Exodus to the Ukraine-Poland border: “They turn us away because we’re black!”

written by Mehdi Chebil | February 24, 2022

INFO MIGRANTS

Many Africans fleeing the war in Ukraine claimed on social media that they had been rejected at the Polish border because of their skin color. At Lviv train station in western Ukraine, France 24 met several African students who had been turned away for no reason at the Medyka border crossing. Discrimination denied by Kiev and Warsaw.

Are civilians prevented from fleeing the war in Ukraine because of their skin color? In any case, Africans claim to have been turned away at the border with Poland while other people, white, were allowed to cross. Discrimination that could tarnish the great outpouring of solidarity displayed by the countries of the European Union, while hundreds of thousands of refugees continue to flow to the Polish, Hungarian, Slovak and Romanian borders of Ukraine.

The blockade of the Polish border for Africans is not total because some groups were able to cross, which suggests instead an arbitrary screening of local border guards.

But during a report on Sunday, February 27 at the station of Lviv, a large city in western Ukraine located about 80 kilometers from the Polish border, France 24 met several African students who claim to have been prevented from entering Poland by Ukrainian border guards.

“We were blocked at the border, we were told that black people don’t come back. However, we saw the whites coming back…”, recalls Moustapha Bagui Sylla, a Guinean who studied medicine in Ukraine. The young man fled his university residence in Kharkiv from the first bombings to embark on a mad race to the west.

Like tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilians, he endured hours of walking and waiting in the cold on the road to Medyka in Poland. But his journey was met with the intransigence of the Ukrainian border guards, who ordered him to turn back.

A Nigerian student queuing up to buy train tickets described a similar scene at the same location. Her group, which included women, stood in front of the gates of the border crossing while Ukrainian guards smuggled in whites.

“They don’t let Africans through. Blacks who do not have European passports do not pass… They push us away just because we’re black!” exclaims Michael. “We’re all human, we’re born that way, they shouldn’t discriminate against us on the color of our skin.”

According to Moustapha Bagui Sylla, the Ukrainian guards justified their refoulement with instructions from their Polish counterparts, who reportedly told them “that there was no more room for migrants” in Poland.

Warsaw has firmly denied any discrimination. “I don’t know what’s going on on the Ukrainian side, but we admit everyone regardless of nationality. I’ve been making false allegations like this for two days,” Anna Michalska, spokeswoman for the Polish border guards, told France 24. A second Polish

statement confirmed that no visa was required, that identity cards or passports, even if expired, were accepted.

A Ukrainian border guard official also denied the reports, insisting that there was no nationality favored more than another to cross the border. The main exit restriction currently targets men of Ukrainian nationality between the ages of 18 and 60, who are mobilized to defend the country against the Russian invasion.

“I don’t know what happened, these people may have been turned away because they were trying to grill the priority in the queue,” added Andriy Demchenko, spokesman for the Ukrainian border guard.

The humanitarian situation on the Ukrainian side of the Medyka border crossing is extremely precarious for all displaced persons, as illustrated in one of our recent reports. According to an internal European Commission document cited by Le Figaro, it now takes between twenty and seventy hours to cross Poland’s border posts.

For those most concerned, these arbitrary returns resemble a double penalty. Being sent back to the status of economic migrant is a real cold shower for these young Africans who have come to do advanced studies, with papers in order and brilliant job prospects. On Sunday, most of the Africans stranded at Lviv station were now seeking to flee through Romania, Hungary, or Slovakia.

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