

Syrian refugees looking for European haven face bitter reality in Bulgaria

With all doors rapidly closing shut, tens of thousands of refugees from war-torn Syria end up in the EU's poorest state.

By Boaz Arad | 09:18 11.04.14 | 2

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SOFIA - Armed security personnel chain smoke cigarettes while standing outside an abandoned elementary school in Voenna Rampa, a grey, forlorn industrial zone in the northern suburbs of Sofia. As dozens of workers paint the outside walls of the neglected structure, over 800 refugees from the Syrian civil war sit inside, including many children and babies. No paint, no matter how cheerful the color, could do much to change the desperate reality these people face.

There are no beds in this improvised refugee camp, only thick wooden boards scattered about the floors of the school's classrooms and gymnasium, covered with rough, military-issue blankets. Shabby sheets hang from laundry lines to form walls. The bathrooms are filthy. The drains are clogged. Wet clothes hang in the hallways. Groups of restless young men hang around in the yard. Many of them have been here for months. Last winter, they say, the temperatures in the classrooms dropped well below zero. The heating worked exactly twice.

No one meant to come here, to the poorest nation in the European Union, which suffers from 13 percent unemployment, and features an average salary slightly above 350 Euro per month. This is country that barely manages to deal with its own internal problems – like hundreds of thousands of Roma living in devastating poverty in slums outside big cities – let alone handle absorbing foreign refugees. The Turkish smugglers who took from them what little they had on their way out of Syria promised them that as soon as they set foot on EU soil, they would be on the road to the promised land: Germany. But they're a long way from Germany.

Doors slamming shut

Over three million people have fled Syria since the start of the civil war. Over 2.6 million are registered as refugees. According to official UN estimations, they will number 4.1 million by year's end, over 20 percent of the Syrian population. Another 6.5 million Syrians are defined as displaced persons, wandering about Syria looking for shelter, refugees in their own country, a country preying on its own people, tearing them to pieces, and vomiting out what's left.

The makeshift refugee camps hastily constructed over the last three years outside of the Syrian valley of death are overflowing: poor villages in Lebanon are collapsing under the burden of a million Syrian refugees – a quarter of the country's original population. The Syrian refugees in Jordan number around 600,000, with another 600,000 in Turkey. About 35,000 have made it to Algeria.

The UN Refugee Agency has made incredible efforts to find other states – primarily within the EU – willing to absorb Syrian refugees. Germany and Sweden, two of the most generous EU states, have each taken in about 60,000 people, but have recently begun closing their gates. As the war rages on, and as the refugees' situation deteriorates, more and more doors are slammed shut. Austria, France and England, for example, announced that they are willing to take in only 500 refugees each, for the time being. Spain committed to absorbing exactly 130. Greece, which for years served as an entrance for illegal migrants and refugees into the EU, put up a huge, four meter barbed wire fence along the 10 kilometer border it shares with Turkey over two years ago. Greece's border and coast guard violently turns away refugee ships that try to come in through the Mediterranean.

The only open hole in Europe's otherwise fortified borders is a thirty-something-kilometer strip of woody, harsh terrain in southeastern Bulgaria, along the Turkish border. In the past, no more than 1,000 people a year would manage to sneak in through this area, many of them illegal African migrants. But since the Greeks finished building their fence, at least 1,000 enter into Bulgaria this way, almost all of them Syrian refugees. Over the last year alone, about 10,000 Syrians made their way into Bulgaria. It costs between \$400 and \$500 for a ride to the forest border under cover of darkness, and from there, the refugees go it alone, in the dark, until they encounter Bulgarian soldiers. The next ride is to the office of the local intelligence service, and from there, they are sent out to the various refugee camps set up throughout the country.

Harsh world outside

The first waves of refugees caught the Bulgarians with their pants down: The tent camps that were hastily erected near the border quickly overflowed. The harsh Bulgarian winter hit the poor refugees with everything it had: below-freezing temperatures, harsh rains, snow and sickness. Pictures that came out of camps like Harmanli, 50 kilometers from the Turkish border, look like they were taken in a disaster zone. Bulgaria, which desperately wants to become a full-fledged member in the Schengen Agreement, seemed to the other members like a third-world country.

Just during the last two months and a significant drop in illegal migration, the Bulgarian government agencies have the manpower they need to deal with the refugees, in the form of dozens of retired military officers. With a great deal of financial and logistical aid from the European Parliament and the UN Refugee Agency, the situation in the refugee camps has begun to improve. But in the meantime, it seems that the Syrian's biggest problem is not the appalling conditions. It seems that their worst troubles start when they leave the camps.

It takes the Bulgarian authorities about six months on average to grant the Syrian refugees humanitarian protection status, which comes in the form of a document permitting them to live and work in Bulgaria for three years, in accordance with the circumstances in Syria. Almost every Syrian in Bulgaria gets one of these documents in the end, and when they do, they are required to immediately leave the camps and make room for new refugees.

Then they are hit with the bitter reality: No one is there to greet them when they leave the camps. As soon as they are granted official status, they are thrown into the streets. The paltry 30 Euro per month subsidy they had received until then is gone, as is the free health insurance they had in the camps. Apartments? Work? You're on your own. There is no organized plan for integration. There is no government agency that can be approached with requests for help. The worst part, is that there's nowhere to run.

In contrast to what they're told in Turkey, the status they receive does not allow them to legally reside or work anywhere in the EU, or even travel. Even assuming they somehow manage to cross the border and reach more advanced countries, the Dublin Regulation prevents them from filing another request for status. In recent months, dozens of refugees caught attempting to cross the border into Romania on their way to Germany were stopped in their tracks and forced to turn around.

One refugee, a father of five, asks a social worker while touring the Kovachevtsi refugee camp, south of Sofia, "tell me please, what I'm supposed to do, where I'm supposed to go. Why don't you let me leave the country?" The social worker groans. We aren't preventing you from leaving here, she gently explains. But the other states aren't letting them enter.

Powder keg

Over 4,000 Syrian refugees are living in Sofia, outside of the camps. Multiple families with many children share tiny apartments, rented to them at inflated prices. The women and children stay at home while the men, most of them without post-high school education, labor skills, spoken English or Bulgarian take to the streets in attempts to find work. Few succeed, and work temporarily in Arab-owned shops in the city. Most of them remain unemployed, and the little savings that still remained from Syria quickly run out.

This time bomb is about to explode, warn human rights organizations in Bulgaria. The refugees are getting more desperate by the day. On the other side, many Bulgarians are losing patience with the increasingly high number of unemployed young men roaming the streets, and their opinions are getting more and more extreme.

Forty percent of Bulgarians, according to a Gallup poll, oppose absorbing more Syrian refugees, and would support deporting those that have already been absorbed. The nationalist, anti-Semitic, anti-Romanian and anti-Arab ATAKA party, which already holds 23 seats in the Bulgarian parliament, has gained much more support in recent months.

“Why should we care about their problems,” wrote one individual as a comment on a news article about the refugees featured on a major Bulgarian news website. “They should go back home to Syria.”

'Could I get refugee status in Israel?'

Inside of a tent erected on the soccer field outside of the school in Voenna Rampa, a group of Israeli activists from the organization IsraAID distribute packages filled with medicine, diapers, and hygiene products donated by the Bnai Br'it International, American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the German Shai Fund. It has been a few months since IsraAID post-trauma experts began treating Syrian refugees in camps in Jordan, and now they are looking to do the same in Bulgaria.

During a few days in March, IsraAID staff managed, with the help of the Bulgarian branch of Bna'I Brit, to make connections with senior officials in the government's refugee agency, the social welfare department of the Sofia municipality and the local branch of the Red Cross. Together, they've begun building a comprehensive plan of action aimed at preparing local professionals to help deal with the emotional problems facing the Syrian refugees in their midst.

“You're from Israel,” one of the refugees asked, surprised, after he recognized the blue Stars of David on the aid packages, and his eyes lit up after being answered in the affirmative.

“Could I get refugee status in your country?” he asked, innocently. “I'm willing to go wherever they'll take me. I just want to get out of this country.”

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