



Solutions, not Violence
with Refugees and Migrants Trapped at Borders
of Poland-Belarus, Greece, Italy, France-UK, the US, etc. etc. etc.

Policies must turn around, not the refugees

Not just Poland and Belarus, why are so many governments choosing violence against people trapped at borders, instead of legal obligations, and solutions, that are practical and humane?

November 2021/ Some 42 years ago, soldiers ordered to prevent Cambodian refugees fleeing the “killing fields” from entering Thailand forced 45,000 of them back from the border, down a cliff into a minefield. Creating a new killing field, thousands were shot, blown up by mines and died.

Today, other spasms of violence against refugees and migrants are creating a *ring* of new killing fields, on the land and sea borders of not one or two but many countries: **Poland-Belarus, Greece, Italy, France-United Kingdom, the US, Australia and others...**

The headlines and countries vary, but the story is the same: lethal State violence against refugees fleeing war and human rights cataclysms back home, and against migrants forced to leave home because there is no food, water or work there to support them or their families.

States are choosing violence as a response. Poland has chosen to use tear gas, and water cannons—in freezing weather— against 2,000 refugees, mostly from Syria and Iraq, whom **Belarus** has chosen for its own purposes to fly or bus into such danger. What choice are leaders of **Europe** making, or **Russia**? Instead of acting urgently to save lives and stop further hurt to human beings already victimized by governments time and time again, leaders of Europe refer abstractly to the human beings they have trapped as “weapons” in a “war”; warning darkly of an “invasion”.

It is shameful to call an unarmed victim of violence a weapon, and to say that a human being fleeing war is an agent of war. In fact, who has the weapons—and what choice are they making? Armies and border guards lined up with guns against unarmed refugees and migrants—carrying only what little they have been able to bring with them, and in some cases, their children.

Greece is in court on charges of forcing small groups of boat people back to sea despite their manifest vulnerability and that of their boats, even as, like Italy, it is prosecuting in its own courts increasing numbers of humanitarian workers saving lives. **Germany** and **Italy** each initiated huge financial deals with **Turkey** and **Libya** for them to keep refugees and migrants away from Europe; in July, the **United Kingdom** promised **France** USD \$74,000,000 to increase even further the aggressive force it uses to stop small numbers of refugees and migrants from crossing to England.

No surprise that the number of refugees and migrants dying on Europe’s borders, at European hands, is rising. The huge **European Union** of 450,000,000 people—many of whom are the children and grandchildren of refugees and others displaced in two World Wars—can do better.

Elsewhere, the **US** continues to mobilize against the arrival of mostly Haitian, Central and South American refugees and migrants, employing a sweeping “Remain in **Mexico**” policy and military-level enforcement, that trap —and regularly force back— men, women and children from the border who have claims to protection under international law. The US can do better.

Choosing this violence violates legal obligations. States all have legal obligations —and practical choices— other than this kind of lethal violence. Foremost is the binding obligation under international law to not force back human beings who have a claim to asylum on the grounds of fleeing persecution or serious human rights violations in their home country. And further legal obligations are binding under the many widely ratified international treaties on human rights, refugees and human trafficking that States have signed (many seeking solutions after the World Wars) to carefully identify and protect refugees, children and victims of torture or trafficking.

Choosing non-violent solutions instead. In the case of Thailand years ago, the country chose to abandon violence and instead create shelter for the refugees in camps just inside the border, with the presence and services of the United Nations and non-government organizations, eventually enabling the refugees to return under an international peace treaty 10 years later. Many **European countries**, the **US**, **Australia**, **Japan** and NGOs themselves helped to fund that response.

More recently, we have seen **Canada**, **Colombia** and **Portugal** and, with significant support from the UN, EU, US, NGOs and others, also **Bangladesh**, **Kenya** and **Uganda** making better choices. Rather than violence, the better choice has been of solutions that are practical and humane, and also comply with international law and commitments.

Solidarity and cooperation that cares about life is key to these solutions, across Europe and with UN, civil society and local authorities, and it is effective. In that direction, the NGO Committee on Migration calls on States on all borders to immediately:

1. **Stop the violence**, including force-backs on land and on sea and entrapment on borders.
2. **Stop the bleeding, the freezing, the starving and the dying** among the men, women and children trapped without adequate shelter and life-support on any side of any border, **and stop punishing humanitarian actors** working to save and provide basic assistance to them.
3. **Turn to *non-violent* solutions** that comply with international obligations and commitments:
 - **Strengthen systems for more consistent assistance, differentiation and referral for protection of all migrants in vulnerable situations**, including refugees, children, and those who are victims of or at risk of torture, trafficking, gender-based violence or other trauma. **Concrete, replicable example:** the Praesidium Project (Italy, Greece; EU, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, International Organization for Migration, the Red Cross, Save the Children)
 - **Increase safe, ordinary and regular channels of migration and admission for refugees and other forced migrants**, with fair and gender-sensitive access and recognition of their skills. **Concrete, replicable examples:** Humanitarian Corridors (Italy, Sant’Egidio, Federation of Evangelical Churches, Waldensian Church, Caritas, Italy Bishops); community-based sponsorship of resettlement and family reunification (Canada); regularization (Colombia);
 - **Expand rights-based alternatives to immigration detention, including community and NGO partnerships**, immediately for all children and their accompanying family members or caregivers, and for all vulnerable migrants, in particular victims of or at risk of torture, trafficking, gender-based violence or other trauma. **Concrete, replicable examples:** Belgium, Spain, United Kingdom.
4. **Reject— absolutely, and in every instance— responses based on xenophobia and racism.**
5. **Address with determination the drivers that force people to move**, including the wars, inequalities, discrimination and poor governance in which so many States are involved.