

‘Ugly racial discrimination’ at Ukraine border, foreign students claim



Nigerian students Simeon Gbenga (far right) and Bridget (second from right) with their friends at Przemysl Główny Station, Poland.

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Ukrainians are so fearful and stressed from Russia’s reign of terror that they are racially discriminating against Africans and Indians trying to flee the country, foreign students claim.

In the chaos of train departures from Kyiv and Lviv into Poland -first stop Przemysl Główny - a flourishing trading town just across the border, passengers are recounting long hours of horror, “packed so tight like a fish in a can”.

But five Nigerian students have told The Australian of “ugly racial discrimination” in the mayhem where Ukrainian border guards use their weapons to separate first the white women with children, then the white women, then white families, with anybody of colour relegated so far to the back of the line it is taking days to get onto trains.



Refugees arrive at Przemysl Glowny Station, Poland after their long journey from Ukraine. 27 February 2022.

Other non-white nationalities, particularly Indians, have also claimed that they are being held hostage by Ukrainian border guards and are not being allowed into Poland because India did not support the United Nations resolution castigating Russia's war aggression.

Social media has been flooded with dismayed Indians, many of them medical students, who have been prevented from leaving the country. On Sunday night the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi chaired a meeting about staging a rescue mission for Indian nationals inside Ukraine.

The Australian was on the Poland-Ukraine border and spoke to Nigerian Simeon Gbenga, a languages student in Kyiv, and his friend Bridget, a mother of five, who had finally scrambled onto a train -their fourth attempt - along with their student friends on Saturday, arriving into Poland, some 650kms away. It had been a long 14 hours.

But Bridget's brother and some of their colleagues still haven't been able to board a train and escape the bombing because they keep getting shunted to the back of the long queue in the Ukrainian capital,

"The reason they treated us so badly was because some people can't handle the pressure and the fear," said Bridget.



Simeon Gbenga and Bridget at Przemysl Glowny Station, Poland.

“A policeman took me off the train even though they had called for women to come forward, they took me off because I am black.”

Bridget then said when she was able to secure a passage, that Ukrainians on board were hostile.

“One lady was bullying us and I just said to her ‘what is your problem, why do you shout, do you think we are happy, we are not happy either,’” recalled Bridget.

“They only care about their own people, they forget that we are part of their country too.”

Once on the train there are long six hour delays at the border as immigration officials process entry visas. Several passengers have told The Australian that border guards ask for bribes in order to stamp passports quicker. Others have described how “white” people were given priority over the “others”.



Refugees arrive at Przemysl Glowny Station, Poland after their long journey from Ukraine.

But once inside Poland, the experience was completely different, the students said.

“We have been loved in Poland: people here provide food, bottles of water, clothing, sim cards, shelter, they will help you get train tickets for another journey,” said Simeon.

Simeon, 28, said he decided he had to leave Ukraine on Friday night after a neighbour hammered on his door to wake him up, only to then hear and feel two bomb blasts. One blast wave caused his legs to vibrate, Simeon said. He left all his belongings, including a pot of soup he had left on the stove, to travel as light as possible.

One Ukrainian who was waiting for relatives off the evening train amid a huge crowd of people at Przemysl denied any racism by his countrymen.

“The only Ukrainian people who are able to leave the country are women and children and old men, so anyone who is younger and more able is always going to be at the back,” the man, who declined to give his name, said.

“It is not discrimination based on race, but a priority based on need.”