



Syrian refugee Abd al-Razzak Dasher stands with his children at an informal tent settlement in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon March 12, 2021. As Syria marks 10 years of devastating conflict, the country is in economic and social shambles with millions of people displaced and millions more living below the poverty line. (CNS photo/Mohamed Azakir, Reuters)

by The Associated Press

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Poland's influential Catholic Church appealed Monday for humanitarian assistance for migrants from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere who have been seeking to reach Europe by crossing from Belarus into Poland.

Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki, the president of the Polish Bishops' Conference, called for permission to launch humanitarian corridors in order to control the relocation of refugees and put an end to a chaotic migration happening "at the hands of gangs of smugglers."

Church authorities have been largely aligned with Poland's conservative government and the statement appeared to be an unusual reproach of how the state authorities have been handling the migration crisis.

Warsaw has responded to the large-scale migration with a tough approach, refusing to let migrants apply for asylum and pushing some back across the border into Belarus. Those policies violate international law, but the Polish government argues that it must protect the nation's borders and security in the face of a "hybrid war" attack from Belarus.

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People have been getting trapped at the border, suffering thirst, hunger and exhaustion. There are reports of several deaths from exposure. Many Poles were horrified last week at images of children, including toddlers, who arrived in Poland only to be sent back to Belarus.

"The right and duty to defend the state borders can be reconciled with bringing help to people who find themselves in dramatic situations," Gadecki wrote in his appeal.

Poland's right-wing government accuses Belarus of facilitating the large-scale migration into Poland to create instability in the European Union. Poland and other EU countries — particularly Lithuania and Latvia, which also border Belarus and have seen migrants enter their countries — believe it is revenge for EU sanctions against the government of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Top government officials have portrayed some of the migrants as dangerous criminals, terrorists or people with sexual perversions. Meanwhile, those Poles who

criticize the government's approach have been accused of siding with Lukashenko against their own nation.

Gadecki said that the authorities have the duty to detect potential threats from people crossing the country's borders, but shouldn't stigmatize newcomers by making harmful generalizations.

He recalled the Christian duty to help migrants and refugees.

He also expressed his gratitude for the help given to Afghans who were evacuated by the Polish authorities as the Taliban seized control of Kabul.