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# **BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA: the migration crisis is far from over**

By EU High Representative Josep Borrell

EEAS (05.01.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3s1MfDo> – Over the last weeks, we have witnessed a serious humanitarian crisis concerning hundreds of migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The crisis is largely due to the dysfunctioning governance in the country. However, it also reminds us of the urgent need to update our common asylum and migration policy.

During the past days, in the middle of Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations, we have been working with my colleagues Commissioners Johansson and Lenarčič, to mitigate a dramatic humanitarian situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where thousands of vulnerable refugees and migrants are without protection, out in the open in dire winter conditions with their lives at risk. It is an experience from which lessons should be learned.

### ***Totally inappropriate and dangerous living conditions***

On 23 December, the Lipa reception centre for migrants was closed down. It was a summer tent facility opened in response to COVID-19 in the Una Sana canton of Bosnia and Herzegovina, bordering Croatia. Over 1,200 migrants were staying there in totally inappropriate and dangerous conditions during the winter.

After BiH authorities ignored repeated appeals to provide basic and secure living conditions and humane treatment, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which administered the Lipa centre, started to close it on 23 December. Reportedly, a handful of occupants then set fire to the camp in protest, rendering it uninhabitable.

### ***3000 migrants without access to basic shelter in winter conditions***

The closure of the Lipa centre left around 3000 refugees and migrants without access to basic shelter and services in

winter conditions. There would be an alternative: the Bira centre in the nearby city of Bihac, which was refurbished with €3.5 million EU support. It is suitable for winter conditions but stands empty, due to the opposition of local authorities and population to open it.

The BiH Council of Ministers took the decision to open Bira centre – actually twice, on 21 and 31 December. The local authorities however continue to block it, resisting the implementation of the decision of the Council of Ministers. They refer to the lack of sharing of responsibility between the different regions of BiH for managing the presence of migrants and refugees and the local population has expressed concern about its safety, especially in Bihac.

In an attempt to find alternative solutions, the BiH Minister of Security tried to relocate the migrants to Bradina in the Hercegovina-Neretva canton. However, the plan also encountered resistance by the local authorities. The Council of Ministers of BiH did not support the idea and it was ultimately abandoned. Because of the dysfunctionality of decision-making in BiH, no other solution has been made available to the migrants by the state authorities.

With nowhere else to go, some 900 persons have had to continue to sleep in Lipa in the open for a week now and some 800 people have gone off to sleep in abandoned buildings and the woods. The weather is cold and wet, and there is a strong probability of conditions worsening significantly in coming weeks. Lives of many hundreds of people are being seriously jeopardised and their basic human rights disregarded.

## ***The EU engaged from the start of the crisis***

The EU has engaged with all actors from the start of the current crisis and called for months on the authorities to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. Finally, after concerted EU outreach over New Years' Eve, the armed forces of BiH were deployed to provide emergency tents and assistance. This is an important first step, and now urgent work must be carried out to provide basic services such as sanitation, running water, beds and heating.

On 2 January, EU Ambassador/EUSR to Bosnia and Herzegovina Johann Sattler and Ambassadors of Austria, Germany and Italy met in Sarajevo with the Minister of Security of BiH Selmo Cikotic to discuss urgent solutions to address the basic needs of the people and provide humane conditions on the ground.

## ***Around 8,000-9,000 migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina***

Looking at the bigger picture, a total of around 8,000-9,000 refugees and migrants are present in BiH. The migrant centres Bira, Borići, Miral, Sedra, Lipa, Ušivak and Blažuj have a capacity of 7,400 places for 5,600 officially registered migrants. Since 2018, the EU has repeatedly asked BiH authorities to address migration effectively. Lipa is not the first crisis.

Despite repeated and high-level EU advocacy and important financial help to address the needs of migrants and refugees and to strengthen border and asylum management, the country's

authorities have not ensured an effective management of reception capacities and a functioning asylum system. Regardless of the fact that these migrants and refugees are overwhelmingly only in BiH because they seek a brighter future in our Union, BiH has an obligation under international human rights instruments to care for them on its territory.

The EU has consistently supported BiH to do so. Since 2018, the EU has provided more than €88 million, to address the immediate needs of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants and to help the country strengthen its migration management capacities. Most recently, on 3 January, the European Commission has announced €3.5 million in humanitarian aid to help the refugees and migrants that face a humanitarian disaster in the Una Sana canton.

We have to ensure that migrants seeking asylum in the EU get decent treatment and humane living conditions during the entire application process. This has to be requested everywhere, in the EU and in our partner countries. Unfortunately, it is not only in BiH that this is a problem. However, what is particular in this case is that fully equipped capacity is available and remains unused. While we stand ready to assist our partner countries to achieve this goal, they must assume their responsibilities in that domain. As an aspiring member of the EU, these principles should apply in BiH.

More broadly, the current crisis in BiH reminds us that the global challenges around migration and addressing migration towards Europe remain one of the most important responsibilities and at the same time, one of the most complex issues that we face. To address this challenge successfully,

we need to strengthen our common migration and asylum policy.

### ***The urgency of a new European Pact on Migration and Asylum***

To achieve this goal, the European Commission has proposed last September a new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which is currently discussed by the EU member states. It sets out more efficient and faster procedures, to avoid that people spend years in limbo, waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. It tries to balance the principles of fair sharing of responsibility and solidarity. At the same time, it looks at cooperation with partner countries on migration and legal pathways. The package's rapid adoption and implementation is crucial for rebuilding trust between member states and confidence in the capacity of the European Union to manage migration.

*Picture: EEAS.*

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