



UPDATE

Refugee Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

January 12, 2021

Overview

There are currently **between 8,000 and 10,000 refugees and migrants**¹ in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Only about 6,000 of them are accommodated in temporary reception centers in the Una-Sana Canton, while the rest camp in abandoned buildings, the forests of the Una-Sana Canton or other regions of the country. Refugees are often supported exclusively by volunteers or private individuals, rather than by the state.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) temporary reception center in Lipa, which was closed on December 23, provided **shelter for about 1,300 people**. After weeks of increasingly urgent warnings that the camp was completely unsuitable for winter habitation, the **IOM closed the accommodation due to the untenable conditions**. No alternative accommodation was agreed upon before this step was taken. Shortly afterwards, there was a major fire that completely destroyed the camp and made it uninhabitable.

The refugees who had been accommodated in Lipa up to this point were now homeless, and plans were made for them to be transferred to other camps. However, this decision was reversed due to **political differences and vehement protests by citizens** at the planned destinations. The refugees had been waiting to depart on buses during these ongoing discussions, yet after more than 24 hours they had to return to the burned-down camp. Since then, they have been living there in **extremely adverse weather conditions in largely unsheltered accommodation** without heating, water, electricity, sanitary facilities or medical care. They mostly find shelter in the camp's former "food tent" and some remaining containers, originally used as sanitary facilities. Heavy rain and snowfall have further worsened living conditions. Despite the cold, people are forced to wash at water points or in nearby streams. Some of the refugees have gone on hunger strike for several days in protest against these conditions. The Bosnian authorities are now trying to create **alternative accommodation**. However, so far the Bosnian army has erected tents for only 200 people, while images of soaked, freezing and exhausted people have been circulating in the international media.

National and international NGOs as well as volunteer groups have limited access to the former Lipa camp. Currently, the local Red Cross is the main agency providing people with food.

The **Sedra, Borici and Miral camps** are also in a very critical condition and urgently need additional support. All camps are overcrowded, and none offers sufficient protection for particularly vulnerable people, such as unaccompanied minor refugees. Only a few aid organizations can offer limited psychosocial support, and this is far from sufficient to meet the needs of the refugees.

The gap in shelter provision since the closure of the Bira camp near Bihać in fall 2020 has not yet been filled and has now been exacerbated by the closure of Lipa.

¹ In the following, the term "refugee" is used synonymously for all people stranded in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These are migrants and refugees as defined in the Geneva Convention.

CARE works on site with two local partner organizations in Bihać and Tuzla and primarily provides winter relief support. In addition, CARE carries out protection and information activities. Nevertheless, the available resources are extremely limited and far from sufficient to meet the existing needs.

CARE THEREFORE URGES

I. Bosnian decision-makers

- to support refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina according to humanitarian standards.
- to consider camps with a high number of residents in one large facility only as a short-term, temporary solution – especially in the context of a pandemic. In addition, adequate accommodation must be created, whether through subsidized housing or the identification of smaller, decentralized facilities. The approach of accommodating large numbers of refugees in camps that were not designed or equipped for this purpose must be recognized as having failed, especially since recent events.
- The central government in Sarajevo must recognize that the local authorities and the population of the Una-Sana Canton have been facing major challenges from the very beginning with the increasing number of refugees. The region and its population must be offered support with the challenges they are facing. Refugees seeking help must be given comprehensive care according to international humanitarian standards. If this cannot be provided by the Una-Sana Canton, alternatives must be found immediately. This may include the relocation of people to other regions.
- to guarantee aid organizations and solidarity groups unhindered and unrestricted access to the camps, in order to ensure that national and international aid reaches vulnerable groups as quickly as possible. Humanitarian organizations must be supported and by no means restricted in their work.
- to work closely with the local population to develop adequate solutions for people in need, with the involvement of both local and national political decision-makers. In addition, political leaders should avoid populist statements and information should be provided to the Bosnian population about the situation of refugees in order to counteract increasing xenophobia.

II. the European Union

- to commit to ensuring that human rights and minimum standards of humanitarian aid are respected in the care of refugees.
- to provide sufficient financial support, yet also to recognize the limitations of the Bosnian authorities' capacity to implement aid projects. It is therefore essential that aid funding is made available not only to government agencies and international organizations, but also to local and international civil society.
- to defend the rights of refugees. The European Union must lead by example and uphold international humanitarian standards – especially within its own sphere of influence, and in particular on the Greek islands – so that EU accession candidates can follow good practice.
- to prevent and condemn illegal pushbacks and violence against refugees at European external borders with all the means at their disposal. The European Union

must consistently hold member states accountable for violating core European values as well as European and international law.

III. The European Member States

- to expand efforts to provide refugees with adequate care in the Western Balkans and give more bilateral support in dealing with the crisis. This includes both financial and technical support.
- to support local and international organizations with the required humanitarian expertise. National and international civil society initiatives in particular should be strengthened, as these often have better access to the most vulnerable people due to their roots in local communities.
- To continue advocating for fair allocation of refugees within the EU and its candidate countries for those coming from the Balkan route, as well as the Mediterranean Sea.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or require further information:

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