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Police Abusing Afghan Asylum Seekers in Serbia: Human Rights Watch

4/17/2015

Afghan asylum seekers and migrants in Serbia are being harassed and abused at the hands of Serbian police, Human Rights Watch said on Friday after interviewing scores of victims.

Victims painted a bleak picture of being subject to violent assaults, threats, insults, and extortion, denial of the required special protection for unaccompanied children, and summary returns to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Some families and unaccompanied children said they had been turned away when they tried to register as asylum seekers and were sleeping outside in the bitter cold.

"Serbian authorities should be protecting asylum seekers and immigrants, including children fleeing war and persecution, not allowing the police to victimize them," said Emina Čerimović, a Koenig fellow at Human Rights Watch. "The authorities should put an immediate stop to police intimidation and abuse and hold those responsible to account."

Between November 2014 and January 2015, Human Rights Watch interviewed 81 asylum seekers and migrants, including 18 children, in various locations in Serbia and Macedonia – among them were numerous Afghans.

Aalem, a 16-year-old Afghan boy, said that twice in November police forced him and three of his friends – ages 12, 13, and 15 – back to Macedonia. They succeeded in applying for asylum in Serbia after their third attempt. Four adults said the border police in southern and eastern Serbia

told them to hand over money to avoid being pushed back to Macedonia and released them after they did.

Human Rights Watch also interviewed 13 people, including two unaccompanied children, ages 14 and 17, who said police had refused to register their intent to seek asylum – in the Železnička police station in Belgrade, in the Bogovađa Asylum Center, south of Belgrade, and in the police station in Sjenica, in southern Serbia. The refusal not only denied them access to the asylum system, but also to shelter, food, and medical care.

A police officer at the center who was responsible for registering asylum seekers said he only has time to register 15 people a day and that sometimes as many as 50 show up. He added that families with children, pregnant women, and unaccompanied children have priority for registration.

However, the people living outside the center included two families with small children and six unaccompanied children, all except one of whom said they had been denied the opportunity to register. One 16-year-old Afghan boy said the police officer had registered him but instructed him to go to another center, approximately 112 kilometers away.

In November and December, Human Rights Watch made three visits to the informal camps in and around the Cigłana brick factory in Subotica, a border town close to Serbia's frontier with Hungary. More than 50 people, including women and very young children, were sleeping in improvised tents, on bricks and piles of paper with little or no shelter from the freezing cold – with temperatures as low as minus five degrees Celsius during the night.

Fourteen people there said police had threatened them with detention and deportation if they would not hand over their money and mobile phones. Seven said the police hit or slapped them or sprayed them with pepper spray, then took their money.

"Nahla," a 38-year-old mother from Afghanistan, was traveling with her four children ages 6, 9, 11, and 13. Nahla and her 13-year-old son said police had come to the factory two or three nights earlier as they slept, awakened them and sprayed them in the eyes with pepper spray, then took money from them.

Serbian authorities should immediately investigate cases of police abuse against asylum seekers and migrants and hold to account anyone found responsible, Human Rights Watch said.

Serbia is a candidate for European Union membership, and actively participates in the Stabilization and Association Process, a step on the way to membership. Under the Stabilization and Association process, it is required to follow certain requirements for its asylum system and treatment of migrants.

"If Serbia truly aspires to join the EU it should put a stop to any police abuse and promptly investigate allegations of ill-treatment by the police," Ćerimović said. "Anyone who expresses a wish to apply for asylum should have a meaningful opportunity to register their asylum claim and present their case."