

Africans trying to exit Ukraine battle racism

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Africans trying to escape Ukraine into neighbouring countries as a result of the war ongoing in the country after Russia invaded and a war ensued have been forced to come face-to-face with varying degrees of segregation and blatant racism. Several videos of clusters of Africans left behind, or dragged out of train cars and buses, by law enforcement agents to make space for their white counterparts have surfaced online.

People facing these unpleasant circumstances have taken to social media to register their frustrations through the hashtag #Africansinukraine. Thousands of Africans from countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Somalia and other countries languish under the disproportionate cold of eastern Europe as they wait at transit points and the border.

A Nigerian medical student at Poland/Ukraine border (Medyka-Shehyni) told me she has been waiting 7hrs to cross, she says border guards are stopping black people and sending them to the back of the queue, saying they have to let 'Ukrainians' through first.

— Stephanie Hegarty (@stephhegarty) February 26, 2022

While some have been lucky to get into neighbouring countries, others have had it worse, having to

wait for endless hours morphing into days because border officers keep turning them away. This has generated untold fear and confusion in friends and families of the affected, who can do very little but pray and hope for safekeeping, back home.

Train to Poland got here, I and other two Africans entered first, few mins later, the police came in and dragged us down from our cabin. Only Ukrainians are allowed.

I don't blame them, though. I blame African leaders.

— Nze (@nzemmili) February 25, 2022

The official visuals of Ukrainians blocking Africans from getting on trains.
#AfricansinUkraine pic.twitter.com/hJYpM3LY0A

— Deechi (@DamilareArah) February 26, 2022

"I am feeling concerned now especially as I've been hearing how black people have been treated. I didn't think there was anything to be concerned about until Twitter accounts started talking about it. I'm not particularly handling it well, but I've just pushed it to the back of my mind," said Pascal Atuma, a Lagos-based Nigerian ghostwriter who has been unable to reach out to his friend since the war broke out.

Those waiting are gathered in the freezing cold or underground stations as they anxiously wait for the next sway of events. Social media posts show that many are waiting without access to groceries, bathroom, WiFi, food, proper shelter and other essentials. Of the waiting bulk, Nigerian students studying in various Ukrainian universities total up to about four thousand. Ghanaian students are more than one thousand according to the Ghanaian ministry of foreign affairs.

The Nigerian government and many of its African colleagues have come under serious criticism for not being proactive enough about the issue before the situation hit the roofs and the Ukrainian airspace became dangerous to access for probable airlifting and evacuation. Those who have crossed to safety are housed in shelters provided by generous people, local governments, African foreign missions and the association of Nigerians in the diaspora.

In a video obtained by BBC Africa, Jessica, a Nigerian student who has escaped and is now taking shelter in Debrecen, Hungary, as at February 28, shared her traumatising experience saying "It wasn't easy."

On Friday, she was headed for Poland in a taxi. After travelling for some time, the taxi couldn't continue the journey due to the long queue of cars, most of whom had been there for two days or more. She checked her Google map which erroneously informed her that she was only one hour away from the border.

Jessica told herself that a one-hour walk is nothing if it gets them there on time. And we walked and it kept increasing. She ended up walking for 12 hours. The term 'walking' is traumatising me, she

added.

"A traffic warden saw me and said I should go to a shelter to sleep and I slept and he said that on the next day, there is a bus going from that shelter straight to the Polish border. But when it was time to get on the said bus, the Ukrainians said 'just Ukrainians'. I even lied that I was pregnant, they didn't care. I was begging."

The official looked her in the eye and said in his language: "Only Ukrainians, that's all. that if you are black, you should walk." That means that Jessica and other black people present had to trek for an additional eight hours from where they were. By car, it would have taken them just thirty minutes.

Then at the borders, she and the others were turned away. Jessica maintained that the problem wasn't with the Polish officers as indicated in some online feeds, rather, it was the Ukrainian agents sending the black people back so as to make space for Ukrainians.

"The problem isn't at the Polish border, it is at the Ukrainian border because you have to stamp out at the Ukrainian border to get to the Polish side and the Ukrainians are only prioritising their citizens. They don't care, they will push you, they will beat you. If you can make it, you make it, if you don't, you don't."

Several hours after making it out of Ukraine, she still carries the heavyweight of her experience. She took a nap and in sleep, it still felt like she was trekking. It was as if she hadn't crossed over at all.

"It wasn't even easy getting a train to Hungary, we had to pay. Those that didn't have money to pay, what would they do? I couldn't help anybody because I was fighting for my life. It is a traumatising experience and I don't know where I am going from now," Jessica said, the trauma still alive in her tone.

Samuel Aghalino, a professor of History and International Studies at the University of Ilorin said that the racism being faced by Africans at the borders is a representation of the 'African tragedy' that has continued to manifest in every ramification. He explained that Africans seek admission abroad because of the slim admission slots in African universities and the inconsistent academic calendar, especially in Nigeria where lecturers engage in perennial industrial actions.

"Most African leaders do not owe their rulership to the people. They see evacuating their citizens as just trying to be good rather than seeing it as an obligation. In any case, do they have the capacity to even evacuate? What kind of diplomatic relationships do they have with the warring countries, with the proxy nations around Russia and Ukraine where their citizens can be evacuated?" he asked.

"The Nigerian state is not really there for our people because ordinarily when the war started, the government did not act immediately. Sovereign nations should do everything within their powers to evacuate their people from the points of war," said Aghalino who added that the war is a serious threat to global peace and stability.

Meanwhile, people online are holding live Twitter conversations and trying to raise funds to get help to those in need. There are designated Telegram groups through which transportation and relief materials are coordinated. Daemeah Gartayé Karbeah, a Liberian-American living in the United States, told OlongoAfrica that her motivation is to see everyone concerned get to safety.

"I'm trying to help because this is just an unfortunate situation to be in and no one deserves that. I'm motivated by the hope I have that eventually, all Black students will be able to get out of Ukraine and reach somewhere safe," she explained.

The latest press release by the Nigerian and Ghanaian ministries of foreign affairs indicates that efforts to bring citizens home is finally underway and reports have surfaced that Africans are now being allowed into contiguous countries.

Pèlúmi Sàlàkó is a Nigerian writer and journalist. His reports, published in English, Spanish and French, have appeared in *Al Jazeera*, *Reuters*, *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, *Popula*, *African Business Magazine*, *Sahelien* and elsewhere. He is on Twitter @SalakoBabaa.

