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Thousands of refugees held at Budapest train station

By Markus Salzmann

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More than 3,000 refugees—the majority of them families with children—have been held at the Budapest East Train Station in miserable conditions since the Hungarian government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban blocked the access of refugees to the station.

Hundreds of refugees participated in a demonstration Wednesday demanding the right to continue their journey to Germany. They shouted slogans such as “freedom, freedom!” Jeering could be heard outside the station as angry refugees shouted at the hundreds of heavily armed police blocking the main entrance.

Since Tuesday, refugees have been camping outdoors since they are no longer permitted on the grounds of the station from which trains leave for Austria. A few found shelter in the neighboring subway station.

The hygienic conditions are disastrous. Only four portable toilets have been provided. The refugees have received no public assistance or accommodation. Help has come only from small organizations and private individuals who have distributed donated food and clothing and provided basic medical care. A reporter for the Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel* called the situation a “fundamental violation of human rights.”

The clearing of refugees from the train station was abrupt and harsh. Departures from the station were completely halted. Then, after a few hours, the station was reopened to passengers, but refugees were no longer permitted to enter, even though many had already bought tickets.

“The police came and told the Syrians: the trains are open,” a refugee told the German television news program *Tagesschau*. “Then they all bought a ticket here, 200 euro per person. Then the police came back when they had blocked everything off and said: ‘The trains are closed for you.’ We have not gotten our money back.”

The Hungarian police had unexpectedly allowed refugees to travel on Monday. The trains out of Hungary were stopped at the Austrian border, however, and the passengers had to wait for hours in extreme heat. According to the Austrian police, refugees who had already been registered in Hungary had to return to Budapest. The others would be permitted to seek asylum in Austria. The “aid” promised by the government for refugees in Budapest is contemptible given the situation. A tent camp is supposed to be erected beside the station within two weeks. With a capacity of between 800 and 1,000, it will barely accommodate a third of the immigrants.

Though EU countries such as Germany shed crocodile tears over the brutal treatment of refugees by Eastern European governments, the measures being carried out have their full support.

The heavy influx of refugees from Syria and other countries that have been devastated by the military and political interventions of the Western powers has led to the breakdown of the so-called Dublin Rule, which requires refugees to register and be processed in the first EU member country they enter. The authorities in Greece and Hungary are unable and unwilling to deal with the large numbers passing through their territories.

Berlin, in particular, has exerted pressure on the government in Budapest to prevent the refugees from traveling. As asylum seekers left for Germany on Monday, a spokesman for the German Interior Ministry declared, “Germany has not suspended Dublin.” In other words, the refugees should stay in Hungary and not seek better conditions by travelling to the north and west.

One can assume that the German government is frantically working behind the scenes to ensure that the Hungarian government prevents the onward journey of more refugees. This may well be the reason why the Orban government cordoned off the train station again.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker is also exerting pressure on Orban to stop the stream of refugees. The two will meet on Thursday in Brussels to discuss the crisis.

In spite of the dramatic scenes unfolding in the Hungarian capital, Orban announced that he would treat refugees more harshly in the future. Chancellery Minister János Lázár said the police would be mobilized at the border and equipped with water cannon and rubber bullets. The security forces would not actively prevent refugees at the border from entering the country, “But the time for that will arrive,” Lázár declared.

Lázár confirmed media reports that the right-wing government in Budapest wants to deploy the army against refugees. The parliament will create the necessary legal framework in the coming

week, he said. The government plans to use 13 new emergency laws to reduce the flow of refugees, starting in the middle of the month.

Hungary has erected a 175-kilometer fence on its border with Serbia. Most refugees travel through Greece and the Balkans until they get to Serbia. From there, they cross into the so-called Schengen area, the contiguous territory of 28 EU member-states where there is free movement across internal borders.

According to press reports from the German federal police, between 750 and 800 refugees a day travel to Hungary by land from Greece, through Macedonia and Serbia. The refugees originate predominantly in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.

At a meeting of the Visegrád countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), Orban and his counterparts discussed plans for treating refugees even more harshly.

Twenty-five years after the collapse of Stalinism in these countries, the false promises of democracy and freedom have been replaced by chauvinism and police repression. Capitalism is revealing its ugly and inhuman face. Refugees who have been on the road for weeks are being greeted by the authorities with hostility and rejection.

Czech Republic Finance Minister and Vice President Andrej Babis is demanding a NATO deployment to keep refugees out of the EU. "We must close the Schengen area from the outside," the millionaire businessman and founder of the right-wing liberal party ANO declared Tuesday on Czech radio. The flow of refugees is "the biggest danger for Europe," he added.

Czech President Miloš Zeman echoed these remarks and accused countries such as Greece and Italy of a "lack of will power" when it came to protecting their borders. At the beginning of August, he said in an interview: "No one has invited refugees here." He added that his country would rather take Ukrainian refugees because they "integrate themselves better in society than Muslims." Social Democratic Minister President Bohuslav Sobotka spoke against the required quotas of refugees announced by the EU.

Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico denounced the refugees and said it was impossible to determine for certain that there were no terrorists among them. Before that, Ivan Metik, spokesperson of the Slovakian Interior Ministry, said that Slovakia would accept only Christian Syrians.

Polish President Andrzej Duda spoke in favor of closing the border to refugees, adding that Poland wanted to take only Ukrainian refugees. "Other European countries should take that into account when we talk about readiness to help," Duda told the German *Bild* newspaper.

The right-wing Polish government has already explained to Brussels that it is willing to accept only 2,000 refugees from Syria and Eritrea. Even this token number has prompted harsh criticism from Duda's national conservative camp, which refers to the "Islamization" of Poland.

The Balkan countries Macedonia and Serbia, which are not EU member-states, are likewise taking harsh action against refugees. Macedonia blocked the border with barbed wire for two days and fired tear gas and rubber bullets on refugees.

The xenophobic attitude of the Eastern European governments, which are highly unstable and lack significant public support, is encouraging attacks on refugees by the most right-wing forces in the region.

On August 27, the fascist “64 Burgkomitate” held a demonstration in front of the Budapest East train station. Ahead of the demonstration, a group of neo-Nazis attacked several refugees who were waiting for their train. When the police arrived, they left the attackers alone and detained the refugees, including children, and took them to provisional refugee lodgings.

Refugees and Hungarian supporters at the train station in Szeged faced a similar situation when refugees were attacked by fascist gangs with close ties to the ultranationalist Jobbik party. Here as well, the police did not intervene. Various groups publicly and repeatedly boasted on social networks that they were hunting refugees on the Serbian border and “maintaining order.”

In Slovakia, the government campaign against refugees has led to riots. On Tuesday, several hundred right-wing extremists from the Our Slovakia party of Marian Kotleba demonstrated in the village of Gabčíkovo, where some 500 refugees have been taken.