

27 August 2020

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Smear campaign, online threats, and harassment against migrant rights defender Zehida Bihorac

Since the beginning of August, migrant rights defender Zehida Bihorac has been facing an intensifying smear campaign and threats from Facebook users from her region.

[Zehida Bihorac](#) is an elementary school teacher and human rights defender from the Una-Sana Canton, located at the EU-border between Bosnia and Croatia. In 2018, she began to provide medicine, clothes, food and sleeping bags to the neglected refugee camps in and around her hometown Velika-Kladusa. In June 2020, she gave a speech in front of the Austrian parliament to report human rights abuses against refugees at the border and the backlash that volunteers face from the police and local residents.

On 20 August 2020, a Facebook user commented in the group *doček migrantna* (Migrants Welcome) that Zehida Bihorac was an “immoral women”, who is “sweating to go from man to man, I wonder if such a person is suitable to work at school with our children and grandchildren.” Other posts in the same Facebook group contain detailed descriptions on how refugees and those who help them should be killed. One user posted a picture of a metal baton with the caption “We should first beat up the helpers”. Others have also taken and posted pictures of her talking to refugees. On 24 August 2020, Zehida Bihorac filed a complaint against the individuals behind these and other Facebook posts at the local police station. To date, no action has been taken.

While this is not the first time the human rights defender is facing defamatory comments online, the smear campaign has intensified over the past number of weeks, especially since the Una Sana Canton government imposed severe restrictions on freedom of movement on already marginalised migrants and asylum seekers not living in the official reception centres. This includes bans on transportation and gatherings of migrants and asylum seekers, and a prohibition on providing them with private accommodation. The measures are enforced by roadblocks, interception of buses and raids of houses and squats by police and private vigilante groups, forcibly removing migrants without providing alternative accommodation.

In June and July this year, the police followed Zehida Bihorac and stopped her car on several occasions when she was driving from or towards the border, asking questions and accusing her of aiding illegal immigration, insinuating that she would be arrested soon. They also filmed her when she visited the refugee camps. On the evening of 18 June 2020, the human rights defender met refugees to distribute backpacks with food and medicine. Two minutes after she left the meeting spot, police cars with their sirens turned on arrived, blocked the road and asked the refugees about Zehida Bihorac.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned by the ongoing smear campaign and threats against Zehida Bihorac and other human rights defenders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who have been facing increasing hostility both from the authorities and the general population since the beginning of the migration crisis of 2018.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw your attention to Article 6 (b and c): *“Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others: (b) As provided for in human rights and other applicable international instruments, freely to publish, impart or disseminate to others views, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms; (c) To study, discuss, form and hold opinions on the observance, both in law and in practice, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and, through these and other appropriate means, to draw public attention to those matters”*, and to Article 12 (2): *“The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.”*

Please inform us of any actions that may be taken with regard to the above case.

Yours sincerely,



Andrew Anderson

Executive Director