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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Polish Lawyers Clash With Border Police Over Chechen Refugees

Humanitarian groups try to provide legal assistance to Chechens stuck in Belarus

By Ola Cichowlas

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Polish border guards ask journalists for identification, as Chechen refugees arrive seeking asylum. **Marta Gorczynska / Twitter**

A group of lawyers from Warsaw traveled to the Belarusian border on Friday in a bid to secure legal assistance to Chechen asylum seekers facing off against Polish officials.

The number of Chechen refugees fleeing Ramzan Kadyrov's regime peaked last summer, when hundreds arrived in Brest, a Belarusian border town.

With support from NGOs in Poland and Belarus, fourteen human rights lawyers and a team of psychologists arrived on Friday at the border to provide legal help to a group of 70 Chechens

seeking international protection.

According to a statement by the Warsaw-based Society of Legal Intervention, which also joined the initiative, "The presence of the lawyers is supposed to draw attention to the fact that state agencies are not respecting Polish responsibility under international law on human rights."

The whole idea, the lawyers say, was to surprise the border patrols.

Embed:

> Lawyers from @hfhrpl, SIP&Okr. Rada Adw. trying to represent foreigners who are not all. to apply for asylum in #Terespol #adwokacinagranicy pic.twitter.com/dqyseaGhq9
>
> — Kaja Puto (@kajaputo) March 17, 2017

The group arrived at 6 a.m., a few minutes before the daily train arrives from Brest carrying dozens of hopeful Chechen refugees. The group knew exactly who would be on the train, as several families had accepted legal representation. Members of a Belarusian human rights group, in constant contact with the Polish lawyers, were also on the train.

Once the refugees arrived at the Polish border, however, guards intervened and blocked them from speaking to their lawyers.

Embed:

> Attorneys were just informed that their clients will be returned to Belarus and not allowed to apply for asylum. #adwokacinagranicy pic.twitter.com/eDiLD2H3eU
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> — Marta Górczyńska (@Marta_Zofia) March 17, 2017

"Lawyers are allowed to assist their clients during the application for asylum, but we were denied," Aleksandra Chrzanowska, working with the Society of Legal Intervention, told The Moscow Times.

Polish officials say the Chechens seeking asylum are actually economic migrants without visas and therefore have no right to enter the country.

"They say there is no work in Russia, and that's why they want to come to Poland," says Chrzanowska, describing the board guards' position.

This echoes what the Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said last year: “There is no war in Chechnya, so the border is closed.”

But a majority of the Chechens in Brest are running from the brutal regime of Ramzan Kadyrov. “Some of them were subjected to torture. They are psychologically traumatized,” says Chrzanowska, who argues that it’s not the role of border patrols to judge whether a person has the right to asylum. Their role, she says, is simply to provide the application documents, which are handed over to the Foreigners’ Rights Ministry in Warsaw.

Polish border control, however, refuses to acknowledge this. In an absurd situation, the lawyers were forced to communicate with their clients through a screen.

Embed:

> Attorneys trying to contact their clients through the window of the railway station. #adwokacinagranicy pic.twitter.com/yuzEqgxbpC
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> — Marta Górczyńska (@Marta_Zofia) March 17, 2017

“We heard them [the border guards] say: 'This is not a court' and 'When you're a citizen, you'll have the right to a lawyer.'”

Chechen refugees stranded in Brest make dozens of attempts to apply for asylum at the Poland border. Lawyers say the record belongs to a 22-year-old Chechen man who’s tried to cross into Poland 66 times.

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