

21 September 2020

Bosnia Herzegovina: Assault and intimidation of migrant rights defender Zehida Bihorac

On 17 September 2020, unidentified individuals violently threatened **Zehida Bihorac** on a country road outside of her hometown Velika Kladusa, after filming her, and pursuing her in their vehicle.

[Zehida Bihorac](#) is an elementary school teacher and woman 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 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 residents.

On the evening of 17 September 2020, Zehida Bihorac went to distribute humanitarian aid in one of the forest camps outside of Velika Kladusa, where a small group of refugees are living in dire conditions. She noticed two parked cars and two men nearby filming her with their phones. Zehida Bihorac took a picture of them and got into her own car to leave. One of the vehicles, a red Volkswagen, then followed her on the quiet country road. At a wider section of the road, the car outpaced her and blocked her path, forcing the woman human rights defender to stop her car. The driver and two other people, presumably his wife and teenage son, exited the vehicle and approached hers, shouting insults and threats, and calling her a “traitor to her country”. The man hit the bonnet and windshield with his hands before Zehida Bihorac managed to turn her car around and escape. They followed her until she reached the local police station, where she filed a complaint. The next day, Zehida Bihorac handed over video footage from a security camera to the police, showing the red car pursuing her.

The assailants belong to a private vigilante group who search the area for temporary refugee camps on a daily basis and are known for their violent behaviour towards migrants and volunteers. Since August 2020, when the Una Sana Canton government imposed severe restrictions on already marginalised refugee communities who do not live in official reception centres, there have been increasing reports of violence perpetrated by these vigilante groups, harassing and beating up refugees and burning their tents and belongings.

Zehida Bihorac has been facing an intensifying online [smear campaign](#), threats and intimidation attempts since July 2020. Members of anti-immigration Facebook groups regularly post her personal information and pictures online, and she has repeatedly been followed and filmed in recent weeks. She was furthermore followed and stopped by the police on several occasions in June and July 2020.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the assault and intimidation of human

rights defender Zehida Bihorac, as it believes that she was targeted solely for her legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights of people on the move.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Bosnia Herzegovina to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into assault of Zehida Bihorac, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Ensure that the ongoing investigation into the online threats and intimidation against Zehida Bihorac be thorough and impartial;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Zehida Bihorac and her family members;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Bosnia Herzegovina can carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

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