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## Hungary denying food to asylum seekers, say human rights groups

Some adults whose claims were rejected went without food for up to five days, claim activists

**Shaun Walker** in Budapest

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Hungarian authorities are systematically denying food to failed asylum seekers detained in the country's border transit zones, say rights activists.

The policy, whereby adults whose asylum claims have been rejected are denied food, was described as “an unprecedented human rights violation in 21st-century Europe” by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, a human rights organisation working to offer legal support to those in the transit zones.

It may amount to “inhuman treatment and even to torture” under international human rights law, said the organisation in a statement released this week. It documented eight cases involving 13 people this year when the Hungarian authorities had begun providing food to people only after the European court of human rights had intervened. Some went without food for up to five days before the rulings were granted.

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Hungary's nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has built his political programme around being tough on migration and demonising refugees and migrants. In 2015, he ordered a fence built along the country's southern border with Serbia and regularly rails against the danger of migration in his speeches. A tax has been imposed on NGOs who work on migration-related issues.

The Hungarian authorities only accept asylum applications from a small quota of people allowed into its border transit zones, and a July ruling last year made it even harder to satisfy the requirements, noting that anyone who had arrived in Hungary from a safe country was automatically ineligible. Most people arrive from Serbia, which is considered safe.

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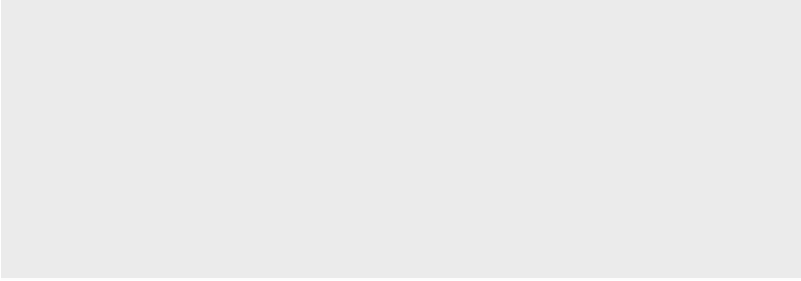
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Orbán's spokesman, Zoltán Kovács, dismissed criticism of the policy of withholding food, saying the authorities provided "everything for people who have a legal right to stay in the transit zone", but added that food would not be provided for those who had been tested and found to be ineligible. "It's a businesslike approach. When business is finished, there's nothing we can do," he said.

Kovács said the government still provided asylum or the right to stay for people who come with "not only a story but real proof" their lives were in danger. Last year, Hungarian authorities accepted 349 applications made through the transit zone, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, though it is not clear how many of these came before the July ruling on safe countries.

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Kovács said when people's asylum claims were rejected they were free to leave the transit zone and return to Serbia. "There is no free meal for anyone," he said in an interview last year.

However, Hungary and Serbia have no readmission agreement, meaning those in the transit zone cannot be legally deported.

"The idea is that if you make people hungry enough, you'll force them to go back to Serbia," said Márta Pardavi, the co-chair of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee. "This would mean they enter Serbia in a way that is completely unauthorised by Serbian authorities."

Orbán's Fidesz party is campaigning on an anti-migration platform for European parliament elections next month. In this climate, all discussions of migration-related issues retain a political dimension, with organisations such as the Hungarian Helsinki Committee denounced in government-linked media.



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The independent Hungarian MP Bernadett Szél criticised the detention of children in the border transit zones after visiting one of the holding centres earlier this month.

“They are locked between fences topped with barbed wire. And there is a lot of dust everywhere ... I think the government is not allowing us to take photos inside because people would feel pity for these kids if they saw them.”

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