
MIGRANTS STILL TREKKING INTO CROATIA DESPITE WINTER COLD

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He said the rate of border crossings was slightly lower, but people were still trying to cross into EU-member Croatia every day.

Croatian police on Wednesday said they rescued 15 migrants, including six children, who got stuck on Mt Pljesevica in Croatia, on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, in deep snow and low temperatures. They were taken to a Croatian hospital.

But Van der Auweraert said many migrant families now preferred to remain in some of the facilities run by the IOM in Bosnia.

"Most of the families, I think, decided to sit out the winter in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that's the information that we have in the facilities that we run for families in Bira and Borici [in Bihac], though young males are continuing to cross over," he said.

Van der Auweraert said the IOM was trying to make people aware of the dangers of the crossing, but many people were very determined to reach Croatia.

"One of the challenges for the rescue service, although they are doing an excellent job, is the very practical issue - when you get into the mountains usually the phone network switches from the Bosnian to the Croatian network □ and most of the migrants are using prepaid cards and don't have enough credit to do roaming... It is very difficult to find these people," he said.

No Name Kitchen, NNK, an NGO that helps migrants and refugees, mostly in Velika Kladusa, in northwest Bosnia, told BIRN that while a number of people appear content to wait out the winter in Bosnia, groups are still trying to cross from Velika Kladusa every night.

Moreover, groups are being violently pushed back by the Croatian police on a nightly basis as well, NNK said.

NNK and other NGOs have accused the Croatian border police of threatening, beating and extorting money and valuables from migrants and refugees, and pushing them back into Bosnia. Croatia denies the allegations.

Since December, we have received regular reports of pushback groups having their sleeping bags burned and their shoes stolen or thrown away by Croatian border police during their pushbacks to Bosnia, the NGOs said.

Moreover, groups are now being forced to jump or wade into waist-high water in subzero

temperatures as a means of punishment for crossing the borders, they added.

In 2018, the number of migrant and asylum seekers arriving in Bosnia rose from fewer than 1,000 in 2017 to about 22,400, according to the European Commission. The Commission estimates that about 6,000 of them are currently in the country.

Most are settled in the Una Sana Canton, near the Croatian border. Van der Auweraert said that 700 are based at the Velika Kladusa humanitarian help centre, where migrants and refugees can have temporary accommodation and access help services.

In nearby Cazin, about 400 are staying in the Hotel Sedra. In Bihac there are two facilities, the former Bira factory that houses around 2,000 migrants, mostly young men, and a student dormitory, where around 150 people are staying.

Van der Auweraert said these locations are fully adapted to winter conditions and fully heated.

In the camp, at least in Kladusa, people live in warm enough conditions, the NNK said, warning that about a hundred people in Kladusa are living in squats.

No Name Kitchen is providing these people with wood and wood burning stoves in an attempt to combat the cold.

According to Van der Auweraert, unlike during the summer, the facilities have now been renovated and new spaces found, so that Bosnia can give all migrants and refugees a roof over their heads. He said that those sleeping outside were doing it for their own reasons.

Ultimately, the biggest concern for NNK in the cold weather remains those walking the mountains of Croatia and Slovenia without proper clothing for winter conditions, it said.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/cold-winter-not-stopping-the-migrants-on-their-way-01-16-2019>

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