The Wall Street Journal
August 19, 2015

Hungary Deploys ‘Border Hunters’ to Keep Illegal Immigrants Out

Budapest is also tightening punishments for illegal border crossing and human trafficking

Migrants walk by a fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border. The frontier will now be policed by units ‘border hunters’ and will be authorized to act ‘with force'. Photo: Reuters

by Margit Feher

BUDAPEST—Hungary's government said Tuesday it will deploy police units of "border hunters" at its frontier with Serbia to keep illegal immigrants out of the country amid a flood of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.

The head of the prime minister's office said several thousand police will be placed along Hungary's 175-kilometer (110-mile) border with non-European Union member Serbia, where most of the migrants enter the country.

Hungary "is under siege from human traffickers," Janos Lazar told a press briefing, adding that the police "will defend this stretch of our borders with force."

The government will also tighten punishments for illegal border crossing and human trafficking, steps aimed at "defending the country," he said.

"[Migrants'] demands to be let in to then take advantage of the EU's asylum system are on the rise, aggressiveness is increasing. Police have seen that on several occasions," Mr. Lazar added.

The majority of the migrants, whom the government labels as illegal immigrants, are refugees from war-torn Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, according to human-rights groups.

Hungary has registered some 120,000 asylum requests so far this year, an increase of almost 200% from last year. This year's total could reach 300,000, the country said last week.

"Hungary is joining Italy and Greece as the member states most exposed, on the front line" of migration, Dimitris Avramopoulos, EU commissioner in charge of migration, said Friday.

Last week, Hungary requested €8 million ($8.9 million) from the European Commission in emergency assistance to expand its capacities to house migrants. Brussels will treat the request without delay, Mr. Avramopoulos said.

With an estimated 4,500 migrants housed in its overflowing immigration camps, Hungary is a transit country for the vast majority of the migrants. Once in Hungary—and thus within the EU's Schengen zone where internal borders aren't guarded—the migrants typically travel on to countries such as Germany and Sweden.

Hungary is now building a double fence on its border with Serbia to reduce the number of migrants crossing the border through woods and meadows.

The first fence, comprising three rows of razor wire, will be finished by the end of this month, Mr. Lazar said. The second fence, planned at some 3.5 meters (11.5 feet) high, will be built behind it.

Hungary's parliament will soon convene for a special meeting to pass legislation to punish illegal immigration and any attempts to dismantle the fence.

If the legislation passes, offenders could face up to four years in prison, Mr. Lazar said.

The construction of the fence has stirred controversy in Hungary and is being fought by several opposition parties, but they lack the votes to block government legislation.

"Deploying border hunters only reflects that the iron curtain on the Serbian border is worthless," the opposition Socialist party said in a release Tuesday. "The fence is just an expensive prop in the circus of politics."

The European Commission said Monday that none of the EU money going to Hungary can be used for the fence as the commission doesn't support it. However, the means of securing borders are the prerogative of each individual member state.

EU funds are being proffered to France to reinforce the fence at Calais, but that fence is different, Commission spokesman Christian Wiegand said, because "it's about protection of migrants, preventing them from electrocuting themselves."

@2015 The Wall Street Journal