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Bulgaria: It's time to address the allegations of abuse of refugees and migrants by the police

Amnesty International is calling on the Bulgarian government to immediately and thoroughly investigate the allegations of beatings, shootings and extortions at the hands of the police reported by refugees and migrants.

"The policeman just shouted "here" [in Bulgarian], then he pointed a gun towards me and punched me in the face. I fell and he moved to another man [52 year old Afghani] and beat him up really bad. He punched his face so that he started bleeding from his nose, kicked his legs... The police beats all the people who reach Bulgarian-Serbian borders."

Ahmad, a 21-year old refugee from Afghanistan told Amnesty International about his experience with the Bulgarian police once he reached the Serbian town of Dimitrovgrad. He said that being held at gunpoint reminded him of Afghanistan and the feeling that one can be shot at any time.

For a number of weeks, Amnesty International has been receiving consistent reports of threats, beatings, extortion of money and phones, and other abuse of refugees and migrants by the police in Bulgaria.

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), volunteers and NGOs active in Dimitrovgrad, the number of refugees and migrants entering Serbia through Bulgaria has been mostly [unchanged](#) in the past months with 200 entering per day on average. Many of them are reported to come in poor health and injured as a result of the treatment in Bulgaria.

"I saw unhealed scars, scrapes, bruises. All the people I spoke to reported that they were forced to be fingerprinted by the police. Many of them said they were chained, beaten by the police, exposed to aggressive dogs, and that police used electric batons against them. One man told me he fell unconscious after receiving an electroshock," one of the volunteers told Amnesty International.

The experiences reported by refugees and migrants in Bulgaria follow a similar pattern: they are apprehended by the police, sometimes beaten; and police officers steal their money and valuables. After that they are transferred to detention, according to the testimonies seen by Amnesty International and statements of volunteers. Refugees and migrants have also complained of lack of food, water and sanitation facilities where they were being held.

In a video seen by Amnesty International, a man from Pakistan explains how he got apprehended by the Bulgarian police.

"[They first] caught my friend [and then] caught me and told me to get out [from hiding], so I came out and they hit me a lot. [A police officer] put a gun towards me [gestures a gun pointing to his left side stomach] and told me to sit down."

"[In Bulgaria], they are cruel to other people, they think we are animals, they do not give any respect. We had money but we still had to beg. They took all of our money from us...They broke all of our mobiles."

Amnesty International obtained dozens of written reports and testimonies recorded on videos in which refugees and migrants, mainly from Afghanistan and Pakistan, talk about ill-treatment and abuse by the Bulgarian police. One of the videos contains a testimony of Ismail (not his real name) who says he witnessed an incident during which a man from Afghanistan was killed on the night of 15 October. Immediately after the incident, Amnesty International [called](#) on the Bulgarian authorities to investigate it. Ismail described how a group of refugees and migrants he was part of, was intercepted by the Bulgarian police after crossing the border with Turkey. As one of them attempted to run away, the police first shot one warning fire, followed by direct fire on the escapee.

“When I looked, somebody was injured in his neck, he stopped [breathing and]...died.”

Following the incident, Ismail was first taken to a detention centre and then to a reception centre for refugees and asylum-seekers from which he eventually left and travelled onwards to Serbia.

In November, Oxfam and the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights published a [report](#) with allegations of abuse against refugees and migrants, based on testimonies of over 100 people. In her response to the allegations, the Minister of Interior told the media that the abuses were not a policy and that she hoped to be able to disprove the allegations.

Amnesty International calls on Bulgarian authorities to conduct an immediate, thorough and independent investigation into the extensive allegations of ill-treatment, extortion and abusive detention conditions of refugees and migrants and make its outcomes public.

A number of refugees and migrants interviewed by Amnesty International since August 2015 reported instances of push-backs or other forms of abuse at the border between Bulgaria and Turkey. Ahmad from Afghanistan recalls his experience from 22 November.

"When we first tried to enter Bulgaria from Turkey, we saw the light of a police car and police officers sitting behind the border fence. They fired shots towards us and we run away back to Turkey. It was raining and we spent the night in wet clothes in the forest."

Despite regular reports of push-backs by NGOs and the media, the response of the Bulgarian Minister of Interior so far hasn't led to an effective investigation the results of which would have been made public.

Amnesty International notes that push-backs and other abuses of refugees and migrants by the Bulgarian police are an ongoing concern. The organization is not aware of any conclusive investigation into these allegations. They include a fatal shooting of an Afghani man by the Bulgarian police on 15 October; hypothermia death of two Yazidis on the Turkish border after being allegedly pushed back and severely beaten by Bulgarian police and numerous [other allegations](#).

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