

Belgium: Accommodation Shortage Leaves Men in the Cold, Court Insists on Reception Conditions, Charities Launch Judicial Challenge, Media Access Curtailed

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Thousands of people have been left destitute and sleeping rough in Belgium over the past month due to a lack of reception places. The reception crisis has restricted access to asylum procedures and accommodation facilities, forcing asylum seekers to go to court to enforce their rights. Organisations supporting asylum seekers have responded with protests outside the office of the asylum minister, [an online petition](#), as well as a judicial challenge. It was reported that Fedasil, the Belgian asylum agency, is blocking journalists from reporting from inside the centre.

According to estimates by ECRE member Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (Flemish Refugee Action), “more than [2,000 people](#), mostly single men have been left destitute” since the start of October. Many have unsuccessfully queued outside Petit Château, a centre in Brussels which is the only place where people can apply for asylum in Belgium. About a [1,000](#) were not able to apply for asylum on the day

they went to the arrival centre. According to the government, the crisis is partly due to the re-allocation of places to the victims of [catastrophic floods](#) over the summer, as well as the reception of Afghan evacuees. The government has also blamed the pandemic, saying that quarantine measures pose limits on numbers and that would-be Dublin transferees are refusing the Covid tests necessary for their removal from Belgium. Critics however point the finger at the authorities' poor management of the reception network, highlighted by a staff [strike](#) in October. Minors, vulnerable people and families have been prioritised for access to the centre, meaning the people sleeping outside are exclusively single men. The Secretary responsible for asylum, Sammy Mahdi, claims that alternative facilities have or soon will be prepared, but that they face opposition from municipalities and residents. Mahdi has resolutely opposed the idea of [accommodating](#) asylum seekers in hotels as an emergency measure.

Under EU law, basic reception conditions are the right of every person waiting for an application to be processed. Between 29 October and 19 November, [Belgian courts](#) found that, in 92 cases asylum seekers were unable to access reception conditions on the day they arrived. Reception conditions can only be accessed once a person's asylum claim has been registered: despite queuing for weeks, many men have been unable to access an asylum procedure. On 30 November, [150 men](#) were permitted to register as asylum seekers. However, they were not provided with a reception place, to which they are entitled.

On 24 November, protesters [camped](#) outside the office of Sammy Mahdi to denounce the situation in an action coordinated by Flemish Refugee Action and Amnesty International. The activists decried the government's failure to act, saying the priority had to be the immediate housing of all those outside the centre as temperatures drop. The organisation CIRÉ (Coordination et Initiatives pour Réfugiés et Étrangers) announced in mid-November that a dozen NGOs were taking the state to [court](#) over insufficient reception capacity and the failure to register asylum seekers.

Journalists reported on [1 December](#) that Fedasil was preventing journalists from reporting on the allegedly overcrowded conditions within the centre. Three days earlier, [police](#) demolished a makeshift camp built by asylum seekers from blankets and cardboard in an attempt to disperse the people outside the centre.

For further information:

- ECRE, [Belgium: Asylum Seekers \(Once Again\) Left Destitute](#), October 2021
- AIDA, [Country Update Belgium 2020](#), April 2021

Photo: Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, November 2021

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