



Hungarian Helsinki Committee

# DESTITUTE, BUT WAITING

## Report on the visit to the Tompa and Röszke "Pre-Transit Zone" Area on the Serbian-Hungarian border

22 April 2016, Hungarian Helsinki Committee

In 2015 the Hungarian government initiated a publicly financed xenophobic propaganda campaign, targeting immigrants in general and refugees/asylum-seekers in particular. This campaign was followed by the so-called "national consultation on immigration and terrorism", a politically motivated propaganda act. By September 2015 the government essentially dismantled the Hungarian asylum system through a number of legal amendments and non-legal measures, including a decision to erect a barbed-wire fence first along the Serbian-Hungarian, then at the Croatian-Hungarian border. Two transit zones were created along both the Serbian and Croatian border sections where immigration and asylum procedures are conducted and where buildings required for conducting such procedures and housing migrants and asylum-seekers are located. The two transit zones along the Serbian border are: Tompa and Röszke, while Beremend and Letenye are the transit zones along the Croatian border.

\*\*\*

On 22 April, 2016, staff members of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC) visited the areas in front of the Tompa and Röszke transit zones on the Serbian-Hungarian border. There, asylum seekers waited to enter the transit zone—the only way to gain access to Hungary and to Hungary's asylum procedure in a lawful manner since 15 September 2015 when the Hungarian government sealed off the borders along Serbia and Croatia with a razor wire fence.

The areas in front of the transit zones in Röszke and Tompa are situated in between the Serbian border check-point and the Hungarian check-point. On one side, the pre-transit zone is closed off by the barbed wire fence and the transit zone gates, which remain closed for most part of the day, and on the other side there is Serbia. One Afghan man the HHC spoke to, who had been waiting in Röszke, tried to go to a small shop on the Serbian side, only to be stopped by the Serbian police. The Serbian police wanted him to pay 50 EUR to cross over to the Serbian side. He said that he did not have that much money and eventually he was released. As another Afghan man in Tompa told the HHC, "Serbian police is just money, money, money".



On 22 April 2016, there were about 120 people in **Tompa** waiting to be allowed into the transit zone. They wait idly in makeshift tents made of the blankets distributed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which provide some shade from the sun. Others simply just sit amidst rubbish and dirt. Men, who still have some cigarettes left, smoke. Children run around, some crying, and little babies are being fed by their mothers. Approximately one-third of those waiting to access the transit zone are children under 18 years old.

In **Röszke**, the authorities allow the use of real tents. There are also some trees, which provide shade for approximately 30-40 people who are waiting to access to the transit zone. Like the waiting area in Tompa, there are also many children here. Here, there is a clear separation in the tents of the would-be asylum seekers from Afghanistan and those from Syria.

While the pre-transit zones are physically located on Hungarian soil, they are considered to be in no man's land by Hungarian authorities, who provide little to nothing to meet basic human needs or human rights. In **Tompa**, there are no tents to provide shelter from rain or heat, which in contrast are allowed in

Röszke. There are no toilets or any sanitary facilities in either area. Plastic bags with the UNHCR logo are strewn all over as remains of the food packages; even these can be put to further use though, by burning the bags to create a source of heat during the cold nights.

UNHCR, along with Médecins sans Frontiers (MSF) and volunteer groups, provide humanitarian relief to the tired and destitute migrants. MSF's doctors visit every day, while UNHCR distributes blankets, clothes and food packages to those waiting. "UN bravo" – as one of the young Afghan men put it.



The Hungarian Office for Immigration and Nationality (OIN), which runs the transit zones and is in charge of asylum procedures in Hungary, also distributes food packages every day. However, according to the account of an Afghan middle-aged man, the food packages OIN distributes are not enough, and often times fights erupt because of the scarcity. OIN staff also informs migrants located outside the zone about the Hungarian asylum procedure. The OIN also decides exactly who can enter the transit zone on a particular day.

The lack of food, absence of shelter and sanitary facilities and the overall inhumane conditions are, however, not the biggest source of frustration for the hundreds of people seeking asylum. It is rather the long and arbitrary wait, in which nobody knows how long they will have to remain under these conditions. The transit zones in Tompa and Röszke have limited capacities, and on average, only 20-30 asylum seekers are allowed to enter per day. The clear factors that determine who is allowed access are time of arrival and extent of vulnerability. The other determinative factors are not so clear. Usually families with small children enjoy priority over single men, some of whom have been living in this small stretch of land for 20 days without being able to take a shower. On 22 April, a young Ethiopian man in Tompa, told the HHC that for the past two days not a single man had been granted permission to enter the transit zone because many families had been waiting outside and they were given priority. Since more and more families arrive each

day, the waiting time for single men gets longer and longer. The transit zone is able to accommodate up to 50 single men, so it is not clear why the OIN does not use the transit zone to its full capacity, but instead allows single men to wait outside for extensive periods without any assistance. The OIN has stated in the media that extended security interviews are carried out with families as well, before they are transferred to an in-country reception centre, and the fact that these interviews are taking more time than they have in the past means fewer asylum applications can be processed each day.

Women with children crowd under blankets as close as possible to the revolving entryway of the **Tompa** transit zone. Some people try to drink only small quantities of water so that they would not have to leave the queue even for a short period of time and lose their place. The HHC spoke to 3 Syrian families who were the closest to the revolving entrance and were expecting to be permitted entry the next day. When the HHC met these families in the open reception centre in Bicske on the following Wednesday, 27 April, the family said they were not granted access to the transit zone on Tuesday, the following day. So although they were the first in the queue, they still had to wait for 3 more days before being allowed access to the transit zone.

There were some refugees who were eager to share their stories with the HHC:



- A 33-year-old man from Afghanistan, who worked as a translator for NATO, complained in perfect English about the lack of control while waiting in Tompa. He said, "I have been waiting here for 15 days. The police is not here and often a fight breaks out when food is distributed. Some people get more, others nothing. It is only UNHCR that



provides us food and blankets. Life is difficult here and lots of people have pain in the mind. I am a single man, I have to wait longer, but I have had an operation and I need a doctor. I am on the list now and I hope I can enter today.”

- A family from Afghanistan with four children has been waiting in Tompa for a week. Their youngest child is not even a month old, and he was born in Sid camp. The other children are 2, 4 and 6 years old. They only have a blanket to shield the baby from the sun. The mother does not speak English, but a younger Afghan woman who was here with her 7-person family was eager to help. The mother wanted us to take their picture to show how they have to live here, how inhumane the conditions are.
- A 16-year old boy from Afghanistan who has been waiting at Tompa for 5 days shared his wish with us: “I wish they had numbers for us, so that we would know when we can enter and be told when my number is coming.”
- A 17-year old girl from Iraq arrived at Rösztke 3 days ago with her two brothers, who are 14 and 20 years old. It is important for her that they continue their journey together.
- A group of young men from Syria who were in Rösztke complained: “here nobody cares about single men. We have been here for 5 days already. The Serbian police will not let us back to buy cigarettes, we are trapped here.”
- A 7-member family from Syria has been at Rösztke for two days. They carried two tents from Belgrade on their backs, and they have three sons and two daughters. The eldest daughter is pregnant.
- Two young Syrian women arrived at Rösztke with their two male cousins. They have been offered to enter the transit zone as single women, but they refused because they did not want to be separated from their cousins and be left all alone.
- An Afghan family with a 3-year-old child has been waiting in Rösztke for ten days. They did not understand why so many new families that arrived after them were let in already. Perhaps they had been forgotten?

