



Save the Children

SITUATION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN AND NEEDS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

OCTOBER 2020

SUMMARY

Due to government restrictions, at least 3,000 people are currently sleeping in the rough in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). More camps potentially face closure, which would leave countless people, including unaccompanied children, at risk of losing their accommodation. Restrictions also prevent humanitarian actors from reaching the most vulnerable. Alternative solutions proposed by the government do not cover the needs.

KEY ASKS

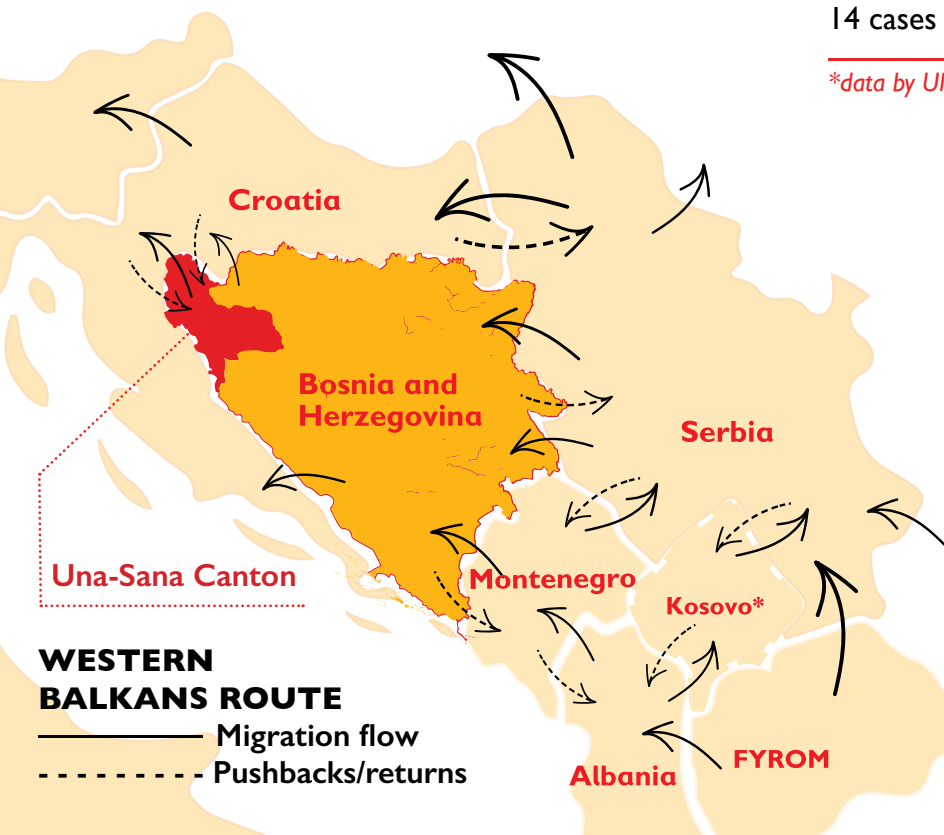
Humanitarian actors should have unrestricted access to those in need. Authorities should ensure all those arriving are registered and have access to quality reception, including small scale reception initiatives focussed on the most vulnerable. Migrants should not linger in limbo but have access to solutions, including asylum, other forms of residency, family reunification, dignified return or resettlement, especially to the EU. There are currently no resettlement programmes operating from BiH.

Monitoring and accountability is needed to prevent violence at the borders.

KEY STATS*

- Since the beginning of 2020 around 13,000 people arrived in BiH, while the number of arrivals since January 2018 is over 66,000
- Over 9,000 refugees and migrants are estimated to be in the country
- In the reception centres in BiH there are around 400 identified unaccompanied children and over 450 children travelling with families.
- Currently there are around 6,000 beds available in BiH. At least 3,000 people sleep in the rough. Another 2,000 risk ending up on the streets as some of the other centres face closure.
- Over 10,000 pushbacks were reported since the beginning of the year, mostly from the Croatian border. Between 12 and 16 October DRC has documented a series of brutal pushbacks on the Bosnia-Croatian border, reporting that more than 75 persons, including children, have all, independently, in one week, reported inhumane treatment, savage beatings and even sexual abuse.
- In first 9 months of 2020, Save the Children registered 14 cases of family separation.

**data by UNHCR; pushbacks data by DRC*



Up to **250 UASC** are staying outside in Bosnia and Herzegovina without any care, or access to identification/guardianship.



Save the Children outreach team identified **35 families, including 74 young children, living in squats, at the outskirts of Una-Sana Canton in mid-October.**

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Some **30 % of all migrants** and asylum-seekers in BiH, including those most vulnerable, **are currently sleeping outside or in abandoned buildings**, especially in Una-Sana Canton.

Since 2018, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been struggling to support large number of refugees and migrants arriving in the country, including to provide adequate accommodation. **The situation has worsened in September due to restrictions implemented by the authorities in the Una-Sana canton (closing of the Bira facility and restricting access to other centres). At least 3,000 people, including women, children and other vulnerable people, are forced to sleep in the rough.**

COVID-19 prevention measures affected accommodation capacities as a certain number of places in the camp need to be secured for preventive and symptomatic isolation. Even if there are places available, refugees and migrants, including children, often can't access accommodation in the camp as isolation capacities are not sufficient.

Local authorities have evicted those sleeping on the streets from city centres, while police forces have been engaged to prevent those evicted from returning to the cities. At the same time forces are deployed to prevent refugees and migrants from entering the Una-Sana Canton, and they often end up stranded at the cantonal checkpoints. As a result, refugees and migrants are creating makeshift camps at the outskirts of the cities, in remote forest areas or in abandoned buildings.

RISKS FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Around 250 unaccompanied children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, out of which many are in Una-Sana Canton, are in urgent need of accommodation. Due to the lack of accommodation capacities and the restrictions imposed by the authorities, children are staying in abandoned buildings and makeshift camps, often together with adult men, exposed to harsh weather, health risks, abuse and violence.

Refugees and migrants, including children, can only be registered if there is available accommodation; if there are no available accommodation capacities unaccompanied children are not able to register and remain **invisible**. For unaccompanied children, a lack of registration also means a **guardian** cannot be appointed to look after their well-being. Inadequate procedures and practices related to **age assessments** and family profiling also lead to children not being identified as unaccompanied children and thus falling through the cracks. Adults are sometimes being declared as unaccompanied children, enabling them to access designated zones for children in temporary reception centres, raising protection concerns for unaccompanied children.

Vulnerable children and adults are on the streets, in the middle of a pandemic, with no access to health care, food, water or any other services. Increased xenophobia and negative sentiment about refugees and migrants from the local community has been observed. Negative sentiment about aid providers is newly arising trend.



Save the Children's outreach team identified **5 families** staying in an abandoned building near Velika Kladusa.

Restricting outreach activities further worsens the situation for children as agencies are prevented from identifying unaccompanied children and providing them access to key, lifesaving services.



Up to **700 people**, including around **20 UASC**, are staying in an informal tent settlement near Velika Kladusa.

WINTER APPROACHING

With winter approaching there is a serious concern that more than half of migrants and asylum-seekers in BiH might be left without access to safe and protective accommodation. Many of them belong to the most vulnerable categories such as unaccompanied children, families with children, persons with disabilities and/or persons with serious health issues.

If there would be a rise in Covid-19 positive cases reception spaces will further decrease as more space needs to be foreseen for isolation.

It is essential that equitable access to health for migrants and asylum seekers is ensured, from a human rights perspective but also from a public health perspective. In order to mitigate, or in the worst case, contain the spread of COVID-19, additional reception capacities have to be ensured, to enable the growing number of persons currently staying on the streets to access health care, shelter and other essential services.



14 families with 29 children, including 2 babies, were identified sleeping rough in Bosanska Bojna.



A group of 6 minors, including a 14-year-old boy, was identified living in an empty factory where hundreds of single males are regularly sleeping.

“I have been sleeping here for more than a month. Everybody is always hungry, thirsty and sick. No organisations are coming to help us, we sleep on wet floors and drink dirty water,” said the boy.

ACCESS TO ASYLUM AND DURABLE SOLUTIONS IN BIH

Asylum-seekers continue to face a lack of registration of their asylum claims and long waiting times. Close to 95% of new arrivals formally express intention to seek asylum but less than 5% formally lodge an asylum claim. So far in 2020 about 173 new asylum claims have been registered (numbers from July). **Since 2014, 15 people were granted subsidiary status and no one received refugee status.**

BiH has readmission agreements with the EU, Western Balkans countries and Turkey, while the readmission agreement with Pakistan is pending. Even if some people do not have a right to stay, there are no readmission agreements with various countries of origin to provide dignified return.

KEY ASKS / RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Responsible authorities should allow all humanitarian actors to **provide humanitarian assistance without restrictions**, including provision of life-saving food and non-food items and first aid health care to migrants and asylum seekers as part of their outreach activities. Local authorities at all levels should jointly with their humanitarian partners strive to find solutions at times of crises, refrain from creating additional and unnecessary suffering of those at risks, and jointly combat the rising xenophobic and discriminatory narrative. In this regard we also call on the ending of discriminatory profiling of migrants and asylum seekers on public transport and on lifting restrictions on free movement.

- Responsible authorities should ensure immediate **official registration and referral of all children, including unaccompanied children. Registration is an essential first step in providing protection to the most vulnerable and cannot depend on available reception capacities.** The government should be supported by the EU to create **mechanisms for identifying, registering and assisting refugees and migrants, including children.** The appointment of a guardian needs to be ensured independent of reception capacities. All children without parental care on the territory of BiH, whether local or foreign, have the right to be protected.

- The government of BiH should **expand reception capacities, in particular for unaccompanied children**, families with children and other vulnerable groups. This includes expanding existing and/or new temporary reception centres as well as the provision of appropriate and suitable alternative care options for unaccompanied children, such as in semi-independent living units, small group homes and foster care in the medium term. Closely linked to this, there is an urgent need to enhance age assessment procedures and practices and family profiling.

- Violence at the borders, unlawful expulsions and deportations must stop. The EU and the Croatian government have to conduct independent assessment of the situation at the border, **put an end to a systematic use of violence**, and ensure that effective, independent border monitoring mechanisms are in place to prevent violence and abuse. Perpetrators of violence must be **held accountable**.

- **The BiH government and the EU should support access to durable solutions** for migrants and asylum seekers in BiH, including strengthening of the asylum system, in order to prevent unsafe migration and break the business model of human smuggling. Migrants should have access to long-term solutions, including asylum, other forms of residency, family reunification, dignified return or resettlement, especially to the EU.

- The EU should step up its commitment to support legal migration pathways from the Balkans. Resettlement schemes and family reunification should be strengthened. There are currently no resettlement programmes operating from BiH.

- The government of Bosnia and Herzegovina should take ownership over responding to the refugee and migrant crisis in the country and fulfilling its obligations towards refugees in line with the international law. There is a need for **better coordination** between federal, cantonal and local authorities in migration management practices, both in regards to long-term planning and timely responding to the developments in the field and needs of refugee and migrant population in BiH.



Empty room in the designated zone for unaccompanied children in camp Bira, which was closed in September

Save the Children provides child protection services through child friendly spaces in the centres in USC, and outreach teams in USC, Tuzla and Sarajevo canton. We identify UASC and families with children, refer them to key services to ensure continuity of care across the country. In the centres in USC we run designated zones for UASC and 24/7 protection teams, guaranteeing UASC have access to guardianship.

Through our education programmes we ensure access to non-formal learning in the centres as well as enrolment of children into schools.

OVER 500 CHILDREN ARE DIRECTLY SUPPORTED THROUGH OUR PROGRAMMES MONTHLY.

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