

RAS

REFUGEE AID SERBIA

FIELD

Report on Challenges and Experiences Along the Migrants' Route

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Activities Overview

Between May 1 and May 31, RAS Field Team focused on monitoring the overall situation in the Belgrade area, in addition to going on a week-long field mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In total, RAS Field Team provided information to 1,184 migrants/refugees and conducted 255 interviews in Belgrade with both newly arrived migrants and those residing in Serbia. In the month of May, RAS Field Team was in contact with 500 new arrivals – 29% (143) of them coming from Pakistan, 24% (119) from Iran, 21% (101) from Afghanistan, and 11% (58) from Iraq. Other countries of origin include Syria (19), Somalia (15), Libya (13), Algeria (9), India (6), Bangladesh (6) and Ghana (5).

In coordination with Praxis, as well as independently, 37 targeted non-food items (NFI) distributions were carried out as a result of which 45 persons were provided with 74 items of clothing. RAS Field Team referred 152 migrants/refugees to Praxis, CRPC, CYI, MSF, and other organizations for the purposes of legal aid, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and medical services during the reporting period.

In May 2018, RAS Field Team interviewed migrants/refugees in order to understand length of their journey and what kind of difficulties they have experienced. Journey length is defined as the time that passed since the respondent left their country

of origin until they reached Serbia.

Out of 176 persons interviewed, 97 (55%) respondents spent more than one year traveling from their country of origin to Serbia, 48 (27%) respondents have been on the road between 1 and 2 years, while 49 (28%) of them have been traveling for more than 2 years. At the same time, a high number of interviewed migrants/refugees (37 or 21%) managed to reach Serbia in less than 3 months. It is important to note that many of these cases involved migrants/refugees from Iran who come to Serbia by plane¹; nevertheless, migrants/refugees from other countries, e.g. Afghanistan and Iraq also in certain cases report quite short journeys. Furthermore, none of the interviewed migrants/refugees from Iran traveled for more than 1 year. On the other hand, large majority of interviewed migrants/refugees from Pakistan (34 or 71%) traveled for one or more years before reaching Serbia. Lastly, only 13 (7%) respondents traveled between 3 and 6 months, while 29 (16%) of them spent between 6 and 12 months on the road to Serbia.

Taking² Personal Belongings

Out of 159 interviewed migrants/refugees, 64 (40%) said that their personal belongings have been

1 Serbia signed a visa-liberalization deal with Iran in August 2017, allowing Iranian citizens to spend up to 30 days legally in Serbia upon arrival.

2 Since RAS cannot determine the exact formal reasons why migrants'/refugees' belongings were taken – i.e. whether they were stolen or confiscated, mainly in the cases where the authorities were identified as perpetrators – general term “taking personal belongings” is used throughout the report.

taken at least once. The majority of such events took place in Bulgaria (24 responses), while some were also reported in Serbia (9) and the border between Serbia and Croatia (4). Different respondents reported having their personal belongings taken in every country on the migrant route – from Iran (5), through Turkey (9), Macedonia (5) and Croatia (5) – with the lowest number of incidents being reported in Greece (1).

In the majority (43 or 67%) of these cases, taking of personal belongings was carried out by the police. In 13 (20%) cases, personal belongings were taken by other migrants, while in 9 (14%) instances, the perpetrator was a smuggler. When it comes to the incidents which took place in Bulgaria, Croatia, Turkey, the border area between Turkey and Greece, and the border area between Serbia and Croatia, all of them were perpetrated by the police. In Iran, all 5 reported incidents were committed by a smuggler. In Serbia, 5 out of 9 reported incidents were done by another migrant while the remaining were committed by a smuggler. **Nearly all respondents (57 or 89%) had their personal belongings taken at least one time.**

Violence, brutality and unlawful treatment by authorities

When it comes to violence, brutality and unlawful treatment by authorities, which includes taking personal belongings as well as physical violence or any cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, 70 (43%) migrants/refugees reported that they were victims. In 15 (21%) instances, migrants/refugees were victims to violence, brutality and unlawful treatment by authorities in Turkey. In addition, 15 (21%) migrants/refugees reported that they experienced violence perpetrated by the police on Turkey's border with Bulgaria, while another 5 (7%) respondents had such experiences on Turkey's border with Greece. Moreover, 11 (16%) respondents were victims of violence, brutality and unlawful treatment by authorities in Greece, 9 (13%) in Bulgaria, 8 (11%) in Hungary, and 7 (10%) on the border between Serbia and Croatia.

In addition to taking personal belongings such as phones and breaking them (e.g. throwing them into the river) as reported above, violence, brutality and unlawful treatment by authorities experienced by the respondents was manifested through beat-

ings (34 or 48%) and degrading treatment such as being forced to take their clothes off (8 or 11%). Additional 11 (16%) respondents were witnesses to police forces beating a family member or friend. In total, **15 (21%) respondents experiences these forms of violence, brutality and unlawful treatment by authorities two or more times since the beginning of their journeys.** At the same time, 92 (57%) interviewed migrants/refugees reported that they never experienced any inappropriate or violent behavior by the police in any of the countries along the route.

Arrests

In total, 72 (44%) migrants/refugees reported that were arrested at least once. Majority of the reported arrests took place in Bulgaria (31 or 43%) and Greece (25 or 35%). Only several of migrants experienced arrests in other countries, such as Romania. Vast majority of the respondents were arrested once, however seven of them had been arrested twice or more times. **Slight majority of interviewed migrants/refugees (90 or 56%) have never been arrested on the route.**

Physical injuries

Among the interviewed migrants/refugees, **153 (93%) reported they had no physical injuries while on the road.** The 12 (7%) migrants/refugees who suffered from a physical injury mostly referred to cuts, bruises and other problems with their legs and feet, due to excessive walking and/or running as well as the challenging terrains they have gone through. In addition, one respondent reported that his injuries were caused by a smuggler, while two migrants/refugees allegedly had injuries perpetrated by the police.

Medical conditions

Only 12 (7%) respondents stated that they had medical conditions during their journeys. Most of the interviewed migrants/refugees could not recall any more serious illnesses other than common cold. Medical conditions included skin diseases, kidney pain, hair loss, and chronic stomachache. While four respondents felt symptoms of an illness in multiple countries on the road, six of them claimed that they only became ill while in Serbia.

The Most Challenging Experience

All interviewed migrants/refugees were asked to, if possible, single out one experience from their journeys that they consider the most challenging. **Among 160 of them, only 23 (14%) stated that they did not have any significant difficulties.** Other respondents told touching stories which greatly varied in their content.

“The most difficult thing is knowing that our parents are still there (in our hometown). Something bad could happen to them every day. [...] our plan is to reach Germany and then our parents can join us.”

- Three male migrants/refugees and one female migrant/refugee from Iraq

Despite various experiences, it was possible to thematically categorize their responses. **Significant number of respondents (22 or 14%) found police violence (such as beatings) and humiliation (such as being forced to take their clothes off) to be the most difficult event to handle on their entire journey.** Furthermore, another 17 (11%) migrants/refugees had their personal belongings taken by either a smuggler, the authorities or another migrant while on the road and found this particularly stressful. **Among those migrants/refugees who crossed Iran on their route to Europe, 12 (8%) of them had exceptional difficulties traveling through this country. Especially problematic is the mountainous area where the border between Iran and Turkey is located. Here, several respondents reported seeing dead bodies or even witnessing their friends or acquaintances die.** Furthermore, smugglers which take migrants through Iran and/or certain local community seem to be providing particularly harsh treatment to these people, according to the testimonies collected.

“At the Iran-Turkey border, there are some people (Iranian people) who wait for migrants, kidnap them, beat them, break their fingers until they call their families and ask them to send them money. Smugglers don't do that. If they did that, they would be out of businesses.”

- a male migrant/refugee from Pakistan

Moreover, **16 (10%) respondents who experi-**

enced being placed in a detention center thought this to be the most difficult experience they have had along the route. Ten migrants/refugees who reached Serbia via Bulgaria found the overall situation in Bulgaria – including violence, brutality and unlawful treatment by authorities, hostile local population and living conditions – to be the hardest thing they had to go through. At the same time, 8 (5%) respondents reported staying on a Greek island was particularly challenging for them. Finally, 8 (5%) complained about feeling tired of excess walking and constantly running, while 8 (5%) of them thought “wasting” their time in Serbia without any clear prospects for the future is the harshest experience.

“In Iran, and also in Macedonia, we were sometimes in a car with 12-14 people... Sometimes in the trunk, too.”

- Two male migrants/refugees from Afghanistan

Several respondents had very unique experiences that cannot be categorized. For instance, one respondent found himself on a sinking boat while crossing from Turkey to Greece and witnessed 30 people drowning. Another group of 4 migrants were witnesses to a serious car accident where two people died.

Reasons for leaving Greece

In May 2018, RAS Field Team interviewed 86 migrants/refugees who spent some time (at least two weeks) living in Greece. The purpose of these interviews was to understand why migrants/refugees who lived in Greece for a significant amount of time – up to several years – in this country made a decision not to stay.

Among the interviewed, the majority (64 or 75%) resided exclusively on the Greek mainland, primarily in large cities such as Athens or Thessaloniki. Only 2 (2%) respondents resided on one of the islands before deciding to leave, while additional 20 (23%) respondents resided both on islands and the mainland.

Most (57%) of the respondents spent between 3 and 12 months in Greece, with the proportion being almost equal between those who spent 3-6 months (24 or 28%) and those who spent 6-12 months (25 or 29%). Additionally, 8 (9%) migrants/refugees spent more than 1 year living in Greece before they reached Serbia, and another 7 (8%) of them

lived in this country for more than 2 years. At the same time, it is not uncommon for migrants/refugees to only pass through Greece, staying for two or three weeks, having received information that leads them to choose a different country of destination. By way of example, 11 (13%) respondents reported that they spent less than one month in Greece before they continued their journey.

Although the respondents' reasons for leaving Greece and deciding not to make it their destination country differ, they can roughly be grouped in those concerning **legal processes, work and living conditions**.

aspect of work in Greece as the most important reason for not staying. The majority of them stated that job prospects are scarce and that they spent months not being able to earn any money. In addition, 7 (8%) respondents who did manage to work said that the working conditions were extremely poor and that the earnings were insufficient. More precisely, **they reported that they would typically be hired by another migrant/refugee who would arrange work for them, provide them with modest food and lodging, but in return keep all or most of their earnings.**

Furthermore, **16 (19%) respondents claimed that there were no appropriate asylum facilities or no asylum facilities at all at the time of their stay in**

Reasons for leaving Greece	Number	Percentage
Difficult to obtain legal documents	24	28%
Few job prospects	20	24%
No prospects for the future, such as education	15	18%
No appropriate accommodation facilities or no asylum facilities at all	14	16%
Bad living conditions	12	14%
Different destination country	12	14%
Difficult working conditions	6	7%
Problems with the police	4	5%
Rejected asylum application	3	4%
Transit Country	2	2%
Fighting and violence among the migrant population	2	2%
Lack of support for refugees	2	2%
Insufficient earnings	1	1%
Total	85	

Nearly a third (24 or 28%) of all respondents reported that the reason for leaving had to do with the long, tiresome and likely to be unsuccessful process of obtaining "papers" or legal residence in Greece. Among them, three migrants had their asylum applications rejected before they left the country. Many of the respondents even claimed that getting an asylum is "impossible" and this discouraged them to spend more time in Greece.

Another 27 (32%) responses elaborate on the

Greece, which motivated them to seek shelter elsewhere. Among them, 2 respondents left the country due to excess fighting and violence among the migrant population residing in the facility on the island of Lesbos. Another 15 (18%) respondents which complained about the lack of prospects for the future of both adults and children (e.g. education). Lastly, a couple of respondents also thought there was insufficient support for refugees in Greece, mainly referring to the lack of presence of NGOs and IOs they noted.

Finally, **14 (16%) of the interviewed migrants did not wish to stay in Greece simply because they have a different destination country.**

stomachache, depression, and kidney pain. Half of them developed these conditions in Serbia.

Gender Analysis

Among the 184 people who were interviewed about their experiences on the road, **44 (24%) were female.** While it is expected that the police as well as other migrants/refugees give preferential treatment to women due to gender-biased perceptions, **only 2 (4%) female respondents reported that they had no significant difficulties reaching Serbia.** None of the female respondents wished to elaborate on some gender-specific experiences they might have encountered such as sexual violence, but instead focused on the excess walking, living conditions, detention, and having problems with the smuggler as the issues these women found particularly challenging.

However, women are not always exempted from incidents such as thefts and arrests. In fact, **12 (27%) female respondents stated that had their personal belongings taken away in Bulgaria (6), Serbia (2), Turkey (2) and on multiple locations (2) by the police (8), smugglers (2) or other migrants (2).** In addition, **9 (20%) of them were victims of and another 7 witnesses to police brutality in Bulgaria (3), Hungary (4), Turkey (5) or the border between Turkey and Bulgaria (4).** When these female migrants/refugees acted as witnesses, they reported that only male migrants were physically assaulted by the police while the women were spared. In exceptional cases, female migrants were put a gun to their head or forced to strip naked.

Up to 13 (30%) female respondents were arrested on one occasion, mainly in Bulgaria (11 or 85%). Whereas no female respondents reported any serious physical injuries which suggests the routes they take could be less challenging than those some single males could pursue, **6 (14%) of them said they fell ill during their journeys.** These women have suffered from a variety of conditions such as chronic