

DANGER IN THE FOREST

Human Rights Defenders in Poland
Targeted at the Belarus Border



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Introduction

Local Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) near the Poland-Belarus border report that Polish authorities continue to target them for their humanitarian work in providing food and other help to migrants and people seeking asylum who have crossed the border from Belarus. Some HRDs are on trial for their human rights and humanitarian work, and many fear that a more widespread crackdown against their activities is imminent.

The attacks on HRDs come in a worldwide context of an increasingly hostile political environment against migrants, refugees, people seeking asylum, and [those who defend their rights](#).

Anti-migrant rhetoric has become mainstreamed in Polish politics, including during the current presidential election campaign. The election is set for June 1, when Polish voters will choose between Rafal Trzaskowski and Karol Nawrocki. Trzaskowski, the Mayor of Warsaw, is from the ruling center-right Civic Platform. Nawrocki is to the right of him politically, an independent candidate supported by the opposition Law and Justice party, which ruled Poland between 2015 and 2023.

They were the leading candidates after the first round of voting on May 18, with Trzaskowski narrowly beating Nawrocki with 31 per cent to 29 per cent. As neither candidate won 50 percent of the vote, a runoff election will be held. Both have declared opposition to migrants and people seeking asylum. In the first round, ultra-nationalist candidates even further to the right of the remaining pair, and even more hostile to migrants, won over 20 percent of the vote.

Much of the political debate is on preventing people from coming to Poland via Belarus. Since 2021, the Belarusian government, a close ally of Russia's Vladimir Putin, has lured many people to transit through Belarus with promises that the government will take them to the border of the European Union. Belarus aims to cause political problems for the European Union by pushing people across its borders with Poland (and, less frequently, into Latvia and Lithuania).

Over the last four years, tens of thousands of people have attempted to cross from Belarus into Poland. Most are from the Middle East or Africa and are often fleeing wars, conflict, and/or persecution. People attempting to come into Poland from Belarus have often been met with hostility and violence by Polish border guards and other security forces.

Political attacks on migrants and those who defend them have been growing steadily in recent years. In March 2025, the Polish government suspended for 60 days the rights of people to claim asylum if arriving via Belarus – a step that UNHCR and other authorities [had warned](#) Poland violates international refugee law and treaties. The suspension [was extended](#) on May 21 for another 60 days in a parliamentary vote with 366 politicians voting for the extension, and 17 against.



The increasingly hostile political environment has prompted activists to redirect their efforts away from advocacy to representing activists in court and providing direct humanitarian and legal aid to migrants and people seeking asylum.

Activists also report aggression from local far-right groups and fading interest from international organizations and NGOs, and others supporting them. Many say they are struggling with burnout and cuts in funding for their lifesaving work.

Despite these challenges, HRDs continue to provide vital legal advice, medical help, and humanitarian aid to people coming to Poland from Belarus.

Background

Since 2021, Human Rights First has repeatedly visited the border area, documenting attacks on local human rights activists providing humanitarian and other aid to refugees and migrants.¹ In May 2023 Human Rights First was questioned by security forces about its presence when it visited the border area in the Bialowieza forest and met HRDs camped 15 yards from the fence offering legal advice to those on the other side of the barrier – a group of around 30 people, originally from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and other places, who were hoping to apply for asylum. About a dozen of the group were children. After several days, after being denied permission to cross the border, the group moved on inside Belarus.

In September 2024 Human Rights First also released [a report](#) detailing the targeting of immigration lawyers in Britain by far right groups, and in May 2025 Human Rights First and Refugees International [issued a report](#) on systemic and grave human rights abuses by the Trump administration against asylum seekers in U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) custody.

¹ Human Rights First. “Belarus-Poland Border: U.S. Should Stand for Human Rights and Human Lives.” Human Rights First, November 10, 2021: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/belarus-poland-border-u-s-should-stand-for-human-rights-and-human-lives/>; Dooley, Brian. “Poland’s Secret Heroes.” Human Rights First, April 11, 2022: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/polands-secret-heroes/>; Dooley, Brian. “The Polish Catholic Group Taking Risks to Help Refugees.” Human Rights First, April 15, 2022: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/the-polish-catholic-group-taking-risks-to-help-refugees/>; Dooley, Brian. “In Alliance with Poland, U.S. Must Emphasize Refugee Protection.” Just Security, May 11, 2022: <https://www.justsecurity.org/81457/in-alliance-with-poland-u-s-must-emphasize-refugee-protection/>; “Polio Authorities Continue to Attack HRDs near the Belarus Border,” Human Rights First, June 9, 2023. <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/polish-authorities-continue-to-attack-human-rights-defenders-near-the-belarus-border/>. “Impact of Polish elections on asylum seekers and rights defenders,” October 13, 2023: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/impact-of-polish-election-on-asylum-seekers-and-rights-defenders/>; “New Polish government, similar border policies,” February 9, 2024: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/new-polish-government-similar-border-policies/>; “Five activists in Poland face trial after helping migrants,” January 20, 2025: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/five-activists-face-trial-in-poland-after-helping-migrants/>; “Human Rights First Urges Poland to Lift Suspension on Right to Seek Asylum,” March 31, 2025: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/human-rights-first-urges-poland-to-lift-suspension-on-rights-to-asylum/>.



In May 2025, Human Rights First returned to the Poland-Belarus border area to meet HRDs targeted for helping migrants and people seeking asylum.

The We Are Monitoring Association (WAM) tracks activity at the border and is part of Grupa Granica, a network of human rights activists working near the border. In 2022, Human Rights First presented Grupa Granica with the William D. Zabel Human Rights Award in recognition of their work providing humanitarian, medical, and legal aid to migrants and asylum seekers stranded in the forests.²

The WAM group reports that since 2021, at least 97 people have died attempting the border crossing, and there have been more than 11,000 pushbacks by Polish border officers. It also tracks the origin of where people come from, and has recorded 4,582 people from Syria, 1,894 from Somalia, 1,235 from Yemen, 1,135 from Ethiopia, 1,011 from Eritrea, and 945 from Afghanistan.



The border fence separating Poland and Belarus.

The number of those attempting to cross the border has dropped this year, and there are fewer families with small children since Poland built a 120-mile-long, 5.5-yard-high fence topped with razor wire at the border in June 2022. The journey from Belarus is extremely dangerous and often involves traveling through thick forests and swamps.

² Human Rights First. "Human Rights First to Present Poland's Grupa Granica with 2022 William D. Zabel Human Rights Award," September 19, 2022: <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/human-rights-first-to-present-polands-grupa-granica-with-2022-william-d-zabel-human-rights-award/>.



If those crossing are caught by Polish border guards or other security forces, they are likely to be pushed back into Belarus, where they face severe violence. Some of those hospitalized in Poland near the border are taken from the hospitals by border guards and pushed back into Belarus.



Recruitment poster for Polish border guards.

Kasia Poskrobko is part of the [Egala](#) organization, which was created in December 2021 in Białystok in response to the humanitarian crisis on the border. Since then, they have been providing humanitarian and medical aid, as well as legal, psychological, and material support for people who have crossed the border. They also report on the situation on the border, and support migrants and refugees in the process of integration and adaptation to life in Poland.

"Since the fence went up, there has been an increase in broken bones and cuts to hands and arms as people climb over it," she said. "One problem is that once people have been treated at the hospital and are 'fit to leave,' the border guards collect them and take them back to the forest to push them back to Belarus. Sometimes people are only treated in the Emergency Room for a few hours, if they need stitches for cuts from the razor wire, for instance. If they're only there briefly, there's not always time to get the paperwork done to get them some legal protection."



Local activists monitoring the numbers of people in one local hospital at Hajnówka told Human Rights First that in 2023, 162 people were treated at the hospital who had come from the border, 258 in 2024, and 41 so far this year.

Activists report that hostility has increased against them since June 2024, when a Polish border guard [died after being stabbed at the border by a migrant](#). Months before, there had been a more businesslike relationship between the HRDs and border guards.

In July 2024, the Polish parliament [approved](#) controversial legislation to decriminalize, in certain circumstances, the use of firearms by border guards in self-defense.

While the ban on claiming asylum, which took effect in March 2025, includes some exceptions for children, pregnant women, and those with certain medical conditions, activists say in practice, virtually everyone caught by the Polish security forces is being pushed back to Belarus. The May 21 renewal of the ban also provides an exception for families accompanying children.

Accounts from activists at the border

Local human rights and humanitarian activists have for some years reported being judicially harassed, criminalized, threatened, and physically attacked for their work at the border. In November 2021, activist Maciej Stuhr, involved in refugee rights at the border, [received](#) death threats from far-right individuals online.

WAM [reports](#) having its phone lines blocked, and receiving phone calls from right-wing trolls, death threats on social media accounts, and false phone calls/reports pretending to be from migrants that disrupt its work.

Many people have been unjustifiably detained for up to several hours in the forest, or taken to Border Guard/Police facilities, and released without charges. Activists report that guards have aimed guns at them, humiliated them, attempted to intimidate them, and ordered them to lie down on the ground.

This month, activists from Grupa Granica and elsewhere gave Human Rights First detailed accounts of the harassment and attacks they constantly face from Polish authorities and far-right groups.

An activist in his 20s who has been working at the border for several years said: "Before its suspension, international protection procedures protected not only asylum seekers, but also activists helping them, who could argue that they are engaging in a legal procedure. With that safeguard gone, it's easier to frame activists as outlaws."

Aleksandra Chrzanowska of Grupa Granica and the Association for Legal Intervention said: "There is constant harassment of activists at security checkpoints near the border - it's



just time-wasting questioning, and it's become so common that many activists and locals have sort of got used to it, but it's not normal. If you refuse to answer their questions, the police keep you there, checking and rechecking your documents before eventually letting you go."

Far-right groups are sporadically active in the area, threatening activists on social media and patrolling the forests. These "citizen patrols" roam the forests, armed with handcuffs and guns, looking for those crossing the border. Several activists report unpleasant encounters with these far-right patrols in the forests.

Prosecuted for defending rights

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders has [reported](#) that across the world, those working to protect the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers "face a range of attacks, including vilification, smear campaigns, imprisonment, deportation, threats, kidnap and murder... some laws enable the prosecution and criminalization of defenders advocating for the rights of migrants. Defenders are brought before courts for protecting the rights of others as solidarity is criminalized and often conflated with people smuggling."

The targeting of activists working at the border has included an intensification of judicial harassment, with several HRDs currently on trial on criminal charges for their work at the border.

A [study](#) of cases brought against activists between the fall of 2021 and the end of 2022 by the Szpila Collective and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights recorded dozens of incidents with charges ranging from organizing illegal border crossings, or aiding and abetting in the organization of an illegal border crossing, to facilitating the stay in Poland of persons who do not have the right to lawful residence in Poland, to aiding and abetting illegal border crossing, to entering a 200-metre-wide no-go zone along Poland's border with Belarus

It found that in the vast majority of cases, the courts discontinued proceedings, issued acquittals, and disregarded requests for pre-trial detention, while affirming the need to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need.

A January 2023 [report](#) from Grupa Granica noted that "court decisions in the past year have shown that the main purpose of repression by uniformed services against humanitarian activists in the Polish-Belarusian border area is to create a so-called 'chilling effect' aimed at intimidation or discouragement of activists." The report highlights that in most cases, the courts dismiss charges against activists and emphasize that providing help is not illegal.

On May 31, 2023, the District Court in Hajnówka [ruled](#) that an Iraqi man living in Germany who had come to help his family in the forest in Poland in October 2021 was not acting unlawfully. The court recognized that he had helped several family members, including



children, who were freezing, tired, hungry, on the verge of physical exhaustion, and in a situation threatening their health and perhaps life.

The court ruled that what he did in providing them with humanitarian aid “was not socially harmful and therefore did not constitute a crime,” and that his action “deserves neither condemnation nor criminal penalization.”

In March 2022, the Polish police detained a 21-year-old activist for 72 hours who was working for the Catholic Intelligentsia Club (KIK) and falsely [charged her with organizing illegal border crossings](#). The charges were later dropped.

In May 2025, Human Rights First observed the trial at Bialystok District Court of two activists charged with assaulting border guards during an incident in October 2024. A verdict is expected in the case on June 2.

While Polish courts have generally sided with activists so far, courts across Europe have also thrown out charges brought against people providing legal and humanitarian aid on many occasions.

In May 2022, in Italy, [Andrea Costa](#), head of the Rome non-profit migrant reception center Baobab, and two of its employees, were cleared of charges related to illegal immigration. According to press reports, the judge said the acquittals were “because the crime was non-existent.” The same month [Mussie Zerai](#), a priest based in Trapani, Italy, was cleared of all charges relating to illegal immigration in connection with providing humanitarian aid to refugees.

In April 2021, a monk was acquitted in a German court after providing refuge in a church to a migrant. The court found that, although [Abraham Sauer](#) had unlawfully assisted the man, his actions had been based on faith and conscience, and he was acquitted.

In a [landmark ruling](#) in 2024, the European Court of Justice fined Hungary \$225 million for breaking the EU’s asylum laws and ignoring an earlier judgment. The court first ruled in December 2020 that Hungary had failed to comply with the EU’s rules by “[unlawfully detaining](#)” [asylum seekers](#) and deporting them before they could appeal the rejection of their applications, and ordered Budapest to make changes to its policies. Hungary ignored the judgment, which the court declared to be “an unprecedented and exceptionally serious breach of EU law.”

In 2019, a U.S. federal court [acquitted Scott Warren](#) of the charge of abandonment of property. He was part of a group leaving food, water, blankets, and medical supplies at drop sites in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, where large numbers of migrants are known to have died from hypothermia, exposure, and dehydration. He had been charged with leaving barrels of water in the desert. The court ruled that the prosecution had violated his religious freedom.



Even if courts eventually throw out cases brought against activists, the process of being charged and tried is exhausting, expensive, and stressful. Some cases brought against activists in Poland are left open for years and never resolved. Activists say the cases in Poland are meant to deter others from helping. Even when those charged are acquitted, the prosecutions create a chilling effect on anyone considering aid for migrants and asylum seekers.

The authorities in Poland and elsewhere continue to bring such cases. Ieva Raubiško, an activist working at the Latvian border with Belarus, [is being prosecuted](#) by authorities in Latvia after helping five asylum seekers obtain an interim measure from the European Court of Human Rights to prevent their deportation.

The Hajnówka Five

Five people are currently on trial after providing humanitarian aid to people at the Poland-Belarus border. They face serious criminal charges and sentences of up to five years in prison. Human Rights First knows some of them personally.

The trial is being closely watched throughout and beyond Poland as a test case for what counts as criminal activity when helping vulnerable people. Those supporting the five say media coverage of the trial is important as it provides a good opportunity for the public to see the human side of their activism, and the reality of what they are doing.

In March 2022, Polish border guards detained four of those in the trial as they were helping a family of seven, including children, from Iraq, and an elderly Egyptian man who were already in Poland by providing them with transport. A few days before, one of the four, Mariusz Chyzynski, had accompanied Human Rights First into Ukraine, driving [a car filled with medicine and other humanitarian aid into the country](#) in the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion.

Those arrested were accused of organizing an illegal border crossing. In December 2023, another person was added to the case. According to the public prosecutor, their crime was providing people with food and clothing and transporting them "deeper into Polish territory" – literally a few miles from a forest in Poland to the closest town.

Those they helped had crossed the border and spent several days living in the woods. The activists were driving the group to the closest town, about eight miles away, but border patrol agents stopped them before they could get there.





Some of the activists on trial outside the court at Bialystok.

They are on trial for providing "illegal assistance" to refugees, "making it easier for them to stay in the Republic of Poland" by "providing food and clothing to them while they were hiding in the woods, giving them shelter and rest and transporting them into Poland on March 22, 2022," the prosecutor said.

Ewa Moroz-Keczynska, an ethnologist at the Bialowieza National Park near the border, is one of those on trial. "We locals are in the woods a lot," *she said*. "It's where we work and relax. In 2021, something terrible happened. Our forest started to move. Suddenly, it was full of people. We met people who were suffering from malnutrition, dehydration or other ailments, some even seemed to have hidden themselves to die in peace."

Lawyer Hanna Machinska of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights says the law is being misused to target the activists. "The law targets human traffickers, but now prosecutors are arguing that the gist of the law is to clamp down on 'advantages gained by refugees.' We are not talking about human trafficking here. We are talking about humanitarian assistance. It's a refusal to provide such assistance that should be a crime," she said.

The case was brought under the previous government, but the new government has chosen to press on with the case and has refused to drop the charges against the five, despite numerous requests to do so. The trial is being closely watched across the country and throughout Europe. The final court hearing is scheduled for June 25.



Far-right groups demonstrate outside the court during the trial of the Hajnówka Five, using the trial for their own propaganda. At a hearing in May, 15-20 people dressed in paramilitary-style clothes demonstrated outside the court.



Protestors gather outside the courthouse in support of the Hajnowka Five. Courtesy of Małgorzata Klemens.

There is a widespread belief that there will be further cases brought against activists, with the prosecution alluding to “a stack of evidence” it has accumulated, only a fraction of which is being used in the Hajnówka Five trial.

Many humanitarian and human rights activists fear more cases will be brought and cite the large numbers of people questioned by the police in recent months. “Maybe all activists are in danger, because who knows who has said what to the police,” said one woman who has been providing humanitarian aid in the firestorm for years.

Intense pressure and fading support

In 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs told UN member states that “compassion is not a crime,” and noted that many HRDs helping migrants, refugees and those seeking asylum “come to this work not because they intended to establish a career in human rights, but decided to act when confronted with families, including children, dying in their localities.”



Responding to the humanitarian crisis in the forest is physically demanding work, often requiring activists to travel long distances through undergrowth while carrying heavy backpacks containing water and food. This is often done in temperatures far below freezing. It can also involve having to run to reach those needing help.

Many volunteers had little or no previous experience of managing such intense activism, including how to plan breaks and pace themselves. It is psychologically very stressful. "None of us was prepared for this experience of working at the border," said one activist. "We're not really qualified to hear stories of violence and rape from people when you bring them food in the forest."

Many activists cite tensions between and within their groups, with internal friction diverting energy from helping those in need. Burnout is regularly cited as a significant problem confronting activists.

There is also a lack of any significant national political support for those providing humanitarian and legal aid at the border. Whatever the outcome, this week's presidential election doesn't offer much hope that things will improve for activists.

"After the last [2023] general election, we thought things would get better at the border. In fact, they got worse," said one HRD. Others say they didn't have high hopes for the new government, but didn't expect things would get worse.

"Mainstream politics has turned against refugees, and now it's less socially acceptable to do this activism, so the number of volunteers is steadily dropping," said one activist.

Aleksandra Chrzanowska of Grupa Granica and the Association for Legal Intervention said, "Now we feel more alone, with fewer allies. Many people who supported us before the 2023 election because they opposed the previous government have now deserted us because they don't want to be critical of the new government. This has really hurt our finances, as many funded us. Some media are now also less reluctant to criticize the new government's actions at the border."

HRDs say that despite advocating on their issues with the new government, including with senior officials, the overall situation has become worse. Polish anti-migrant sentiment used to be focused on people from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Ukrainians were generally exempt from hostility, but that too is changing. "There's now a growing resentment against Ukrainian refugees," said one activist. "I've had to intervene a few times in stores when Ukrainians were being abused for not speaking Polish."

HRDs say media attention on border issues has dwindled, and international organizations and NGOs are less interested and less able to provide financial support for activism. Activists previously paid for projects helping migrants and those seeking asylum are now working as volunteers.



"We don't know month to month what activism we can do because of a lack of financing," said one HRD. "Even if people work for free, you still need money for sleeping bags and humanitarian aid," said another.

The good news

Despite all their difficulties, local humanitarian and human rights activists are continuing to provide help to those in need who have crossed the border.

In the early days, they were often equipped with just first aid kits used in family cars and had little training in how to treat hypothermia or dehydration. Now they are working at a much more sophisticated level and have received significant medical training and better equipment.

One activist in his 20s who has been working at the border for several years said: "Our search and rescue operations are still successful - we bring fresh food and water and clothes to people, and that's needed as much as ever. Advocacy hasn't produced much in terms of success - for a while, it helped with fundraising, but direct action is what matters most now."

Ania is based in Bialystok near the border and is part of the Egala organization. Part of her job is helping those who have come across the border adjust to life in Poland.

"We help with training, on adapting to Polish life - with language classes, how to register with a doctor, applying for jobs, and so on. For many locals here, it's the first time they've met anyone from Africa on the level of a coworker, or as a patient," she said.

Egala is countering stereotypes of foreigners fueled by much of the Polish media. "Refugees are so demonized here that when locals meet them in person, it breaks the stereotypes that they're lazy and don't want to work," said Ania. "We put out some short clips on social media of refugees telling their stories, and it worked very well in making people here rethink their views."

Conclusion

Whatever the outcome of the presidential election on June 1, prospects for migrants, those seeking asylum, and those who protect their rights look bleak. A hostile national and international political environment, dwindling public support, cuts to resources, and exhaustion are all major challenges facing HRDs working near the border.

Despite these difficulties, many continue to provide lifesaving legal, medical, and humanitarian help to those crossing the border, and in helping them adapt to life in Poland. They should be aided in this work with political support and resources.



Recommendations

The Polish authorities should:

- Immediately desist from attacking HRDs and drop all court cases against HRDs prosecuted for providing legal and humanitarian aid at the border.
- Prosecute those who make physical threats online or offline against HRDs.
- Reinstate full rights for people to claim asylum and comply with international refugee law prohibitions against refoulement.

Foreign governments, international organizations, and NGOs should:

- Publicly urge the Polish government to reinstate full rights for people to claim asylum.
- Regularly visit the border area to witness the work of HRDs for themselves.
- Closely monitor and publicly report on threats to HRDs.
- Monitor and publicly respond to charges brought against HRDs and, when requested by HRDs, observe their trials.
- Resource the lifesaving work of activists working in the border area.



About Human Rights First

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization founded in 1978 to address the lack of legal protection for refugees and asylum seekers. We work alongside human rights defenders, hold human rights abusers accountable, fight for the conditions that uphold democracy, and provide tools that bring the power of AI and advanced technologies to justice and human rights movements.

Human Rights First is based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

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Cover photo: Protestors gather outside the courthouse in support of the Hajnowka Five. Courtesy of Małgorzata Klemens.

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