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Countries with neighbor woes are agreeing with Trump

Razor wire marks the border between Hungary and Serbia, but officials are planning to erect a 109-mile-long, 13-foot-tall fence. (Associated Press)

by Andrew Nachemson

Donald Trump isn't the world's only fan of walls.

Three strands of razor wire currently delineate the boundary and between Hungary and Serbia, but by the end of this month, Hungarian officials plan to have erected a 109-mile-long, 13-foot-tall fence to stem a rising tide of illegal immigrants.

But even though migrants have used the Hungary-Serbia frontier as a gateway to the rest of Europe, Hungary's plan to secure the border has been met with criticism and disdain from European officials and human rights groups. But Hungarian officials make no apologies.

Hungary is "under an organized attack" by human traffickers who aren't only transporting migrants but instructing them about how to abuse the European Union's refugee system, Janos Lazar, Prime Minister Viktor Orban's chief of staff, told reporters recently.

Mr. Lazar said police units of "border hunters" would be organized to step up against the "increasingly aggressive migrants arriving with more resolute demands."

Hungary is not alone. One of the world's oldest solutions for keeping people in, keeping them out and frustrating hostile forces is enjoying a new vogue. The Great Wall of China and Hadrian's Wall in Britain are finding their modern analogues in places as politically and geographically diverse as Israel, North Korea, the Mediterranean coast, Latin America and southern Africa.

Spain has constructed a fence around its African enclave Ceuta, a coastal city bordering Morocco near the Strait of Gibraltar, in an effort to stop illegal immigration and smuggling. Migrants and smugglers have long exploited Ceuta as a point of entry into Spain and the rest of Europe. Likewise, Morocco is erecting a high wall topped with razor wire along the border of a second Spanish outpost, Melilla, to stanch the flow of immigrants to Europe.

China has constructed a barrier along parts of its 880-mile border with nominal ally North Korea in a bid to keep defectors from crossing. Kuwait, with the U.N. Security Council's blessing, erected a wall along its border with Iraq as protection following Saddam Hussein's invasion in 1990. Botswana built a barbed-wire fence along its 300-mile border with Zimbabwe, ostensibly to contain a foot-and-mouth outbreak among cattle, but also to demarcate the line between one of Africa's richest and one of its poorest countries.

There has been a spate of wall-building projects across the Middle East in the face of the terror threat from Islamic State, the Syrian civil war and the chaos in Libya following the ouster of strongman Moammar Gadhafi. Tunisia, rocked by a recent string of spectacular attacks on its tourism industry, now plans a 100-mile security wall along its unsettled border with Libya.

In a recent series of essays on immigration and borders, Said Saddiki, international relations professor at Abu Dhabi's Al-Ain University, said modern governments have returned to the low-tech fix of berms and barbed-wire along their borders because of their "decreasing ability of control [of] the flow of money, ideas, information and all kinds of virtual interactions" in the digital age.

“Immigration policies and border control systems have undergone a number of significant reforms during the last two decades in response to the steady growth in the number of immigrants and the development of the means used by smugglers,” Mr. Saddiki wrote. “The common denominator is the linking of immigration policy and border control management on the one hand and immigration policy and security issues on the other hand.”

Israeli officials credit the wall built to separate the Jewish state from the Palestinian-run West Bank for a sharp decrease in the number of terror incidents and security threats coming across the border — despite sharp criticism from the United Nations, human rights groups and Palestinian leaders. They point out that the suicide bombings that had been rife during the second intifada from 2000 to 2005 fell dramatically after the first section of the West Bank barrier was completed in 2003.

“We can certainly see the security fence has huge benefits. Controversial as it may be, no one can argue with the statistics that it simply brought an end to that free flow of terrorism,” said Israeli army Capt. Barak Raz.

Worries about walls

And as with Mr. Trump’s proposal, border wall projects have sparked fierce controversies around the globe. Bill Frelick, director of the refugee program at Human Rights Watch, worries about how international barriers affect the human right to seek asylum.

In an interview with The Washington Times, Mr. Frelick acknowledged there is no “right to immigrate” but feared the implications a border wall would have on the “right to seek asylum” as outlined in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He worries that border barriers would prevent asylum-seekers from getting the opportunity to make their case to stay.

“They will not have their claim for protection heard before they are pushed back,” Mr. Frelick said.

He cited the situation on the border between Turkey and Bulgaria. The Bulgarian government erected a border barrier but claims that asylum-seekers are still welcome to approach the entry point.

Mr. Frelick said these claims are “disingenuous” and “don’t actually describe the situation on the ground.”

“In order to get to the Bulgarian entry crossing, you have to exit Turkey, but you can’t leave the exit control without a passport and documents,” he said.

The issue is particularly evocative in Europe, where the dream of a continent "united, whole and free" seemed to come to pass with the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in 1989. But an illegal immigration crisis spawned by unrest across the Middle East has put new strains on countries like Spain, Italy and Hungary to step up control of their borders.

More than 110,000 requests for asylum have been filed this year in Hungary, officials said earlier this month — more than double the number of requests last year, when Hungary received the second-largest number of illegal immigrants per capita of any country in the European Union.

Hungary's porous border with Serbia has allowed an influx of migrants, who subsequently make their way to other EU countries. Officials estimate that 95 percent of illegal immigrants who enter Hungary leave for other areas in Europe — such as Denmark and Germany — before their asylum requests can be fully processed. Hungary received 42,777 asylum requests in 2014.

"A significant number of those who we send [to refugee centers] never arrive at the institution," said Zsuzsanna Vegh, Hungary's top immigration official. She added that the centers are providing shelter to about 4,500 refugees, double their normal capacity.

But other EU states have condemned the planned wall, and opposition to the steel-mesh barrier is also strong in neighboring Serbia.

"Building walls is not the solution," said Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic. "I do not understand this decision, and I intend to talk about the issue with our European Union partners."

EU spokeswoman Natasha Bertaud questioned the wisdom of Hungary's proposal, saying the European Union "does not promote the use of fences and encourages member states to use alternative measures."

"We have only recently taken down walls in Europe. We should not be putting them up," Ms. Bertaud said.

Amnesty International also has weighed in, claiming that Hungary would be violating refugees' rights to seek asylum.

"Hungary had announced a series of measures intending to restrict that Hungary would be violating refugees' right to seek asylum access to asylum in the country both physically — through the construction of a fence — and through the introduction of legislation that would facilitate the denial of asylum to asylum-seekers," the organization claims in a recent report.

Mr. Trump has not backed down in the face of a backlash to his claim that he would build a wall along the entire 1,954-mile length of the U.S. border with Mexico — and to make the Mexicans pay for its construction.

“The Mexican government has taken the United States to the cleaners,” the Republican presidential front-runner wrote in his just-released policy paper on immigration. “They are responsible for this problem, and they must help pay to clean it up. We will not be taken advantage of anymore.”

But the wall proposal once again isn’t improving relations with the nation on the outside looking in.

Eduardo Sanchez, spokesman for Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, told the Bloomberg news service that the Mexican government opposed the wall idea and had no intention of footing the bill if Mr. Trump is elected.

“Of course it’s false,” Mr. Sanchez said. “It reflects an enormous ignorance for what Mexico represents, and also the irresponsibility of the candidate who’s saying it.”

• *Carleton Bryant contributed to this article, which was based in part on wire service reports.*

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