**Refugee riot in Békéscsaba**

**By H.[[1]](#footnote-1) & activists from NO BORDER Serbia network**

**In Hungary, most asylum seekers are kept imprisoned in closed camps under constant threat of deportation and without the chance of a fair asylum procedure. In one of these camps, Békéscsaba, in November 2013, around 200 asylum seekers rose up in protest against their unjust detention, the inhuman conditions of the camps, and all deportations. This article offers a brief introduction to the situation in Hungary followed by an eyewitness account from the riot.**

Most of the asylum seekers in Hungary are kept in closed camps, forced to wait in detention for the result of their asylum claim. Some are placed in so-called “open camps”, or “non-secure facilities”, which they are allowed to leave for up to 24 hours. The decision of whether a refugee will be brought to an open or a closed camp depends on her or his country of origin. Generalizing the cases of persons from same countries, refugees from states that have better chances to get asylum in Hungary (like Eritrea, Afghanistan and other countries) are ‘accommodated’ in open camps for asylum seekers, whereas others are kept in detention for a uncertain period of time. This is a permanent violation of human rights by the Hungarian state and the European Union. After the detention of asylum seekers as general common standard in Hungary had been temporarily interrupted, it was re-established again in 2013. There are two ways how people usually get into a detention center in Hungary: On the one hand, there are people who were arrested in Hungary after crossing the border so that they are forced to apply for asylum in Hungary. On the other hand, there are those who were deported to Hungary from other EU-countries based on Dublin II-convention because they have finger prints in Hungary. In most cases is assumed that the refugees entered Hungary hence the EU through Serbia, that is not part of the EU, and where the largely dysfunctional asylum system leaves little hope they will get any “protection”. In this sense, the detention system in Hungary is an integral part of the restriction of freedom of movement in Europe through Dublin II/III. After a hunger strike among refugees in October 2013 and a new wave of deportations, the refugees started a riot inside the closed camp of Békéscsaba in November 2013. They were showing their frustration about being detained without reason, the inhuman conditions in the detention camp, and the daily danger of sudden push back to Serbia[[2]](#footnote-2). Their struggle for the freedom of movement, without being kept like prisoners, for the possibility to live without the threat to be deported from the EU, is a strong form of resistance of refugees against the European border system. H. is one of the 192 refugees who participated in the protest. This is his testimony:

*“Many times we made some small protests inside the camp in order to improve our conditions inside. For example we organized to reject food collectively.*

*It all started when they took us to the closed camp. After our asylum application we were brought there. A court extends the cases for at least two months. Afterwards they keep us waiting. The closed camp is like a prison. In Békéscsaba there were about 200 people, distributed among two buildings. The conditions were quite bad. We couldn’t decide for ourselves when to eat, or how much. It was also often bad food, or cold.*

*Then we heard that if we stay in the camp for 6 months, they will deport us back [to outside of the EU or to Serbia]. We didn’t know exactly what would happen after these two months with which our cases had been extended. During this period I had seen that they deported people who had been there for four months (from Pakistan, Algeria, and other countries). They [the wardens, the police] would just come, without informing them before and deporting them the same night or the early morning of the next day. The people were angry that they just deport us back. We came to seek asylum and they would just push us back to Serbia. Some of the people who were deported had not even received a negative verdict in their asylum cases.*

*We talked about it and discussed what to do. When some refugees from Mali came new to the camp, they asked around what was going on. Why we are kept in detention; we are not criminals, we are refugees. Then they started a hunger strike for freedom. It started the 10th of October 2013 and lasted for 8 days. On the 14th of October, about 55 people from different countries joined the hunger strike. The camp authorities came and said they should stop the hunger strike immediately****. The director promised that if they stop their hunger strike, he will accelerate their asylum procedure. But they didn’t trust these empty promises.*** *After the 8th day of the hunger strike, one on the guys fainted. He was brought to a hospital. I also saw that there were people from the media, trying to get access to the camp for interviews.*

*After that they stopped the hunger strike.*

*Surprisingly, after one week, 7 of the 8 Malians, who had first started the hunger strike, received a negative asylum verdict. To one of them they gave a positive answer. It was a direct reaction to their protest. If you receive a negative verdict in your asylum case, you have 3 days to make an appeal against it, in order to let your case be checked by a higher court. This means that you have to wait another month in the closed camp. But many of us don’t know that. Only one of the 7 people from Mali made an appeal, the other 6 guys got deported to Serbia four days later.*

*The situation was then the same as before. I only saw two people who got the possibility of moving from the prison camp to an open refugee camp. In their case it was because of health problems. Women and girls are generally sent to open camps.*

*After about two weeks we organized a protest against our deportation and for freedom. It was after an incident, where they deported three Pakistanis that had been there for four months. The same happened to a group of Senegalese. It was without reason. A while after we heard that one of them had died in Serbia where they had no place to stay. He froze to death, sleeping outside in the Serbian forests. Almost everyone participated in the protest. We stood outside in the yard, holding up signs with the text “no deportations” and other slogans. It was a tense atmosphere, people were annoyed, standing up, protesting, shouting, but everything remained peaceful. Our action was invisible to the ‘outer world’– it was directed to the authorities of the detention camp. The managers and staff of the camp came out, and they told us that they couldn’t do anything. They said that they are like prison keepers. The orders come from Budapest, and our protest wouldn’t change anything. They even suggested that we give up our asylum claims and leave Hungary. They told us that our fingerprints would then only be registered in Hungary, and we could apply for asylum in another EU country[[3]](#footnote-3). Even though we were peaceful, many cops came with dogs and stayed inside the camp until three a.m. on the next day. I remember the police commissioner of Békéscsaba city saying that if he were in our position, he would do the same.*

*We refused to give our names to the camp authorities and the police, when they required a list of the refugees who participated in the protest. The eight hunger strikers had done this before, and we knew what had happened to them. During this protest there were no media present. So how could we address the public with our demands?*

*On the 11thof November, another three people were informed that they would be deported. I know it was a Monday. They reacted very angrily. The majority of refugees in Békéscsaba were standing behind them. It was too much this time. Everything happened quickly. There was a meeting, and after lunch the riot started: Things inside the prison were destroyed, glass broke, people were breaking the surveillance cameras and one of the buildings was set on fire. All the time everybody was saying ‘we need freedom’. I don’t know exactly, I guess around 100 people from many different countries participated in the uprising. Two people escaped at that time.*

*All the staff from the camp ran away, even the security guards. The reason why the asylum seekers did not run was that the detentions center authorities kept all our belongings and our money. Also, the camp is far from the city. Some of us tried to break the gate to get out, so people outside could see them and hear their demands, simply make their feelings heard, but after one hour the police came. They kept people from going out. I saw many, many cops, completely armed, entering, with the dogs shouting that everybody should stop.*

*The same day, the police transferred all of us to other closed camps all over Hungary, saying that the camp was not secure anymore. Some of us were not allowed to pack our personal belongings. After one week, we were brought back to Békéscsaba. In the meantime, one of the buildings had been renovated. When we came back, the security guards were behaving much stricter than before. The conditions had not improved, they had gotten worse. Now they don’t tell people in advance anymore that they are facing deportation. Before the riot, a person would be informed the same day about the upcoming forceful deportation, but now they just come, pick the asylum seekers up, and deport them.*

*For some time, it seemed as if they would treat us better, maybe to prevent another protest. The milk in the morning was now served warm, not cold anymore. But the situation inside the detention camp is still very bad. They even forbid you to take a second helping of food if you are still hungry.”*

 Everything happened without public attention. The riot and its revolutionary potential did't leave the walls of the asylum-prison. The few reports focused on 'the good work of the hungarian firefighters', reproducing racist views on the migration issue and not contextualizing the refugee-riot as a as a collective and self-organized step to fight the border system. The border can be anywhere for illegalized people. It is a cruel system that divides people into those that have papers and those who have not, leaving the last group completely marginalized. But a dehumanisied society is a society that harms everyone. The fact that asylum seekeers are kept in closed detention-centres needs more critical attention. To scandalize the bad conditions can't be enough.

H. decided to stay in the detention center, but he - like many other refugees arriving in Hungary - didn’t get the chance of a fair asylum procedure. He was expulsed illegally from the country by the Hungarian police without having received a final, negative asylum verdict.

1. Initials had been changed to preserve anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The most of the migrants are caught at the border between Serbia and Hungary. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This information is not verified, but most of the migrants involved assume that this is a lie. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)