

# Croatia 'forces' Hungary to take in more refugees

**TENSIONS GROW AS EUROPE STRUGGLES TO COPE WITH THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE FLEEING WAR AND POVERTY. BY SASA KAVIC IN BELI MANASTIR AND GERGELY SZAKACS IN BEREMEND**

**C**ROATIA said yesterday it had "forced" Hungary to take in thousands of refugees and would continue sending them to its northern neighbour, amid deepening discord and disarray in Europe over the biggest westwards migration in decades.

More than 20,000 refugees, many of them Syrian, have streamed into Croatia since Hungary on Tuesday barred their route to the European Union through its southern border with Serbia with a metal fence, tear gas and water cannon.

Warning it was losing control, Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic said his country would give food, water and medical attention, and send them on their way.

There were increasingly ugly exchanges between the two countries, reflecting the anger and ill-feeling between the EU's 28 member states over what to do with the hundreds of thousands of refugees reaching its shores, fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

EU leaders are to hold a summit on Wednesday, trying again to reach agreement on how to share out about 120,000 people. Even then, more are on their way, flowing by the several thousand every day over Balkan borders having reached Greece from Turkey by boat and dinghy.

Hungary said more than 5,000 had crossed from Croatia by bus and train on Friday. More were expected today and at least 20 buses on the Hungarian side of the border lined up in the village of Beremend waiting to pick them up.

"There was no agreement [with Hungary]. We forced them, by sending people up there. We'll keep doing it," Milanovic said in the northeastern town of Beli Manastir, from where many of the buses and trains have been leaving for the trip to Hungary.

Hungarian soldiers are racing to build a fence like the one on the border with Serbia along a stretch of the Croatian frontier too, and have rolled out coils of razor wire. Milanovic was dismissive of the move. "Borders can only be closed by brute force," he said, "and that means killing."

On Croatia's western flank, 1,200 refugees have crossed into Slovenia, like

Hungary a member of Europe's Schengen zone of border-free travel. Crowds were building yesterday at border crossings, kept back by riot police who briefly fired pepper spray late on Friday. Police began letting through small groups.

"I feel frustrated, we're so tired," said Siha, 35, from the Syrian city of Aleppo, the country's commercial hub reduced in many parts to rubble since the Syrian war began in 2011. With two small children, she was waiting on a bridge in no-man's land at the Harnica border crossing into Slovenia.

"We left Turkey 10 days ago. The trip was very dangerous for the kids. I decided to leave Syria because I want my kids to have a comfortable life, to study," Siha said.

Slovenian Prime Minister Miro Cerar said he would discuss with neighbouring countries the possibility of creating a "corridor" through the country if the influx became too much. Hungary said it would send a diplomatic protest note to Croatia.

In a telephone call with his Croatian counterpart, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto asked why Croatia was sending "thousands of unregistered immigrants" to their border "in complete violation of European law", the Foreign Ministry said.

The migrants entering Hungary from Croatia were being registered and sent to reception centres near the Austrian border, from where they would likely cross to Austria and on to Germany, the favoured destination for the vast majority.

An aide to right-wing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban suggested Budapest may block Croatia's accession to Europe's Schengen zone "if Croatia puts up its hands and says, 'No', I don't want to defend the borders".

Late on Friday, with tempers fraying, Hungary said it had "seized" a Croatian train carrying migrants to the Hungarian town of Magyarbóly, disarmed the police escorting it and arrested the driver.

A Hungarian government spokesman said the incident "raised the suspicion of a border violation".

But a statement by the Hungarian police yesterday said the Croatian officers were unarmed and were escorted back to the border. Milanovic said the Hungarians were "just showing off." As the political bicker-

ing continues there were yet more reminders this weekend of the dangerous journey refugees undertake.

Off the Greek island of Lesbos a girl believed to be five years old died yesterday and 13 other refugees were feared lost overboard after their boat sank in choppy seas, the Greek coastguard said.

A second, exhausted group of around 40 people reached the island in a small boat following a traumatic journey from Turkey, having paddled through the night with their hands across six miles of ocean after their engine failed.

"When we were on the sea ... I didn't have any hope ... I said: I am dead right now, nobody can help me," Mohammed Reza, 18, said after being pulled ashore from the boat by foreign volunteers.

Hundreds of thousands of mainly Syrian refugees have braved the short but precarious crossing from Turkey to Greece's eastern islands this year, mainly in flimsy and overcrowded inflatable boats.

Reza, who fled from Afghanistan and left the rest of his family in Iran, told reporters: "The water and fuel mixed up together ... and we were on the sea for about seven or eight hours without any water or any food."

He said neither the Greek nor the Turkish coastguard had assisted the group of men, women and children. "At that moment, we, all of us, thought that we are useless, we are not human."

Greek coastguard spokesman Nikos Lagkadianos said 11 people were rescued from the boat that sank and a 12th swam ashore in the early hours.

The girl who died was found unconscious and was later declared dead in hospital, Lagkadianos said, adding that the coastguard and Greek navy were searching for survivors.

Fifteen babies and children were among 34 refugees who died when their boat capsized off the small island of Farmakonisi last Sunday. Twenty-two others drowned and 200 were rescued two days later trying to reach Kos.

Of the record 430,000 refugees who have made the journey across the Mediterranean to Europe so far this year, 309,000 have arrived via Greece, according to the International Organization for Migration.



## Struggle for

**BY STEVEN SEMPLE IN KOS**

**O**N the beach to the north-west of Kos town, bronzed tourists relax on sun loungers while waiters and waitresses ferry them drinks. As they gaze across the shimmering Aegean Sea the Turkish town of Bodrum looks tantalisingly close.

Moving south-east towards the harbour, beyond the fishing boats and restaurants, you reach the imposing Castle of the Knights of St John. Built in the 14th century, the fortress which adorns the entrance to the





**A Slovenian police officer pulls a crying girl out of a crowd of refugees waiting to cross the border from Croatia**

Photograph: AP

then I bring mum," Mostafa says hopefully. As tourists pass by the Syrian camp and make their way to and from the harbour, many stop to take photographs. The refugees in their makeshift homes have become a somewhat macabre tourist attraction.

While most people are respectful, one young man utilises a selfie stick to include himself in a photo of the refugee camp.

Not all tourists are so callous.

Sahar Aghazadeh and Sara Khalili, two Iranians now living in Germany and the Netherlands, respectively, happened upon the Syrian refugees when visiting Kos Town. Sahar, walking among the tents of the makeshift Syrian camp, chatted to people and handed out a series of blankets.

"We were helping them with food and clothes but yesterday they told us they were cold at night and needed blankets."

When Sahar and Sara discovered the conditions these people were living in they donated their own money, children's clothes and food to help them. Afterwards they took to social media and pleaded for additional aid. "We have raised nearly €4,000 from friends and family on Facebook" she proudly revealed.

On the site they have uploaded videos showing the hugely impressive volume of bags that they have donated over the course of their vacation.

On this, the last day of her holiday, she humbly stated that the reason she did it was these people needed it and were desperate.

A short distance away from the Syrian camp, hundreds of migrants crowd around the entrance to the police station hoping to be registered and granted permission to leave the island. Estimates suggest as many as 200,000 refugees have come to Greece this year, most of whom have arrived on islands such as Kos and Lesbos.

Johannes Geier, 26, is a German tourist holidaying with his girlfriend. "I came on purpose from the north of Kos. I had to see what was going on here," he revealed.

Like many tourists, Johannes felt mixed emotions about the refugees' presence. "I feel somehow sad. I can understand the ideas of the refugees. Europe is rich. We are a rich country but on the other hand we have to make sure that we have to clear up this misunderstanding about, like, everybody can come here."

"I have nothing against people who come here because of war but these economical refugees – that will be a problem, especially if they don't bring the right skills for us."

When it came to Syrians, whom he considered to be refugees rather than economic migrants, he was more welcoming than in the case of others. "I think we should help them because after WWII a lot of German people were refugees too. My grandma was from Poland and she was a refugee in my town, where I am now."

At a jewellery stall a few minutes' walk from the police station and backing on to the ancient Agora, Helen, a local Greek woman who declined to give her surname, revealed the local economy is struggling due to the refugee crisis.

"Everything is closing earlier as there is not as many people. Tourists don't like to

## dignity as tourists on loungers look on

harbour, was originally designed to keep the Ottoman Empire at bay. Ironically, the castle walls now provides shelter for hundreds of Syrian refugees fleeing their homeland.

Among the rows of multi-coloured tents, improvised washing lines and piles of litter, men, women and children try in vain to live a dignified life as tourists stroll past.

One such man is Najeeb Karhokb, 40, from the northern Syrian city of Idlib. A member of the Greek Orthodox Church, Najeeb was forced to leave when Jabhat al-Nusra took hold.

"Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra are two faces of one coin," he said disdainfully.

"I am a Christian and my friend, Majed, is

a Muslim," he says pointing towards a man holding a young child in his arms. "We were neighbours and lived in happiness until..." he trails off, shrugging his shoulders.

"In Idlib there is one church – one thousand Christians. There are one million Muslims. We all leave Syria now."

Najeeb, who worked in a pharmacy, was forced to leave his wife and child behind in Idlib as he felt the journey was too dangerous. "My son, George, is one year old," he proudly reveals. "I am hoping to get to Germany – anywhere safe – and then I can bring my family over."

One of Najeeb's travelling companions, Mostafa Abdul Latef, played a video on his

phone of their journey on the boat from Bodrum. "There were around 60 people on the boat," the 18-year-old smiles.

The video, taken 10 days previously, clearly shows dozens of people crammed on to a motorised rubber dinghy. There appears to be no room to move and small children are squeezed together on the inside.

"It was very dangerous," Najeeb says. "Six boats left and only one, ours, arrived." He does not know what happened to the others.

Mostafa, the only member of his family to have fled, is hoping to join Najeeb in Germany. "His mother is sick," Najeeb explains. "Cancer." "I get to Germany and

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## ●YEMEN

## Civilians among airstrike victims

THE Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes against Yemen's Shiite rebels and their allies have killed 29 people, including civilians, in the capital Sanaa. The strikes hit an apartment building in the centre of the capital, a Unesco world heritage site, killing a family of nine, said security and medical officials, who remain neutral in the conflict that has divided the country's security forces. One more civilian was killed and more may be buried under rubble. The other dead were Houthis and their allies against the internationally recognised government's forces backed by the Saudi-led coalition.

## ●GERMANY

## Six million here for the beer

THE beer is flowing again at Munich's famed Oktoberfest. Mayor Dieter Reiter inserted the tap into the first keg today with two blows of his hammer and the cry of "O'zapft is" – "It's tapped." Some six million visitors are expected to arrive in Munich for the 182nd Oktoberfest which runs until through October 4. Ten of thousands are travelling to the feast via Munich's main train station, which has seen floods of refugees arriving in recent weeks. Yesterday however only a few dozen people had arrived there from Germany's southern border. Police spokesman Simon Hegewald said: "The situation regarding the migrants' arrival at the train station is calm."

## ●SOUTH AFRICA

## Pistorius release hearing delay

SOUTH Africa's parole review board has postponed for two weeks a hearing to decide whether Oscar Pistorius can be released early from prison, after being sentenced for killing his girlfriend. The board had been unable to finalise all its cases on Friday, when it had been due to meet to decide if Pistorius should be freed on parole or serve a longer period in jail. The Paralympic gold medalist was due to be released on house arrest in August after serving 10 months of a five-year sentence, but South Africa's justice minister blocked his release and referred the case to the parole review board.



## 'In Syria, you expose yourself to death every day'

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see these refugee camps and people sleeping rough.

"I feel pity about Syrians but Iraqis, Iran, Pakistan... they have no war and they are destroying tourism."

A short walk from Helen's stall, Irene Cockroft and her friend Lynn Bell, on holiday from the north-east of England, walked passed a pebbled beach where Syrians washed themselves and their clothes in the sea. It is sights such as this that many local people fear will prevent tourists coming to the island.

"We wouldn't have come if we hadn't already booked," Irene revealed. "The refugees haven't bothered us though."

As the midday temperature reached its peak, a dark blue van arrived at the beachfront packed with bottles of water which volunteers handed out to a quickly assembled crowd. One of those waiting in line to receive water is Gihan Mahmoud. Wearing a beige hijab and black framed prescription glasses, the doctor, also from Idlib in Syria, has travelled through Turkey and across the Aegean Sea with her husband and four children.

Journeying through the Syrian mountains, it took Gihan and her family 22 days to reach the Turkish coast. She revealed that it only cost them \$100 each to be taken on this route. In Bodrum, however, it cost significantly more to secure passage to the Dodecanese island.

"It was \$6,000 for my family to get on the boat, \$2,000 for each adult, children were half price."

As their boat set off, however, it was intercepted by the Turkish police who have seemingly stepped up patrols in the wake of the tragic death of toddler Alan Kurdi whose body was washed up on a beach.

"We were arrested at 2pm and did not get out until 8am. We were in the sun and only given water – even with children."

Her husband, who did not provide his name, claimed that the Turkish police pointed guns at them.

"They did not shoot. Just to terrify us."

The Syrian war has raged for four years, so why had Gihan waited until now to flee the country?

"Because I love my country," she replied. "It's a beautiful country, people from all over the world were welcome. It was so hard to leave."

"Before the war we had a good life. We are both doctors," she said pointing at her husband. "We had to sell everything: our car, our house... everything. It was too dangerous in Syria – anyone may kill you. You expose your life to death every day."



about the future of Syria yesterday as part of a three-day visit to the UK by the US Secretary of State

Photograph: PA