



## **Lemkin Institute Statement on the Deaths of Afghan Migrants in Bulgaria**

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention is deeply concerned about the tragic news of eighteen Afghan migrants and refugees who were found dead near Lokosrsko (Bulgaria). We condemn the Bulgarian leadership and the responsible EU authorities for failing to respond adequately to the ongoing migrant smuggling crisis and, more broadly, for promoting a refugee policy that is xenophobic, racist, Islamophobic, classist, and out of step with international law and human rights norms.

On February 17 Bulgarian police found an abandoned truck in the fields near the village of Lokosrsko, close to the capital Sofia. In the truck they found the bodies of 18 migrants from Afghanistan, all of whom had died of asphyxiation. According to the initial information released by Bulgarian authorities, the truck was carrying 52 people, including children. The survivors, some of whom were in need of emergency medical care, were taken to hospitals and were provided with support by the relevant state agencies.

This is not the first tragic incident occurring on the illegal routes to and through Bulgaria because of migrant trafficking. Bulgarian journalists, human rights defenders, civil society organizations, and border monitoring projects frequently report on the practice of pushing back refugees at the border as well as on the poor conditions and stretched capacities of refugee centers in the country. When it comes to border control tensions and the response towards the increasing number of smuggling trucks, it is particularly worrying that those incidents become operationalized by both Bulgarian leaders and their European partners as a challenge to Bulgaria's incorporation into the Schengen Area. The latter is a zone comprising 27 European countries which agreed to abolish their internal borders to facilitate the unhindered circulation of their citizens within the Schengen borders. Although Bulgaria is supposed to join the Schengen Area, the country is still in the "waiting room". Bulgaria's latest attempt to speed up the process of becoming a full-fledged member was blocked by Dutch and Austrian leaders out of concern for Bulgaria's ineptitude in stewarding and securing its external borders.

It is this political context that decides what steps are taken towards responding to people trying to cross the border between Bulgaria and Turkey. The current modus operandi of Bulgarian border control, coordinated with EU partners, is limited to increased securitization of the borders and advancing the surveillance infrastructure rather than engaging in more inspired and visionary leadership that addresses the very real needs of people from Afghanistan and elsewhere to find economic, political, and personal security in countries that are not their homes.

Bulgaria's practices, and the current practices of the EU, only further the "weaponization" of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, which is being used by government officials and Western media outlets to ignore the voices, the needs, and the dignity of the displaced people reaching Europe's shores. Moreover, as the example of Melilla in June 2022 demonstrates, fences and increased surveillance do not stop people from seeking refuge, but rather will most likely create more frequent deadly incidents.

In the face of yet another migration-related tragedy in Europe, the Lemkin Institute is compelled to reiterate the points made in our statements of November 14th, 2021, "Statement on the Crisis at the Belarusian Border with Poland", and of August 24th, 2022, "Statement on the Melilla Massacre of 24 June 2022", and to remind that migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are human beings and must be treated with respect and dignity. Europe and European leaders must acknowledge the responsibility that they bear and work towards eliminating the dehumanizing discourse towards migrants and refugees both in word and in practice.