

‘Scared for our lives’: grave concerns over safety of refugees detained by Ukraine

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Campaigners are calling for the release of all foreign nationals being held, as conditions deteriorate after the Russian invasion

Human rights groups are calling for the urgent release of detainees in Ukrainian immigration centres, after allegations that conditions have dangerously deteriorated since the Russian invasion in February.

At least 45 people are thought to remain in the EU-funded [Zhuravychi migrant accommodation centre](#), a former army barracks situated in a pine forest in the Volyn province, according to the international NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW).

Nadia Hardman, a researcher in the refugee and migrant rights division at HRW, who interviewed several men detained at Zhuravychi over the phone, said they were “locked up in a war zone” and were “justifiably terrified”.

“They could see sometimes, from the TV, where the war was, but obviously, they don’t have an updated idea. And then there’s the sounds of war that they could hear, and they have no idea how far away that is or what that means,” she added.

The centre is one hour from Lutsk and two hours from the border with Belarus. An airfield in Lutsk was [hit by a Russian airstrike](#) on 11 March, which killed two soldiers and injured six others, according to Yuri Pohuliaiko, head of the Volyn regional state administration.

All of those detained in the centre were traumatised, said Hardman, some having escaped war in their own countries. When HRW conducted the interviews there were more than 100 men being held from up to 15 different countries, including Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Bangladesh.

The Guardian spoke to a former detainee, Mohammed*, who was released from the centre on 18 March. “It’s horrible – it’s not for immigrants, it’s for prisoners. It kills your mind; you only sit, eat, sleep. You can’t think well. I struggled to sleep – you just stay awake,” he said over the phone.

The situation got worse once the war started, and conditions inside the centre began to deteriorate, according to Mohammed.

“We were scared for our lives,” said the 26-year-old, who did not wish to disclose his nationality. “All of us immigrants, we got together and we asked the guards to call their boss and someone came down and we said, ‘Civilians are evacuating from [Ukraine](#), we should be allowed to leave too. Just release us.’ They told us no. They took our phones, but we managed to hide one and they beat us. They were laughing at us.”

A video filmed by one of the detainees and seen by the Guardian shows a man lying on the ground, allegedly after being beaten by a guard.

Mohammed says he heard explosions while he was detained and that there was nowhere to hide as the centre does not have a bomb shelter.

"When the war started, the military came and took over one of the two buildings [in the centre]. The immigrants that were living there had to relocate to another building. We saw a lot of tanks, a lot of military equipment, a lot of troops. We were so scared. It was 10 metres from us," he said.

Michael Flynn, director of the Global Detention Project (GDP), said: "There is no justification for keeping migrants and refugees in administrative detention in situations of active warfare."

He added that international law clearly indicates the necessity of releasing detainees from these centres. "The laws of war, the Geneva conventions, require all sides in a conflict to take necessary precautions to shield all civilians under their control from the dangers of the conflict."

HRW said it is gravely concerned for the safety of those still detained and believes they are at serious risk. Hardman said they are calling on Ukraine and the EU to release those detained and for neighbouring countries, such as Poland, to allow all foreign nationals fleeing Ukraine to enter and claim asylum.

A volunteer from the Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals (GSTS), who was in touch with a group of male detainees in March, said that along with about 100 men, there were 30 women being held separately, some with children, the youngest of whom was four. The men told her that when the war started they were given dirty water which caused people to become ill and food was limited. Most of the detainees lived off a piece of bread a day, she said.

Mohammed had been studying in Ukraine when he was caught by the immigration authorities for trying to work – which is not allowed – and threatened with deportation. "At that time, my country was in war – it still is – I couldn't go back so I decided to cross the border into Romania." But he was caught by Romanian border guards and taken back to Ukraine.

He was sentenced by a court to six months' detention and sent to Zhuravychi on 2 November 2021. He was released only after his embassy intervened. Other embassies have also helped in the release of some detainees, including those from Bangladesh and India.

Mohammed said he is "100% sure" that there are people still being detained. "Some of the people tried to contact their embassy using our phone, but now we are gone. They need help. I don't know why they keep them there. If they release us without going to court, why not them?"

He added that the guards said they would give the detainees Ukrainian passports "right now" if they agreed to fight the Russians. "It wasn't a joke, they were serious. We said no, we're refugees."

The Guardian has approached the Zhuravychi detention facility and the Ukrainian authorities for comment.

The volunteer from GSTS said some of those that were released from the centre in the first few days of the war are now being held in a detention centre in Poland, after they were arrested attempting to cross the Polish border, but these claims could not be verified.

There are two other immigration detention centres in Ukraine – one in Chernihiv, until recently under siege, where GDP believes people have been released. The other is Mykolayiv PTPI (or

Nikolaev Temporary Stay) in Voznesensky district in the south, near Odesa. GDP were able to confirm that it remained in operation with detainees as of two weeks ago.

** Name has been changed*

Jessie Williams

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P.S.

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