
Poland. Voluntary organisations: “We cannot remain indifferent to the plight of migrants at the borders of our country”

"We cannot turn a blind eye to the plight of these people, whatever be the reason for their presence at the Polish border", reads the appeal issued on November 16, addressed to all members of Polish society by non-governmental organisations and voluntary workers involved in the rescue and reception of migrants. "Regardless of whether they qualify for asylum in Europe or whether they should return to their countries of origin, we cannot allow them to die of hunger, cold and deprivation in our country." Voluntary workers have been supplying basic necessities for several days already to thousands of migrants crammed behind barbed wire fencing separating Poland from Belarus. "Army soldiers and border guards will not hesitate to use weapons should the need arise", Border Guard spokeswoman Anna Michalska said in response to a question from journalists during a "press conference" organised by the Polish authorities at the boundary of the 3-kilometre-wide "exclusion zone" created along the border, which only the residents of border villages are granted access to. *Migrants trying to cross the border into Polish territory are currently being turned back with tear gas and water cannons. But there are no ambulances to provide medical assistance. Physicians and nurses, as well as journalists, are banned entry into the "exclusion zone."* A difficult and complex situation. Polish authorities regard the influx of migrants as a "hybrid attack on the EU external border." Consequently, a 5.5-metre-high reinforced concrete wall is already being planned along every inch of Poland's 180-kilometre border with Belarus. The Warsaw parliament passed the measure in early October and President Andrzej Duda approved it shortly afterwards. Various polls show that over 50% of Polish citizens are in favour of the wall. *The situation on the ground is catastrophic, to say the least. Border guards, police and the Polish army have reported attacks from migrants armed with stones and slingshots in an attempt to smash the barbed wire fencing using wooden beams, especially at night.* Law enforcement officers said that the migrants were "backed" by masked Belarusian special forces agents. "These are serious attacks we must defend ourselves from", confirmed the border police, who also reported incidents of vision loss among the guards caused by the use of laser pointers. No official figures are available as to how many migrants have died in the attempt to cross the border, but unofficial estimates suggest that at least ten corpses have already been found. Polish magistrates are in charge of identifying them, informing their embassies and returning the bodies. So far, only the funeral of a Syrian boy was held on Polish territory, arranged by the Muslim community of one of the villages inhabited by many families of Tatar ethnicity and Islamic faith. The victim's family members in Syria attended the funeral service online. *"We are calling on the state authorities to allow us to bring humanitarian aid into the exclusion zone, to provide medical care for those who need it. And those who need it the most are stranded at the border"* said **Helena Krajewska**, from Humanitarian Action, the Polish association which, together with the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, the Migration Forum, members of the historic Warsaw Catholic Intellectuals Circle and a large number of Polish citizens, signed the appeal to the Polish authorities. A growing number of people, "regardless of their political views and religious convictions", cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that "the moral principles of our civilisation require us to feed the hungry." In their appeal, the signatories of the document also recall the recent statement on migrants made by the Primate of Poland, Msgr Wojciech Polak: "The suffering of these people is our suffering. The fact that they are being exploited so viciously for political purposes must not prevent us from seeing them as our brothers and sisters. We must not be persuaded that their fate does not concern us." They highlight the fact that

“Bringing aid to starving people suffering in the cold is always a legal activity and must be recognised as such.”

However, assistance cannot depend exclusively on the good will of the people. "The needs of the migrants are currently too great to be met by citizens requiring support from professional humanitarian organisations themselves," reads the appeal. *Many people living along the border have been lighting a green lantern at the entrance of their homes every evening, which stands for "green light"*. They welcome migrants and refugees with warm soups cooked in large pots, they give them a warm clothing supply, brought from nearby towns outside the exclusion zone, where vans (often privately owned) deliver relief packages collected in centres throughout Poland, from Czestochowa to Poznan and Gdansk, and then they let them flee into the night, hoping that luck will assist them. The signatories of the appeal call on all Poles of good will "to spread awareness of the border crisis with family members and friends so they may be informed of the plight of these migrants and gain an understanding of the situation"; they ask "to address members of the Church with a request to speak out in support of those who are suffering and to work towards resolving the crisis." They also urge "to help those who bring help, to respond to their appeals and fundraising efforts" and "to use all means of communication to persuade the Polish authorities to authorise humanitarian relief in the exclusion zone", and finally "to light a green candle every evening and place it on their windowsills as a sign of solidarity." *The symbolic initiative of the 'green lantern' brings to mind the candle lit by John Paul II on Christmas Eve 1981 from the window of the library of the Apostolic Palace as a sign of solidarity with Poland.* In fact, a few days earlier, Martial Law had been imposed by the regime, suspending all civil and democratic freedoms in opposition to the Solidarnosc movement and to approximately 10 million Poles. Those were different times, but in the People's Republic of Poland everyone sang the adapted version of 'L'Estaca' (Without Freedom) composed by Catalan musician and poet Lluís Llach. The song was a prophetic warning of walls "that will soon collapse and bury the old world."

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