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## Crisis at the Belarus border contains a warning for the future

By Sarah Glynn



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Migrants gather at the Belarus-Poland border. Photograph: AP

"In the Second World War they hunted down Jews in the Polish forest, now it is refugees," Lida Weerts told me. She is just back from a diplomatic mission with the European Kurdish Democratic Societies Congress (KCDK-E) – a majority of the people attempting to cross the border from Belarus into the European Union are Kurdish.

Freedom of movement within the European Union's borders is matched by increasingly harsh measures to keep non-Europeans out, and this can be exploited by other countries who want to put pressure on the EU – as Turkey has successfully demonstrated. The crushed lives of the would-be migrants or refugees are dismissed as collateral damage.

President Lukashenko of Belarus warned that he would bring migrants to Europe when the EU imposed sanctions after his brutal crackdown on opposition protests. Poland brought in a law that allowed their border forces to push anyone back across the border – in defiance of the international laws of asylum. Now up to 4000 people, including families with young children, are trapped in freezing temperatures, with armed Belarussian border guards pushing them forward onto a razor-wire fence defended by thousands of Polish police and military who have been using fire hoses, tear gas and rubber bullets. And those who have got through risk death in the Polish forests, where they are hunted like animals.

When the KCDK-E delegation reached Poland, they found a situation so tense it was "like they are preparing for doomsday". Police and military were everywhere, checking people's papers. Lida is Dutch, but she could observe the hostility on the streets towards her Kurdish colleagues.

There was no possibility of getting through into the border area, which has been closed off under a state of emergency since the beginning of September, but they managed to get to a Kurdish woman who had been taken to hospital after her capture. She had been pregnant, but the baby was now dead, and the woman was unconscious with kidney failure. Her husband and five other children had been pushed back over the border. The hospital was full of military police, and they were told there were other migrants there.

Local activists have been helping the people hiding in the forests and swamps, but it has become increasingly dangerous for them to do anything more than bring them the essentials of food, water, blankets, basic medical supplies, and charge packs for their phones. Last weekend a group of doctors who had been going into the forest at night to provide vital aid, found that their cars had all been destroyed. The forest is very wet and very cold. The numbers hiding are dwindling as people are either caught or succumb to the harsh conditions.

Rather than show a humanitarian response in line with its claimed "European values", the EU has described the hungry and frozen masses at their border as a "hybrid attack" and agreed to further sanctions against organisations or individuals (including Belarussian officials) involved in transporting them. This government hostility fuels popular racism. The response from the UK Government has been to send a team of 10 soldiers to Poland to give engineering support for strengthening the border.

And yet people still come to try their luck in this huge gamble, convinced that they will somehow get through the hardships of the border and emerge to a place where they can dare hope for a better future for themselves and their children. The countries who have rushed to Poland's defence not only need to question their response but also to ask themselves why so many people are emigrating – both from areas made unliveable through imperialist wars, and also from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), whose deeply corrupt government, dominated by the semi-feudal Barzani family, they have been so willing to support. Why is a crackdown on protest in Belarus met with sanctions, while a crackdown on protest in the KRI is largely ignored?

Where Lida saw echoes of the region's darkest past, we can also see warnings for the future. With world leaders condemning the planet to unsustainable temperature rises, today's refugee movements are only a fraction of those to come. The immediate need is for humanitarian aid, but in the longer term, we can either look forward to a world designed for the security industry, or we can fight to make every place liveable – now, and in the future.