



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

# “Die Here or Go to Poland”

Belarus’ and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses



## **“Die Here or Go to Poland”**

**Belarus’ and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses**

Copyright © 2021 Human Rights Watch

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-62313-952-0

Cover design by Rafael Jimenez

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people worldwide. We scrupulously investigate abuses, expose the facts widely, and pressure those with power to respect rights and secure justice. Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization that works as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights for all.

Human Rights Watch is an international organization with staff in more than 40 countries, and offices in Amsterdam, Beirut, Berlin, Brussels, Chicago, Geneva, Goma, Johannesburg, London, Los Angeles, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Paris, San Francisco, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto, Tunis, Washington DC, and Zurich.

For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.hrw.org>

# “Die Here or Go to Poland”

## Belarus’ and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses

<b>Summary.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>4</b>
To the Government of Belarus.....	4
To the Government of Poland.....	4
To European Union institutions and member states .....	5
To governments in countries of origin .....	6
<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Background.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Abuses in the Belarus-Poland Border Area .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Poland’s Unlawful Pushbacks To Belarus .....	11
Families Separated .....	13
Polish Legislation & Violations of EU Law .....	15
Abuses by Belarusian Border Guards .....	17
Death Following Abuses by Belarus Guards.....	18
Abuse at “Collection Sites” .....	18
Crossings to Poland Under Duress .....	20
<b>The Human Cost of Instrumentalized Migration .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>26</b>



## Summary

Thousands of people are stuck in a desperate limbo at the border of Belarus and Poland in circumstances that violate their rights, in some cases egregiously, and put their lives at risk. Encouraged by local travel agents in the Middle East to travel to the Belarus capital, Minsk, they have come to the Belarusian/Polish border with hopes of crossing irregularly into Poland. Polish officials repel those who try to cross, or push back those who initially succeed in crossing. Belarusian officials beat and detain those who return, and coerce them to try to cross into Poland again, meanwhile preventing them in most cases from either traveling elsewhere in Belarus or returning to their home countries. Unable to move forward or back into either country, people are spending several days or weeks in the open on the border, without shelter or access to basic humanitarian services, including food and water, resulting in deaths, hypothermia, and other sickness and injuries. Belarus and Poland share responsibility for this human crisis.

In May 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on Belarus in response to Belarusian authorities forcing a commercial Ryanair passenger airplane to land in Minsk and arresting two passengers, the prominent opposition activist and blogger, Roman Protasevich, and student Sofia Sapega, his girlfriend. In retaliation, President Aleksandr Lukashenko announced Belarus would no longer help prevent illegal immigration at the EU border. Since summer 2021, Belarusian authorities actively enabled migrants from the Middle East to travel to Belarus by facilitating tourist visas, and allowing them to travel to the border area with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. At time of writing, thousands of people are in Belarus attempting to cross into the EU. Exact numbers are changing and not available.

By November, Polish media reported there had been more than 30,000 crossing attempts at the Belarusian-Polish border since the beginning of the year. This figure could include the same people making multiple attempts to cross, as many interviewed by Human Rights Watch had. Poland has not provided statistics on the number of people detained by Poland or pushed back to Belarus by Polish authorities. A spokesperson for the Belarus government was quoted on November 18, as saying there are 7,000 migrants in the country.



In September, in response to what they have labeled “an attack against Poland” and “hybrid warfare,” Polish authorities constructed razor-wire fences along large parts of the border with Belarus. The same month the authorities imposed a state of emergency on 183 towns and villages within two miles of the border, blocking all access to that area for journalists, civil society organizations, volunteers, and others. On the Belarus side, the 10 kilometers stretch parallel to the border is a secure zone, to which only Belarusian nationals who reside there have access, with the 3-kilometer area closest to the border completely restricted to all but military and security officials.

In October, Human Rights Watch researchers travelled to both sides of the Belarus-Poland border. Migrants and asylum seekers in Poland and Belarus told Human Rights Watch that Polish border guards routinely push them back across the border to Belarus, without due process. In some cases, if those crossing were injured or sick, authorities took them to hospital for medical treatment and gave them a temporary six-month stay on humanitarian grounds. However, the family members of those hospitalized were mainly taken back to the border and pushed across to Belarus, separating them from their loved ones.

Belarusian border guards apprehend those who are pushed back and bring them to open-air collection points on Belarusian territory. Subsequently, the guards guide or drive the migrants to different locations at the border and force them to cross back into Poland. According to people interviewed by Human Rights Watch, Belarusian border guards prevent migrants from leaving the border areas even if they no longer wish to try to cross the border again. Consequently, migrants in some cases spend several days up to several weeks stuck on the border in the open, without shelter or access to basic necessities, including food and water.

At time of writing, there have been 13 reported deaths. The arrival of cold weather in September further exacerbated the situation for trapped migrants. People interviewed by Human Rights Watch testified to violence, abuse, theft, and extortion by Belarusian border guards. Belarus opened a shelter for some migrants near the border in mid-November.

Belarus is not a safe country for migrants and asylum seekers. By pushing back people to inhuman and degrading conditions in Belarus, where they do not have access to asylum procedures and in some cases are met with violence, and by separating families, Poland is in breach of multiple obligations under EU, human rights, and refugee law including the

prohibition on sending anyone to a country where they face a real risk of torture or other prohibited ill-treatment.

The crisis on the Belarus-Poland border is entirely concocted and unnecessary and requires an urgent solution. Belarus and Poland share responsibility for the dire situation and the well-being of the thousands of people stranded or trapped on their common border. Likewise they both have an obligation to switch to a rights-respecting response and end the human suffering.

Belarusian authorities should immediately stop all abuse of migrants, including pushing people towards the border with Poland. They should also immediately allow access for humanitarian organizations to assist people in need, and ensure that basic assistance is provided, including adequate winterized shelter for all. But more importantly, they should permit those who wish to leave the restricted border area and return to their home countries via Minsk to freely do so. Authorities should launch investigations into abuses against migrants by Belarusian border guards and hold responsible individuals to account.

Polish authorities should immediately halt all summary returns and collective expulsions to Belarus and stop all abuse by Polish officials of migrants. The government of Poland should also immediately allow humanitarian and other civil society organizations access to the area currently restricted under the state of emergency order for the purposes of saving lives. Journalists and other monitors should also be permitted access.

The EU and other member states should press Poland to facilitate humanitarian access at its side of the border and consider a temporary relocation mechanism to enable people who arrive on Polish territory to be temporarily relocated elsewhere in the EU to have their protection needs fairly assessed.



## **Recommendations**

### **To the Government of Belarus**

- Stop all abuses against migrants, including violence, theft, and detaining them in open-air sites without shelter, food, or water.
- Immediately allow access to the restricted border area for humanitarian organizations and independent observers, including civil society organizations, journalists, and human rights investigators.
- Investigate and hold to account border officials who abuse migrants.
- Respect people's right to freedom of movement, and allow migrants who wish to leave the border area to return to Minsk or to return to their home countries to do so.
- Foster conditions for people who wish to remain and seek asylum in Belarus: ensure that people at the border have information and resources necessary to apply for asylum or regularizing their stay.
- Work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to identify people in need of international protection.
- Work with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to help those who wish to return to their home countries, provided these returns are genuinely voluntary and will not expose individuals to harm.

### **To the Government of Poland**

- End summary and collective expulsions of migrants from within Poland and at the Belarusian border.
- Stop all abuses against migrants at the border with Belarus, including violence and theft; investigate and hold to account those responsible for such abuses, including border and security officials and their commanding officers.
- Lift the state of emergency and allow immediate access to the restricted border area for humanitarian organizations and independent observers, including journalists, civil society organizations, lawyers, and human rights workers.
- Provide migrants at the border access to formalized procedures, including the opportunity to lodge claims for protection in Poland and safeguards against

refoulement or return to a country where they are likely to face persecution ill-treatment, or inhuman and degrading conditions.

- Stop separating families when admitting people in need of medical treatment to hospitals in Poland.
- Fully cooperate with the Polish Ombudsman's monitoring activities and publish—at least in part—the office's reports on the situation at the border with Belarus.
- Refrain from using inflammatory language aimed at justifying a militarized response to the human crisis unfolding at the border.

## **To European Union institutions and member states**

- Reaffirm that all actions by EU member states and institutions must be rights respecting and that all migrants and asylum seekers should be treated with dignity.
- Press Poland to facilitate access to restricted border areas for humanitarian organizations, journalists, human rights workers, and lawyers, and provide material support for humanitarian efforts.
- Press Poland to respect its obligations under EU and international law towards people at its borders, including halting pushbacks.
- Establish an emergency relocation scheme to allow for fair processing and humane treatment of migrants arriving at Poland's borders.
- Assist Poland in guaranteeing the right to seek asylum, including through help from the European Asylum Support Office.
- Condition the provision of any border management support to Poland on (i) an end to abuses and illegal pushbacks of migrants and asylum seekers to Belarus, (ii) the establishment of an effective, independent, and impartial border monitoring mechanism at the border with Belarus, and (iii) allowing access to the border area for humanitarian aid, civil society groups, and journalists.
- Assess compliance with EU law of the amendment to Poland's Act of Foreigners that gives legal cover to pushbacks, and urgently consider triggering a legal infringement proceeding against this law.
- Condition use of European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) assets or personnel on assurances that Frontex will uphold its duty to avoid complicity in abuses and that its operations are consistent with human rights obligations under

the European Convention on Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

- Apply targeted punitive EU sanctions to individuals and entities involved in trafficking and abusing migrants and asylum seekers—as foreseen in the November amendment to the legal basis for EU Belarus sanctions.

### **To governments in countries of origin**

- Ensure that all government organized transports of migrants from Belarus to their countries of origin are voluntary and conducted with the full and informed consent of the people.
- Provide guarantees that those transported back to countries of origin will not be subjected to persecution or harassment.

## Methodology

Two Human Rights Watch researchers carried out research in October 2021 in Minsk and Hrodna region, Belarus, and one researcher in the Bialystok area in Poland. Researchers interviewed 19 migrants. Eleven were single men, five were traveling with their families, and three were single women. Six were from Iraq, including at least two from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, twelve were Kurdish from Syria and one from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Interviews were conducted in private using an Arabic-English speaking interpreter; one interview was conducted in French over the telephone. Interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview. They were told that they could end the interview at any time or decline to answer any specific questions. No interviewee received compensation for providing information. Pseudonyms have been used for all interviewees to protect their identities.

Human Rights Watch also interviewed representatives of the nongovernmental organizations Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Poland, Ocelania, Grupa Granica, and networks of volunteers and activists. Human Rights Watch also interviewed several human rights activists in Belarus. Human Rights Watch also spoke to staff of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Belarus and Geneva. Polish authorities denied Human Rights Watch's request to visit migrant detention centers in Poland, citing the Covid-19 pandemic as the reason for refusal.

## Background

In overt retaliation for EU-imposed sanctions in May 2021, Belarusian authorities have facilitated the transit of migrants to the country's borders with the EU, specifically the member states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland.<sup>1</sup> Belarus authorities facilitate tourist visas, primarily for people from the Middle East, through travel agents that make false claims that entry into the EU from Belarus is easy. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in flights from various airports, including Istanbul, Damascus, Baghdad, and Amman to the Minsk international airport since August.<sup>2</sup>

In October, Human Rights Watch traveled to both sides of the Belarus-Poland border. We interviewed 12 migrants in Poland, and 7 migrants in Belarus, who gave detailed information on how the travel operation works. Local travel agents in the Middle East offer their services on social media, primarily Facebook, and offer package deals to Minsk.<sup>3</sup> Belarusian state authorities issue visas through registered travel agents in Belarus, who are linked up with travel agents in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup>

Visas, mandatory travel insurance, travel to the border, and hotels in Minsk are included in the price, and sometimes airfare as well. Depending on country of origin, and whether airfare is included or not, prices tend to range between US\$3,000 to \$17,000 per person, according to information provided by interviewees.

Migrants told Human Rights Watch how local travel agents in the Middle East, including in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Jordan, told them that they will be assisted all the way to Poland.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Baltic States Accuse Belarus Of Facilitation Migration Across Their Borders," *VOA News*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/baltic-states-accuse-belarus-of-facilitating-migration-across-their-borders-/6263522.html> (accessed November 14, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> In November, following a decision by the Turkish Civil Aviation Authority, Turkish Airlines and Belavia, Belarus' national carrier, announced they would no longer allow passengers from Iraq, Syria, or Yemen to board Istanbul to Minsk flights. <https://www.newsweek.com/flights-belarus-halted-citizens-3-countries-turkish-airlines-amid-eu-pressure-1648675>

<sup>3</sup> For example, سياحة وسفر في سوريا والعالم, a Facebook group where travel agents and smugglers advertise their services, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1385528618470787/permalink/1499289440428037/> (accessed November 14, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> "Tourist Visas And Flights From Syria - The Route To Europe From Belarus," *The Guardian*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/nov/12/its-risky-but-ill-go-anyway-migrants-desperate-to-reach-europe-via-belarus> (accessed November 14, 2021).

Travel agents told them that news accounts of problems at the border are fake and that only people who do not buy package tours potentially face problems.

“They [travel agents] kept reassuring us that everything will be fine. They used us like wood for fire. And we sold everything for a chance at a better life. We have nothing to go back to,” said “Awira,” a 40-year-old Kurdish woman, from Syria.<sup>5</sup>

Human Rights Watch researchers observed dozens, up to a hundred, migrants at a hotel in central Minsk in early October. It was clear that most of them were unprepared for the journey ahead of them that includes days, sometimes weeks, in the forest, open spaces, swamps, and harsh weather conditions. Human Rights Watch researchers observed families with small children and other individuals traveling with normal suitcases unsuitable for the harsh terrain in the border area, indicating that they were misled into thinking the crossing would be smooth and quick.

All 12 people interviewed in Poland told Human Rights Watch that tourist buses and agents awaited them on arrival at Minsk airport and brought them to hotels in Minsk, where they stayed between 1 and 7 days, awaiting travel to the border area.<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch researchers witnessed how licensed taxis and vans pulled up to a hotel in central Minsk in the afternoon to take groups of people to the border areas.

While Human Rights Watch researchers were in the lobby of Hotel Minsk in the city center at around noon on October 8, they saw two police officers enter the lobby, which was full of apparent migrants from the Middle East, luggage at the ready, and approach one the managers. In response to their inquiry, the manager said that the number of “refugees” at the hotel was approximately 350 at that time and had been 400 the day before. He said that “they are watched closely and there is no violation of public order.” The “party in the lobby,” he said, was “waiting for pick up.” One of the police officers then used his cell phone to call someone, “report” the conversation practically verbatim, and reassure the person he had called that “all is under control.”

---

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with “Awira,” Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch individual interviews with 11 witnesses, Bialystok, Poland, October 26-29.

According to the 12 people Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed in Poland, the journey from Minsk to the border area varied between 3 and 5 hours. At a certain point near the border zone, they were told by driver to get out of the car and walk on foot towards the Belarusian razor-wire fence three kilometers from the Polish border that demarcates a military restricted zone.<sup>7</sup> Interviewees told Human Rights Watch they were given GPS coordinates on the Poland-Belarus border and instructed to head for those locations. They said that once they entered the three-kilometer military zone on the Belarusian side of the border, Belarusian border guards would detect them and help them to get to various locations on the Polish border. They said Belarusian border guards would either cut the razor-wire fence or guide people to locations where the razor-wire was already cut.

---

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch individual interviews with 11 witnesses, Bialystok, Poland, October 26-29.



## Abuses in the Belarus-Poland Border Area

In October, Human Rights Watch interviewed 7 migrants in Belarus and 12 migrants in Poland, who testified to serious abuses, including summary returns (also referred to as pushbacks), violence, being held in the open, being separated from family members, and deprivation of food and water, committed by members of Polish and Belarusian border authorities.

Once unlawfully pushed back by Polish border guards to Belarus, people described what they frequently referred to as “a game of ping-pong”. At time of writing, there have been 13 deaths of migrants, mainly on the Polish side, as a result of the conditions and treatment to which they are exposed during the course of these ping-pong pushbacks.<sup>8</sup> The total number of deaths on the Belarusian side of the border is unknown due to the lack of access for independent investigators, aid organizations, journalists, and others. However, Human Rights Watch documented one account provided by a Syrian Kurd whose friend died after Belarus border guards forced them to try to cross the Bug river into Poland.

Polish activists aiding people stranded on the Polish side of the border who had made it outside the state of emergency area, practically anywhere along Poland’s 480-kilometer border with Belarus, told Human Rights Watch that between August and November they aided more than 3,000 people.<sup>9</sup> In one week alone in late October a hotline set up by activists to connect migrants with volunteers received 1,000 calls for help.

### Poland’s Unlawful Pushbacks To Belarus

I crossed many times to Poland but was pushed back to Belarus every time [by Polish border guards]. I was in the forest for eight days, in this no man’s land... I didn’t have food or water for four days...<sup>10</sup>

— Abdul, 20, from Daraa, Syria

---

<sup>8</sup> “One-year-old Syrian child dies in forest on Poland-Belarus border,” *The Guardian*, November 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/18/one-year-old-syrian-child-dies-in-forest-on-poland-belarus-border> (accessed November 19, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Data on email by *Grupa Granica*, November 15, 2021. On file with Human Rights Watch.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abdul, Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

According to Polish activists' data, most of the people whom they assist after they have successfully crossed into Poland have been previously pushed back to Belarus at least once.<sup>11</sup> A September 2021 Amnesty International report using digital technology confirms pushback practices by Polish authorities.<sup>12</sup> The Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights concluded in a September report that Polish authorities are engaged in pushback practices at the Poland-Belarus border.<sup>13</sup>

"Afran," a Syrian Kurd, told Human Rights Watch how he was pushed back three times to Belarus by Polish border guards despite begging them not to send him back. "It's like a game of ping-pong: the Belarusians throw us into Poland, and the Polish throw us back, Belarusians in, Polish back."<sup>14</sup>

Fifteen people told Human Rights Watch about one or multiple pushbacks from Poland to Belarus.<sup>15</sup> All stated that Polish authorities failed to consider their protection needs or to follow formal asylum procedures. They said that their pleas for protection and asylum were ignored by Polish border guards. Interviewees told Human Rights Watch that that they were not taken to border stations for processing, which should include questioning, photographing, fingerprinting, and the initiation of a lawful return procedure.<sup>16</sup> Except when a person was deemed by border guards to be in need of hospitalization, after Polish border guards apprehended people who had crossed, they put them in cars, vans, or trucks and drove them to points at the border with Belarus and ordered them to re-cross the border back to Belarus.

---

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Marta Gorczyńska, activist Grupa Granica, Warsaw, Poland, October 26, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, *Poland / Belarus Border: A Protection Crisis*, September 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2021/09/poland-belarus-border-crisis/> (accessed November 17, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> "On The Side Of The Law: An Analysis Of The Situation On The Polish-Belarusian Border," *Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights Poland*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.hfhr.pl/en/on-the-side-of-the-law-an-analysis-of-the-situation-on-the-polish-belarusian-border/> (accessed November 15, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with "Afran," Hrodna, Belarus, October 9, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch individual interviews with 12 witnesses in Białystok, Poland, October 26-29, 2021; Human Rights Watch interview with an Iraqi Kurd, Polish forest, October 26, 2021; Human Rights Watch individual interviews with "Afran," "Aswer," and "Destan," Hrodna, Belarus, October 9, 2021; Human Rights Watch individual phone interview with "Jean," October 11, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Act on Foreigners, of December 12, 2013, [https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/sites/default/files/aldfiles/EN%20-%20Poland%20act\\_on\\_foreigners\\_en\\_o.pdf](https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/sites/default/files/aldfiles/EN%20-%20Poland%20act_on_foreigners_en_o.pdf) (accessed November 17, 2021).

“Jean,” a 35-year-old man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, travelling with his wife and three children (all under 7 years old), said his family was pushed back twice by Polish border guards to Belarus in October. During the second incident, he said he pleaded with the Polish guards for asylum but that they would not listen:

[They said], “There’s no asylum, there’s nothing [here], go back to where you came from!” They [took us by vans] and made us go back to Belarus, to the neutral zone.<sup>17</sup>

People who do make it across to Poland often do so in dire conditions, usually having spent days meandering through forests and swamps, wet and without food or water. The state of emergency declared by the Polish government in September prohibits aid and civil society organizations, lawyers, and journalists from entering a two-kilometer-wide zone along the entire border with Belarus. No state funded aid is available for migrants in need. To address this gap, local activists, lawyers, and volunteers have set up a hotline number.

When stranded or lost migrants call, the volunteers can establish what their GPS coordinates are so rescue teams can find them to provide food, water, clothing, and legal advice if requested. However, those stranded in the restricted two-kilometer-wide border area are beyond the reach of volunteers and activists.<sup>18</sup>

### *Families Separated*

People described how Polish border guards sometimes separated members of the same family prior to pushbacks if one or more members of a family were deemed in need of hospital treatment. According to interviewees, those deemed not in need of hospital treatment were promptly taken away in cars or vans, with Polish border guards saying only that they were being taken back to Belarus. Three people interviewed by Human Rights Watch in Poland who had received hospital treatment told Human Rights Watch they had not been able to establish contact with members of their family who had been taken away by Polish border guards.

---

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with “Jean,” October 11, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> A Human Rights Watch researcher visited the headquarters and a field team in Poland to observe the work of activists and volunteers to provide basic humanitarian assistance to stranded migrants. The researcher participated in an intervention aiding a group of five Iraqi Kurds.

Following their release from hospital, people stated that they were taken to a border guard station for fingerprinting, photographing, confiscation of travel documents, and questioning and were given documents allowing them a temporary stay for six months in Poland, with the condition that they report weekly to the border guard station and reside in a shelter in Bialystok, 50 kilometers from the border.

“Awira,” mentioned above, travelling with her 14-year-old daughter and 24-year-old son, told Human Rights Watch how, after a pushback from Poland to Belarus, they spent 7 days walking in the forest, 4 of them without food and with little water. Her daughter fell very ill on the Polish side of the border after they had been forced back by Belarusian guards. She described what happened when Polish border guards caught them:

My girl collapsed and I begged them [Polish border guards] to take her to hospital. The Polish border guard said that only one person can stay with her. They took the rest of the people away—we were a group of six, including my son. The [Polish] guards put my son and the rest in a military van and drove off. I don’t know where. Since then, I haven’t been able to reach my son.<sup>19</sup>

On October 29, a Kurdish woman from Syria arrived at a center hosting migrants in Poland while Human Rights Watch was visiting, and said that her family, part of a larger group, had been captured by Polish border guards two days earlier. She explained that Polish border guards identified her as in need of medical attention but refused to allow her family members to stay with her, including her five-year-old son. She stated that her family and the rest of the group were put in cars and taken away. She had not had any contact with her family since border guards separated her from them.<sup>20</sup>

A Kurdish man from Syria, travelling with his wife and 4 children, all under 18, described how he and his wife were forced to decide which parent would go to the hospital with their sick 4-year-old child. He said:

---

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with “Awira,” 40, Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch interpreter interview with “Aferin,” Bialystok, Poland, October 29, 2021. Human Rights Watch received information about the case of “Aferin” through local Grupa Granica volunteers who had been notified about “Aferin’s” circumstances and whereabouts.

The Polish border guards told us to choose. One parent could go with the child to the hospital. The rest of the family would be sent back to Belarus. I begged and pleaded, I cried like a baby, I begged them not to split up my family. After an hour, the border guards came back and said “okay, all can stay.” I’m still traumatized by this.<sup>21</sup>

### *Polish Legislation & Violations of EU Law*

Poland’s government has introduced problematic legislation to limit access to asylum procedures. First, in August, the Polish Parliament passed an amendment to the regulation on temporary suspension or restriction of border traffic at certain border crossings with the effect that persons who are not authorized to enter Poland are instructed to leave the territory immediately and returned to the state border line.<sup>22</sup>

Second, in October, the Polish Parliament passed an amendment to the Act of Foreigners that effectively gives legal cover for pushbacks.<sup>23</sup> The amendment introduces a provision that mandates issuing orders of illegal entry. These orders are to be issued when a migrant is apprehended immediately after crossing the external border of the EU in an irregular manner. The provision enables the summary expulsion of migrants from Poland, even if they apply for international protection. The law does not require authorities to examine applications for international protection submitted by migrants apprehended immediately after irregularly crossing EU’s external border.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding any changes to Polish law, Poland’s pushbacks without due process violate EU law including the Charter of Fundamental Rights.<sup>25</sup> The Charter guarantees the right to asylum and standard international refugee law practice, under which any

---

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with “Daryan,” Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> “On The Side Of The Law: An Analysis Of The Situation On The Polish-Belarusian Border,” *Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights Poland*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.hfhr.pl/en/on-the-side-of-the-law-an-analysis-of-the-situation-on-the-polish-belarusian-border/> (accessed November 15, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> “Poland: Parliament Approves ‘Legalisation’ Of Pushbacks, Council of Ministers Adopt Bill To Construct Border Wall, Another Life Lost At Border With Belarus,” *ECRE*, <https://ecre.org/poland-parliament-approves-legalisation-of-pushbacks-council-of-ministers-adopt-bill-to-construct-border-wall-another-life-is-lost-at-border-with-belarus/>, October 14, 2021 (accessed November 16, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> The draft is accessible at: <https://sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/PrzebiegProc.xsp?id=CD900BBA567B12CAC12587420034332B>.

<sup>25</sup> See Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, [http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/char\\_2012/oj](http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/char_2012/oj).

expression of intent to seek asylum should promptly be forwarded to the competent authorities for assessment based on the person's individual grounds for seeking asylum.<sup>26</sup>

The use of violence during a pushback may amount to ill-treatment, prohibited under article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and article 4 of the Charter.<sup>27</sup> The ECHR in article 3 and the Charter in article 19 also prohibit the expulsion of any person to a place where they face a serious risk of torture or other prohibited ill-treatment.

Polish pushback practices are also in violation of article 19 of the Charter and Protocol 4 of the ECHR, which both state unequivocally that collective or mass expulsions of aliens are prohibited.<sup>28</sup> The European Court of Human Rights has defined collective expulsions as “any measure compelling aliens, as a group, to leave a country, except where such a measure is taken on the basis of a reasonable and objective examination of the particular case of each individual alien of the group.”<sup>29</sup>

On August 20, 32 Afghans who were trapped on the Belarus Poland border applied to the European Court of Human Rights for help claiming that they had been subject to prohibited ill-treatment and illegal expulsions in violation of the ECHR, and that their right to life was jeopardized. In August and again in September, while considering their case, the Court called on Poland to provide food, water, clothing, adequate medical care and if possible temporary shelter to the applicants at the border. They also instructed Poland not to send the applicants back to Belarus.<sup>30</sup>

Poland is also violating the EU Returns Directive, which provides in article 6 and 8 that expulsions can only occur if a return decision has been issued. In none of the cases

---

<sup>26</sup> European Union Directive 2013/32/EU, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32013L0032>, UNHCR, Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/legal/5ddfc47/handbook-procedures-criteria-determining-refugee-status-under-1951-convention.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1950, acceded to by Poland in 1993, [https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Protocol No. 4 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, securing certain rights and freedoms other than those already included in the Convention and in the first Protocol as amended by Protocol No. 11, [https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Library\\_Collection\\_P4postP11\\_ETSo46E\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Library_Collection_P4postP11_ETSo46E_ENG.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> See *Andric v. Sweden*, application no.45917/99, 23 February 1999, para. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Notification and application of interim measures in the case *R.A. and Others v Poland*, lodged by 32 Afghans, application no. 42140/21, available at <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=003-7134761-9667819>.

documented by Human Rights Watch was a return decision issued by a competent authority prior to expulsion.<sup>31</sup> In addition, since Belarus suspended its readmission agreement with the EU, it is not possible to return migrants there lawfully.<sup>32</sup>

The forcible separation of families, including the separation of children under age the age of 18 from one or both parents, violates the right to family unity and the principle that any action involving children must prioritize the child's best interest, including in the context of migration and seeking asylum.<sup>33</sup>

## Abuses by Belarusian Border Guards

The Belarusian border guards hit us with batons, kicked us, stepped on our necks to the point that we cried.... I lost all hope. I pleaded with them [Belarusian border guards] to let me go back to Minsk and then Syria. They [Belarusian border guards] refused to let me go and kept forcing me to cross the border to Poland.<sup>34</sup>

— Abdul, 20, Daraa, Syria

The consequences of Poland's pushbacks of migrants to Belarus are deeply alarming. People told Human Rights Watch that once they were pushed back to Belarus from Poland they were routinely subjected to various types of abuse by Belarusian border guards, including beatings, being detained in open air spaces for extended periods of times (up to days at a time) with limited or no food or water and then forced to cross the border to Poland.<sup>35</sup> People told Human Rights Watch that Belarusian border guards prevented them from leaving the border area to travel back to Minsk or to their countries of origin when

---

<sup>31</sup> European Union Directive 2008/115/EC, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32008L0115>.

<sup>32</sup> "Belarus Parliament Votes To Suspend Readmission Of Migrants," Associated Press, October 5, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/european-union-alexander-lukashenko-poland-europe-belarus-4c39e7def6408319747ff89b1a8052fa> (accessed November 17, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, 999 UNTS 171, Art. 23(1). "The unity of the family . . . is an essential right of the refugee". Final Act of the United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons, 1951, UN doc. A/CONF.2/108/Rev.1, 26 Nov. 1952, Recommendation B. Respect for family unity is a "minimum basic human standard" including in situations of large-scale influx, UNHCR Executive Committee, Conclusion No. 22 (XXXII), 1981, para. II.B.2(h).

<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Abdul, Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch individual interviews with 12 witnesses in Bialystok, Poland, October 26-29, 2021; Human Rights Watch interview with an Iraqi Kurd, Polish forest, Poland, October 26, 2021; Human Rights Watch individual interviews with "Afran," "Aswer," and "Destan," Hrodna, Belarus, October 9, 2021; Human Rights Watch individual phone interview with "Jean," October 11, 2021. Belarus did establish a shelter for some migrants near a border crossing in November 2021.



they asked to be allowed to do so. In some cases, border guards asked migrants to pay for their release.<sup>36</sup> Several people told Human Rights Watch that they ultimately did manage to find ways to get back to Minsk.<sup>37</sup>

### *Death Following Abuses by Belarus Guards*

Human Rights Watch documented one incident where a young man died after Belarus border guards abused him, following a pushback from Poland to the Belarusian side of the border.

Ahmed, 21, a Syrian Kurd, told Human Rights Watch of this particularly shocking incident. After three pushbacks from Poland to Belarus, he and his friend were forced by Belarusian border guards to inflate a rubber raft, carry it to a particularly wide spot at the Bug river, with strong currents. There, according to Ahmed, Belarusian border guards made Ahmed and his friend, also named Ahmed, board the raft and pushed it hard out into the river. He explained what happened next:

The boat turned over. None of us could swim. I got rid of my backpack, but my friend Ahmed didn't. I was thrown [by the current] towards the Polish bank and managed to get hold of some branches to keep myself afloat. Ahmed was thrown into the middle of the river and I could see him go under. He cried and pleaded for help. I heard his last words shouting that he believes in God, and then he died in front of my eyes. I stared at the water for four hours in shock afterwards.<sup>38</sup>

### *Abuse at "Collection Sites"*

A Kurd from Syria described the practice by Belarusian border guards at what he referred to as collection sites, open air locations without tents or shelter, guarded by Belarus officials.<sup>39</sup> He told Human Rights Watch that following pushbacks from Poland to Belarus,

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ahmed, 21, Bialystok, Poland, October 26, 2021. The incident was widely reported in international and Polish media. <https://www.politico.eu/article/death-poland-belarus-border-19-year-old-syrian/>.

<sup>39</sup> Some people we interviewed referred to these locations as "camps" but when asked to describe them referred to open air locations without structures or tents, though sometimes with fires, where groups of people were guarded by Belarusian border guards. Many referred to the sites as "collection sites" or "collection points."

Belarusian border guards captured him and his travelling companions close to the border and took them on foot to join a larger group of migrants guarded by Belarusian border guards at the “collection site.” He described the conditions at the site:

They [Belarusian border guards] would beat us and keep us in this location outside and in the forest.... Sometimes we were allowed to make fires, sometimes not.... One time we were held for eight hours, another time 24 hours.... Others told us they had been held for days.... We were not given food or water.<sup>40</sup>

“Jean,” the Congolese man mentioned above, described the conditions at the site as “a prison.” He said:

The camp is open, but in reality, it’s closed, because if you try to go out, they [Belarusian border guards] beat you up, they hit you.... At first when I arrived there, I thought okay, I’ve had enough, I’m tired, I’ll ask them [Belarusian border guards] to help me get out [back to Minsk]. But they [Belarusian border guards] made me understand that from there, you don’t get out. If you want to get out, you have to pay. If you want to run away, they’ll [Belarusian border guards] beat you, they’ll hit you. That’s when I understood it was a kind of open prison.... There was no water there, there was no electricity.<sup>41</sup>

“Jean” said that Belarusian border guards took his and his wife’s phones away (a third hidden phone remained) and that Belarusian border guards extorted money from migrants, including himself. He said that Belarusian border guards would force people to hand over their money.<sup>42</sup>

Two Kurdish sisters from Syria, aged 14 and 17, travelling with their aunt and uncle and their three young cousins, testified to similar conditions.<sup>43</sup> Interviewed together, they told

---

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with “Jamal,” Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with “Jean,” October 11, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch phone interview with “Jean,” October 11, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch joint interview with “Ase” (14) and “Yesda” (17), Bialystok, Poland, October 27, 2021.

Human Rights Watch how following a Polish pushback to Belarus, Belarusian border guards caught them and took them to a collection site. The 14-year-old described the site and treatment:

There was nothing there, no tents, no buildings, just some campfires. We slept there. In the morning, the Belarus guards woke us up by kicking us. They kicked the fire out and when they did, my sleeping bag caught on fire. I got burnt badly. We pleaded and cried for them to let us go. The Belarusian border guards lifted me up, carried me and took the rest of the family to another spot between the two borders and left us there. They stole my auntie's phone. We got no water or food and we had to walk through swamps and forests for four days, me with a burn wound, my sister [17 years old] with an injured back. We had to drink water from the swamp.<sup>44</sup>

A Human Rights Watch researcher saw wounds consistent with burns on the 14-year-old girl's leg and feet.

On November 17, Belarus announced that it had opened an emergency shelter for around 1000 people trapped at the border.<sup>45</sup> International media filmed the facility with people inside it. Human Rights Watch has not been able to verify the number of people who are able to shelter there or what facilities are available to them.

### *Crossings to Poland Under Duress*

Human Rights Watch interviewed migrants who said that Belarusian border guards routinely take groups of people who are in or near the border area on foot or in vehicles (cars, trucks) to specific locations at the Polish border and make them cross into Poland, even those who are no longer willing to attempt it. In seven cases, migrants said that, to make the passage easier, Belarusian border guards cut a barbed-wire fence erected in September by Polish authorities.

---

<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch joint interview with "Ase" (14) and "Yesda" (17), Bialystok, Poland, October 27, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> "Belarus-Poland Border Tensions Show Signs of Easing," *New York Times*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/11/17/world/belarus-poland-border-migrants> (accessed November 19, 2021).

“We were not given a choice,” “Abdul,” a 20-year old Kurdish man from Syria, told Human Rights Watch. “They [Belarusian border guards] told us: ‘You have a choice. You either die here [in Belarus] or you go to Poland.’ So we had no choice but to go.”<sup>46</sup>

“Anwar,” a 26-year-old Kurdish man from Syria, told Human Rights Watch how after a pushback from Poland to Belarus, he and five others were captured by Belarusian border guards. He explained what happened next:

They [Belarusian border guards] took us to an awful route, in an area full of swamps and a river 40 kilometers ahead. They told us to walk and we had no choice. It took us three days, with one day walking swamps. We ran out of water.... Some of us drank from the swamp. The swamp got too deep so we had to turn back. My old leg injury from Syria got infected in the swamps.<sup>47</sup>

“Anwar” and his companions managed to reach the forest to rest, and then cross into Polish territory and contact volunteers to rescue them.

Access to the 10-kilometer-wide zone of the border area on Belarusian territory is restricted. Only Belarusian nationals that reside in the first seven kilometers of the area are allowed access. The remaining three kilometers is classified as a military zone, barring restrictions for all civilians. Migrants are trapped and guarded by Belarusian border guards inside the three-kilometer military zone. A few have managed to slip away and travel back to Minsk.

UNHCR and IOM were granted brief access to the zone in early November. To date, Human Rights Watch is not aware of any civil society organizations being granted access to the 10-kilometer zone during the ongoing human crisis.

The crisis in the border area on the Belarusian side is exacerbated by the massive civil society crackdown unleashed by President Lukashenko’s government following the

---

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with “Abdul,” Bialystok, Poland, October 26, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with “Anwar,” October 26, Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

unprecedented public protests of 2020.<sup>48</sup> As part of the crackdown, in summer 2021, Belarusian authorities announced a “purge” of nongovernmental organizations, and shut down at least 270 NGOs, including the country’s leading human rights group, between August and October.<sup>49</sup>

Under those circumstances, Belarusian human rights defenders cannot organize humanitarian aid for migrants or document abuses against them and provide them with legal and other assistance.

In October-November 2021, Belarusian authorities and the local Red Cross Committee provided some humanitarian aid to stranded people, including potable water, canned food, firewood, and tents. UNHCR and IOM provided support through the Belarus Red Cross on at least one occasion in November.<sup>50</sup> However, the situation remains dire, especially as the weather is getting increasingly cold, with sub-zero temperatures at night in early November.<sup>51</sup> News reports citing Polish health care workers state that hypothermia is common among people stranded in the border area.<sup>52</sup>

Belarus’ abuses of people on its territory violates the international law prohibition on inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and Belarus’ treaty obligations as a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Forms of Inhuman or Degrading Treatment (UNCAT), and the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> “A Year Of Dismantling Civil Society in Belarus,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 8, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/08/year-dismantling-civil-society-belarus>.

<sup>49</sup> “Belarus Authorities Purge Human Rights Defenders,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 7, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/07/belarus-authorities-purge-human-rights-defenders>.

<sup>50</sup> “IOM, UNHCR provide emergency aid to asylum-seekers and migrants at the Belarus-Poland border, call to ensure well-being of people and prevent loss of life,” UNHCR, November 12, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2021/11/618e20c34/iom-unhcr-provide-emergency-aid-asylum-seekers-migrants-belarus-poland.html>.

<sup>51</sup> “Lukashenko Nazval Situaciiu S Migrantami Na Granice S Es Gumanitarnoj Katastrofoj,” *TASS*, September 27, 2021, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/12875083>; <https://rg.ru/2021/09/27/lukashenko-nazval-situaciiu-s-migrantami-na-granice-s-es-gumanitarnoj-katastrofoj.html> (accessed November 15, 2021).

<sup>52</sup> “Migrants Face Hypothermia And Broken Bones In Freezing Forests As Poland-Belarus Crisis Deepens,” *CNN*, November 11, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/10/europe/poland-belarus-border-migrant-crisis-wednesday-intl/index.html> (accessed November 14, 2021).

<sup>53</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted December 10, 1948, ratified by Belarus in 1973 art. 7; the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Forms of Inhuman or Degrading Treatment, adopted on December 10, 1984, ratified by Belarus in 1987, art. 16; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted November 20, 1989, ratified by Belarus in 1990, art. 37.

According to a 2018 report by Human Constanta, a leading Belarusian human rights organization working on refugee rights, migrants experience difficulties with accessing medical and mental health and psychosocial support, employment, education, and financial support in Belarus.<sup>54</sup> Authorities do not provide adequate information on what is a complicated and nontransparent asylum application procedure, and they deny lawyers and interpreters access to asylum seekers.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Анна Барановская, Алексей Козлюк, Наста Лойка, Валдис Фугаш, Елена Чехович, “ВЫНУЖДЕННАЯ МИГРАЦИЯ В БЕЛАРУСИ,” Human Constanta, June 20, 2017, <https://humanconstantaby/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Вынужденная-миграция-в-Беларуси.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Анна Барановская, Алексей Козлюк, Наста Лойка, Валдис Фугаш, Елена Чехович, “ВЫНУЖДЕННАЯ МИГРАЦИЯ В БЕЛАРУСИ,” Human Constanta, June 20, 2017, <https://humanconstantaby/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Вынужденная-миграция-в-Беларуси.pdf>.

## The Human Cost of Instrumentalized Migration

Polish and Belarusian authorities have cynically instrumentalized the migration issue since August 2021, including through social media and the use of pro-government news outlets whose reporting verges on propaganda. Border guards from Belarus routinely film and photograph the other party engaging in alleged pushbacks, and Polish guards similarly film Belarusian guards aiding migrants in entering Poland. Both states use social media platforms like Twitter to disseminate images and footage claiming to show abuses of migrants by the other side.

A Syrian Kurd, “Eylo,” told Human Rights Watch that following several Polish pushbacks to Belarus in mid-October, Belarusian border guards collected a large group of migrants, approximately 150 people, and guided them to a location at the razor-wire fence between Poland and Belarus. He stated that the Belarusian border guards ordered the group to shout “Freedom!” and throw sticks and stones at the Polish border guards.<sup>56</sup> Similar incidents have been caught on tape by Polish border guards and disseminated online. On November 16, Polish border guards engaged in disproportionate use of force by resorting to water canons and teargas against people stranded at the Bruzgi border crossing point.<sup>57</sup>

While working in Poland close to the border, a Human Rights Watch researcher received a mobile telephone text message sent by Polish authorities reading: “The Polish border is sealed. BLR authorities told you lies. Go back to Minsk!”<sup>58</sup> Polish activists told Human Rights Watch that such text messages are commonly received in the border area.<sup>59</sup>

“Rebin,” a 26-year-old Syrian Kurd, told Human Rights Watch of an incident in October when he and a larger group of men were caught by Polish border guards inside Poland, and transported by car to a location on the Poland-Belarus border.

---

<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with “Eylo,” Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> “Polish Police Fire Teargas At People Trying To Cross From Belarus,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/16/polish-belarus-border-police-teargas-please> (accessed November 19, 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Mobile phone text message (SMS) by Polish authorities from +48 885 886 616, October 26, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Marta Gorczynska, lawyer and volunteer at Grupa Granica, Warsaw, Poland, October 26, 2021.



The [Polish] border guards made us go through the razor-wire to Belarus when all of a sudden a couple of Belarusian border guards showed up. One was filming the incident. An argument broke out between the Polish and Belarusian border guards and I noticed the Polish guard got scared. They [Polish border guards] told us to come back. Then they [Polish border guards] put us back in the car and took us to another point at the border and made us cross there.<sup>60</sup>

Belarus authorities are seeking to deflect attention from their own abuses and facilitation of migration flows, while manipulating the situation to generate fear among EU policy makers that the situation could lead to a huge surge in irregular migration to the EU similar to 2015. Meanwhile Polish authorities have used the language of “hybrid war” to describe Belarus state actions in encouraging migration, and other EU states and institutions have followed suit. This rhetoric is used to justify a militarized response to a human crisis, including the declaration of a state of emergency, razor-wire fences, the exclusion of civil society groups and journalists, and large deployments of security personnel.

What is often lost amid this politicized context is the fate of the human beings who are suffering as a result of the actions of both states. To prevent further loss of life, and intolerable human misery, that must change.

---

<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with “Rebin,” Bialystok, Poland, October 28, 2021.

## Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Lydia Gall, senior researcher in the Europe and Central Asia division. Tanya Lokshina, Europe and Central Asia associate director, contributed to research, writing, and editing of the report. Anastasiia Kruope, assistant researcher in the Europe and Central Asia division, provided research support. Benjamin Ward, deputy director in the Europe and Central Asia division, edited the report. The report was also reviewed by Judith Sunderland, Europe and Central Asia associate director, Philippe Dam, Europe and Central Asia advocacy director, Bill Frelick, director of the Refugee and Migrants Rights division; Bill Van Esveld, associate director Children's Rights Division, Hillary Margolis, senior researcher in the Women's Rights Division, Lotte Leicht, EU director, Sara Kayyali, Syria researcher in the Middle East and North Africa division, Belkis Wille, senior Crisis and Conflict division researcher, Jane Buchanan, deputy director in the Disability Rights division, Thomas Fessy, senior Democratic Republic of Congo researcher. Aisling Reidy, senior legal advisor, provided legal review. Tom Porteous, deputy program director, provided program review. Catherine Pilishvili, senior coordinator in the Europe and Central Asia division and Klara Funke, associate in the Central Asia division, provided editorial assistance. Travis Carr, senior publications coordinator; Fitzroy Hepkins, senior administrative manager, and José Martínez, administrative officer, produced the report.

We would like to thank all of the people who gave their time to share their experiences with us. We recognize their courage and resilience in the face of great hardship and suffering. Without their willingness to speak, this report would not have been possible.

# “Die Here or Go to Poland”

## Belarus’ and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses

Thousands of people are stuck in a desperate limbo at the border between Belarus and Poland, in circumstances that violate their rights, in some cases egregiously, and put their lives at risk. Encouraged by local travel agents in the Middle East to travel to the Belarus capital, Minsk, they travel to the Belarusian/Polish border with hopes of crossing irregularly into Poland which is also the external border of the European Union. This is a situation orchestrated by Belarus in retaliation for sanctions imposed by the European Union.

Polish officials repel those who try to cross or push back those who initially succeed in crossing. Belarusian officials beat and detain those who return and coerce them to try to cross into Poland again, meanwhile preventing them in most cases from either traveling elsewhere in Belarus or returning to their home countries. Unable to move forward or back into either country, people are spending several days or weeks in the open on the border, without shelter or access to basic humanitarian services, including food and water, resulting in deaths, hypothermia, and other sickness and injuries.

Based on research conducted on both sides of the Belarus-Poland border, *“Die Here or Go to Poland”: Belarus’ and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses* documents the human rights abuse experienced by people at the border and the shared responsibility of authorities in Belarus and Poland. It contains concrete recommendations to the governments of Belarus and Poland and to the European Union.



*Two women and a child huddle in sleeping bags on the forest floor after crossing the Polish-Belarusian border near Michalowo on October 6, 2021.*

© 2021 Maciej Luczniewski/NurPhoto via AP