

Refugees in Hungary start moving west on foot

05/09/2015 13:26 by admin

Budapest,Hungary: Hundreds of refugees frustrated at being stuck at two train stations in Hungary set off on foot for Austria Friday, one group forming a line nearly a half-mile long as they streamed out of Budapest, the other breaking out of a train near a migrant reception center and then running toward the West after overwhelming police.

The moves for freedom came after Hungarian authorities spent days preventing thousands of refugees, many fleeing war in Syria, from boarding trains to Germany amid a surging number of desperate people from Asia, Africa and the Middle East seeking refuge in Europe.

In Bicske, a town in northern Hungary, hundreds broke through a police cordon and began running westward on a train track leading away from the town's railway station, interrupting train traffic. Surprised riot police scrambled for their helmets as the huge crowd suddenly surged from the front of the train. They could be seen arguing among themselves over what went wrong.

Police were able to block only a minority of the estimated 500 people inside. Police pushed those they blocked back onto the train amid much shouting and screaming and infants crying.

In the receding distance, an Associated Press reporter saw at least 200 migrants, probably more, running in a wide group along the railway line west of Bicske and heading for Austria 135 kilometers (85 miles) to the west.

Hours earlier, hundreds set out from the Keleti station in Budapest. With their belongings in bags and backpacks, they snaked through the streets of Budapest as they began the 171-kilometer journey (106-mile) to the Austrian border. By mid-afternoon they had reached the M1 motorway outside the city.

Most hope to eventually reach Germany or elsewhere in the West and are trying to avoid registering in Hungary, which is economically depressed and more likely to return them to their home countries than many Western European nations. Under European law, asylum seekers will be approved or disapproved in the countries where they are first registered.

One man leaving Budapest on foot said he expects the journey to Austria to take three days. Osama Morzar, 23, from Aleppo, Syria, was so determined not to be registered in Hungary that he removed his fingerprints with acid, holding up totally smooth finger pads to an Associated Press reporter as proof.

"The government of Hungary is very bad," said Morzar, who studied pharmacology at Aleppo's university. "The United Nations should help."

A couple from Baghdad, Mohammed and Zahara, who marched with a toddler, said they had been in a Hungarian asylum camp and got roughed up by guards because they refused to be fingerprinted. She said she has family in Belgium and is determined to seek asylum there. They would not give their last names.

Before the breakout at Bicske, hundreds had been sitting on a train, some with tickets they had purchased to Berlin or Vienna. Although some eventually relented and registered at the asylum center, most were determined not to.

At some point, about 100 people left the train to wage a protest in front of a large number of TV cameras and journalists. Using white paint, they wrote "no camp / no Hungary / Freedom Train" on the side of the train.

"The situation is so bad. We have so many sick people on the train. We have pregnant women, no food, no water," said Adnan Shanan, a 35-year-old from Latakia, Syria, who said he was fleeing war in his homeland.

"We don't need to stay here one more day. We need to move to Munich, to anywhere else, we can't stay here. We can't wait until tomorrow. We need a decision today, now," Shanan said.

Shanan, who bears scars on his arms that he says are from the fighting in Syria, contended that authorities were denying them food and water. Associated Press reporters saw police and civilian volunteers trying to deliver both to the train and it being thrown back out the windows in view of TV cameras. On a far side of the train, however, more than 30 men could be seen eating baguette-style bread rolls delivered by police.

Hungary's immigration office said 64 migrants who had been registered in Budapest and were taken by bus to the Bicske center ran away from police while getting off the bus in Bicske.

In Syria, a man whose family died when a small rubber boat capsized during a desperate voyage from Turkey to Greece buried his wife and two sons in their hometown of Kobani. Photos of the lifeless body of Abdullah Kurdi's 3-year-old son after it washed up on the beach drew the world's attention to the dangers faced by those fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

"He only wanted to go to Europe for the sake of his children," said Suleiman Kurdi, an uncle of the grieving father. "Now that they're dead, he wants to stay here in Kobani next to them."

Across Europe, the refugee crisis is becoming more dramatic.

In Geneva, the UN refugee agency said Friday that nearly 5,600 people crossed from Greece to Macedonia a day earlier. That's roughly double the already high 2,500 to 3,000 per day in recent weeks.

"That is a dramatic number," said UNHCR spokeswoman Melissa Fleming, saying it was the highest she's heard yet.

Earlier Friday, Antonio Guterres, the head of the UN refugee agency, issued a statement urging the EU to create a "mass relocation program ... with the mandatory participation of all EU member states" for would-be recipients who clear a screening process.

He said a "very preliminary estimate" would be for the creation of at least 200,000 places to be added across the bloc.

The UN comments came a day after a round of recriminations among EU leaders. Orban has said the human wave is a German problem, but German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the obligation to protect refugees "applies not just in Germany, but in every European member."

Orban reiterated on Hungarian state radio Friday his determination to stop the refugees.

"Today we are talking about tens of thousands but next year we will be talking about millions and this has no end," Orban said.

"We have to make it clear that we can't allow everyone in, because if we allow everyone in, Europe is finished," Orban went on. "If you are rich and attractive to others, you also have to be strong because if not, they will take away what you have worked for and you will be poor, too."

- AP