensions.

Both here and in the rest of the city, families with young children are present, predominantly from Arabic-speaking countries.

## 8 Women Migrants/ Refugees in BiH

Until May 18th, approximately 40% of the migrants/refugees sleeping rough in Sarajevo were women and girls. None of these women or girls interviewed by RAS reported traveling alone. Nevertheless, RAS Field Team's previous experience from Serbia helped the team identify at least two instances where women who had previously been alone with children in one of the asylum facilities are now traveling with

one or two single males in order to improve their safety on the road. Only a relatively small number of children – and therefore families – was relocated to the reception center in Salakovac; however, it is still unclear where other families and women found shelter. Among the more than 100 people sleeping rough in Sarajevo city center, only one woman was seen.

**Safety of all women and girls sleeping rough in Sarajevo, Bihać, Velika Kladuša and other parts of BiH remains a major concern. Currently, reproductive, mental and physical health issues of women and girls cannot be properly addressed, as the reliability of access to medical care and psychosocial support varies drastically between the different locations and cities.**

## 9 Push-backs

**According to the interviews conducted both in Serbia and BiH, high number of people who have been caught crossing BiH a-Croatia border have been pushed back to Serbia. For**



*Camp in Trnovi, Velika Kladuša, May 20<sup>th</sup>*

this reason, newly arrived migrants/refugees take care to register as soon as possible before moving towards the border areas, hoping that having a document issued in BiH would compel

territory of BiH. By September 2013 land mines and unexploded munitions remained scattered in 28,699 locations in BiH.

**“When we were at the Montenegro-BiH border, the police saw us several times. In the end, they let me and my daughters pass, but they push the two men back. Although we entered BiH, we came back to wait for the men to cross. It would have been unsafe to continue the journey without them.”**

*- a woman from Iraq traveling with her two daughters*

the Croatian border police to refrain from transferring them to Serbian territory. It is unclear if this tactic is successful as RAS Field Team has noted several cases of migrants/refugees with BiH registration document being pushed back to Serbia, as well as low number of those who came from Montenegro and have never before been to Serbia.

Those migrants/refugees who have tried to cross into Croatia from this area claim that they treated very roughly by the Croatian border police, who reportedly took money from them, broke their phones, and even physically assaulted children. According to the claims, despite the harsh measures carried out by the border police, rate of successful irregular border crossing is much higher here than elsewhere along the Balkan route, as according to interviewees 20-30% of the attempts were successful.

RAS Field Team was not able to detect any activity by organizations present in BiH aimed at informing the migrants/refugees present in the country and especially those near the border zones on the presence of mine fields and dangers of traveling through wooded areas away from the roads. During the wars in ex-Yugoslavia, minefields were scattered throughout the

## 10 Dynamics between the Serbian and BiH migration contexts

Between May 9th and May 18th, RAS Field Team interviewed 83 migrants/refugees who left their reception facilities in Serbia and came to Belgrade to then continue their travel to a different country. While several respondents considered attempting to cross the border to go to Romania or Croatia, **90% (74) of those interviewed reported they were planning to go to BiH.**

Among those interviewed in Belgrade, 40% (33) had been residing in Serbia for more than one year. An additional 29% (24) spent between four and eight months in Serbia before they had decided to leave. Considering that nearly all of these interviewees were seen in Sarajevo within a couple of days after the interview, it can be concluded that most of these attempts – if not all – have been successful.

**“If they deport me to Serbia, I will kill myself. From there, there is no way out.”**

*- a migrant/refugee from Syria*

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# MIGRATION ROUTES THROUGH BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

- Transit areas
- Areas of prolonged stay
- Immigration center
- ▲ Asylum facility

