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From Africa to Europe: Africans seeking new life make epic trek through Balkans' back door

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ABSTRACT

North Africans seeking a better life in Europe face dangerous waters – but first, they've got to cross a treacherous sea of sand – arguably the most inhospitable place on earth – the Sahara Desert. Hundreds upon hundreds run the gauntlet every week. Some are caught, some die – but encouraging all who want to leave poverty behind, some do make it.

Keywords: Africa; Europe; immigrants

1. INTRODUCTION

Fleeing wars, dictatorships, poverty. Willing to risk their own lives - often it is paid for dangerous path, during which they are at the mercy of smugglers. Mediterranean Sea has become a graveyard for thousands of immigrants from Africa and Asia, dreaming of entering into Europe. But the victims of this wandering is a lot more - refugees are dying from exhaustion, during raids, go to the brothels and slave labor.

A brief mention, some data, sometimes colored map with red arrows and black points, a pair of unpleasant pictures - and that's it. We knew it was happening, that is a problem. But in the face of so many dramas, has not attracted our attention. Until the nightmare in Lampedusa. Then the whole world looked at the marine cemetery at the gates of Europe.

October 3 near the small Italian island boat sank, two days earlier had sailed from the Libyan Misrata. On board were more than 500 Africans, mostly Somalis and Eritreans. They were heading to Europe. They had started in her new and better life. Even if illegally.

Rescuers managed to save only 160 of them. The rest of the body yet been rescued eight days.



20 thousand. Victims

According to international organizations, since 1990 when trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea killed 20,000 immigrants from the Third World. Last month in this respect was extremely tragic.

Four days before the events of Lampedusa, a Sicilian waves washed up on the beach body of thirteen men who forced smugglers to leaping into the water when their Lajb stuck on a sandbank. Less than two weeks later they drowned off the coast of Malta at least 33 people. After a few days the Italian and Maltese maritime services prevented another macabre, pulling off three boats drifting almost 400 refugees from Syria and Palestine.

The first reaction was shock and sympathy. Coast guards were placed in the highest readiness, the European Commission has offered additional help for the survivors, victims posthumously awarded Italian citizenship, lowered the flag. After a while, came some other reflections.

Cooperation Italy and Malta helped save hundreds of people now, but the rest of the EU has supported us just empty words. I do not know how many people must die at sea even before we understand that this is our common problem - complained to the Prime Minister of Malta Joseph Muscat.

Countries southern EU have long complained about the lack of solidarity from the rest of the community. This year alone escaped to Italy to 35,000 immigrants from Africa and the Middle East; 24000 meet the requirements necessary to receive asylum. Although for many of them the final destination countries are richer north, for a long time remain the only concern of the government in Rome.

Tragedies like the one in Lampedusa, take place every year, and the Union's response always looks the same: a call for unity and coordinated action - like Joanna Parkin from the Brussels think-tank Centre for European Policy Studies. - In practice, however, fails to determine what to do next - he added.

Berlin, London and Stockholm do not want to share the burden of patrolling the distant Mediterranean and the placement of migrants in transit camps. Weapons that eventually and so take more "illegal" than the rest of the Union. For Polish, Lithuanian and Czech topic is quite abstract. Proposals put forward by the southerners to distribute asylum seekers on all EU countries, meet on the east of eloquent silence. In this calculation is already little room for sympathy.



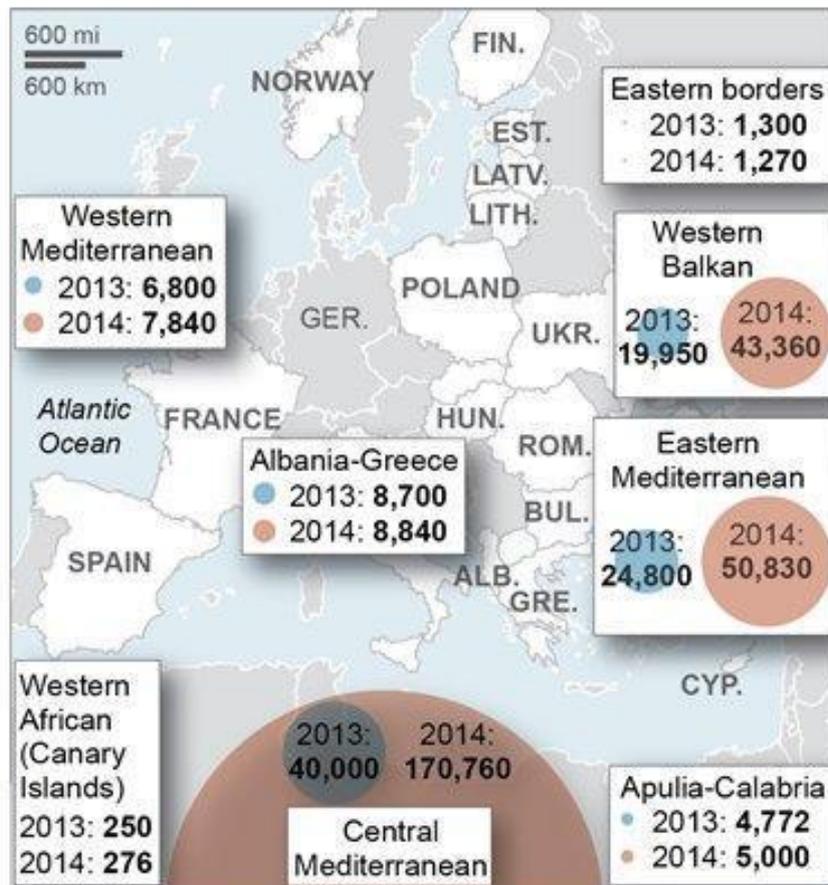
Photo. 1 Immigrants from Africa at the gates of Lampedusa, 2007. Photo: noBorder Network / Flickr.com

Spain couldn't deport Ndiaye because he had arrived without a passport. The police could have locked him up with the other men from the boat until the emigrants decided the life they'd left was better than another day in jail and told where they were from. But that would mean room and board, under guard, for 63 men, perhaps for months. And another few dozen when the next boat came. And the next. Spain had no solution - it still doesn't - and with Tenerife's population of just over 900,000, the island wasn't equipped to absorb so many new residents with limited language and, perhaps, employment skills. So for the moment, the official policy is just to leave people to their own devices on the streets of Madrid.

Ndiaye had set out on a journey taken by hundreds of thousands before him: West, North, and East Africa to Europe. The route he'd traveled, through the Canaries, is less popular today, largely because a couple of years after he landed there, many émigrés - estimates reach as high as 10,000 - started meeting their death on the way: The fishing skiffs they'd steered into the high seas were smashed by waves and sank, had engine trouble, or ran out of food and water.

Journey to Europe

Many countries in the European Union are experiencing an influx of illegal migrants through various routes.



The authorities shifted patrols to the region, and now the migrants are finding other routes. But redrawing the paths of migration hasn't made the trek any safer: In September, at least 360 people, nearly all from Eritrea, many of them children, perished in a shipwreck off the Italian island of Lampedusa, in the Mediterranean. Two weeks later, another, smaller group met the same fate near the same island.

The smugglers' vessels had left from Libya, meaning that to even get on board, the refugees had needed first to cross the Sahara. In Niger, in October, a truck convoy carrying a reported 92 emigrants toward Algeria's coast broke down, stranding its human cargo. One young woman would tell the BBC later about how she'd buried her mother and sister in the sand after they'd died of thirst - and by "buried," she meant she got down on her knees and dug a grave with her hands while barely clinging to life herself.

Residents of every nation in Africa and all but one in Asia - Malaysia, if you're wondering - need a visa to enter the European Union. Entry requirements of the United States are even more intimidating for most Africans.

Ndiaye applied unsuccessfully for visas from France, Italy, Spain, Holland, and Norway before booking illegal passage on a fishing boat.



Photo. 2 Immigrants moving.

Plans change, and plans sometimes aren't even made with much information, he said. He himself had started his trip hoping only to transit through Spain, and continue soon after to France, where he spoke the language. He never made it to the French border. After a few months, he said, he borrowed someone's identity card in Madrid, posed as that person, and got an on-book job picking fruits and vegetables. Spain was lax, he found, with fewer immigration sweeps and random searches than he'd heard would have greeted him in France. He said he nevertheless avoided going outside much in his first months in Madrid. After moving to Barcelona he found the police harassed him less.

Ndiaye lived roughly for half a decade. He fetched up in a *casa patera*, a "skiff house," essentially a squat occupied by Senegalese men and others who had come on boats and were living hand-to-mouth. A lot of the people there, a few dozen passing through at a time, were working as *chatareros*, collecting scrap metal (*chatarra*), 8 cents a pound resale value. A real estate boom in Spain, during the same period as the American one, increased demand for workers, and for much of the past decade, immigrants off the boats had provided it, building second homes for British and German retirees (Spain, in this way, is the Florida of Europe). Border officials had looked the other way when the builders and the banks that financed them needed the labor. When the bubble burst, around the time that Ndiaye arrived six years ago, and construction halted mid-condo, the same people who'd once worked building the houses turned around and started selling off the parts as scrap. These half-built homes, cheap renos, and public works projects designed as economic stimulus - Spain's unemployment rate, which has reached record numbers in recent years, is still a staggering 26.3 percent - left a lot of unused toilets and copper pipe lying around Barcelona's residential neighborhoods.

Chatarra is easy pickings, though hard work: the chatarreros walk miles daily, leaning heavily into shopping carts piled with pipe and I beams, refrigerators and bathtubs, bicycle wheels and patio chairs. So far, officials just let it go. In late November, a city council member in Barcelona proposed starting a nonprofit union for the chatarreros, arguing that they were unofficially doing a lot of the city's recycling work. He didn't mention that most of the metal scavengers were illegals.

Others in Ndiaye's squat had worked as *manteros*, members of bands in the city center who sell knock-off designer handbags and Messi jerseys to cruise ship tourists. (Yousouf, still in Tripoli, was earning his passage from one step below the *manteros*' - cleaning the stalls where knock-off designer handbags and European soccer jerseys are sold). As with the chatarreros, *mantero* culture also comes with a built-in irony. Like the West African sellers of counterfeit Italian brands with cheap Chinese sewing, their customers come off boats, too - cruise ships docked in Barcelona's harbor. They may well have passed in the night, for all they knew.

Manteros display their wares on blankets - *manta* in Spanish - with cords tied to the corners, like a parachute. If the police come, they can snatch the cord and gather up the whole sidewalk sale in one motion, throw it over a shoulder, and run. If the cops catch them, at minimum they will lose their merch. They can be placed in an immigration jail for as long as a year and a half, and after that, be deported.

"It's hard, but you have to put up with it," said Hadim, 24, a *mantero* hawking soccer jerseys with a group of others outside the Barcelona Apple store, on a busy plaza in the city center. He said he, 19 at the time, and his brother had arrived by plane on travel visas. Both their visas had expired years before.

“The customers are good to you, but if the cops catch you, they can give you a ticket, or there could be a trial.” The ticket was basically a pardon – a fine for selling illegally, but no immigration trouble. A “trial” though, meant immigration court, and possible deportation.

Hadim was calm but alert, scanning the sidewalk. He’d been assigned as lookout that day. “Maybe we can stay 10 minutes, maybe. When the cops come” — and the cops always come - “we run.”

Beside him was a subway station that’s busy at all hours with shoppers and commuters. Down below were another dozen West African manteros, their goods gathered in their blankets, hiding, waiting for the signal to rush upstairs and replace the previous group after it got chased off and the police moved on for ten minutes to check another spot favored by manteros. This retail ballet would go on all day.

Ndiaye had not worked as either scrap-metal collector or fake-handbag seller. “They would be doing similar jobs back in Dakar,” he said. The nondescript term “immigrant” smooths down too many differences among those who come off the boats, the only thing they had in common being that they had all been refused visas.

Ndiaye was a middle-class guy in Dakar. Forty-two the day he boarded the boat - he’s now 48 - he lived in a good neighborhood, drove a good car, and said he had no trouble paying the 750 euros the smuggler required for passage. He figured on a middle-class job in Barcelona, too, like the one he’d left at the communications company.

After six years of scratching a living from odd jobs, he learned of an NGO offering training for the restaurant industry and applied. “I always liked food,” he said. He liked the idea of a career more.

The NGO trained him to work as a chef’s assistant in a professional kitchen; it runs a restaurant where the trainees work. He passed the course. Now he’s completing an apprenticeship, at a restaurant uptown called, in a slightly too-perfectly European way, Café Amelie. It pays well enough that he has moved out of the *casa patera* and has his own place, a one bedroom, a short subway ride from work.

A few weeks after the tragedies in Lampedusa, Ndiaye filed papers with the Spanish government requesting legal residency. He’d already been in Spain nearly seven years. He can get by in Spanish and Catalan, but he still dreams in French and Wolof, the languages he grew up speaking. Everyone talks to him in fast, fluent Spanish anyway, because they don’t believe he’s Senegalese, and can’t imagine he came by boat. He looks too successful.

“They say, ‘You’re Dominican, right? Cuban?’” If he told them he was sleeping in a squat a few months ago, they wouldn’t easily believe it. If he told them he’d arrived on a *patera*, a smuggler’s boat, they’d say that wasn’t a funny joke at all.

Ndiaye hasn’t seen his family in person since boarding the boat off the beach that night in Dakar (though they talk often via Skype), with one exception. A year ago, as he started the restaurant training course, his father was diagnosed with a heart problem. The French government granted the ailing man a visa and he flew to Paris, where he was treated in a specialist hospital. After recuperating a few weeks, he came down to Spain, across the EU’s famously open borders, to see his son.

There, for a moment, were the two sides of migration to Europe. His father’s journey, by commercial airline to a French hospital, had saved the man’s life - the treatment he received was not available in the hospital in Dakar.

But the son's journey, on an unmarked boat, might have killed him. "I was lucky," the younger man says today. "I had a good boat. Water. Meat. Tea. When there was a leak, they patched it." Others, perhaps 25,000 of them, had not been so fortunate.

Ndiaye remains, he allows, a contradictory message. He had sailed, that night six years ago and a continent apart, over the corpses of thousands who had tried before him. Today he looks great: strong and ruddy-cheeked, with expensive-looking braids and designer eyeglasses. His papers seem likely to get approved because he has a job, speaks decent Spanish and Catalan, and has completed training for a middle-class job.

In Libya, where Yousouf awaits passage, Ndiaye's story could only be an inspiration. Here the Senegalese man sits, in a Barcelona café steps from Passeig de Gràcia, Barcelona's Fifth Avenue. The Camper shoe store is up the street. The Bulgari boutique is across it. He's wearing professional clothes, has an iPad in front of him, a new lease in a folder somewhere at his apartment, his residency application in the mail.

Ndiaye has already made it. Nonetheless, Ndiaye saidme he doesn't want to be an example for people still at home, dreaming of a life in Europe.

2. HUMAN TIDE

Each month, a tide of humanity pours through the hills of Greece, Macedonia and Serbia in hopes of entering the heart of the 28-nation European Union through its vulnerable back door in the Balkans. This is the newest of a half-dozen land and sea routes that Arab, Asian and African smugglers use to funnel migrants illegally from war zones and economic woes to opportunities in the West.

Most don't make it on their first attempt. Nor their third or fifth. Many, it seems, just keep trying — and failing — over and over.

The AP followed a group of migrants to document the challenges of the Western Balkans route, witnessing key events on the journey: the confrontations with police and locals, disagreements with the smuggler leading them and among themselves, and other difficulties along the way.

The flow of migrants has grown from a trickle in 2012 to become the second-most popular path for illegal immigration into Europe, behind only the more dangerous option of sailing from North Africa to Italy.

Frontex, the EU agency that helps governments police the bloc's leaky frontiers, says it appears nothing will deter migrants from trying the long walk that starts in northern Greece. Their monitors have detected more than 43,000 illegal crossings on the Western Balkans route in 2014, more than double the year before. And 2015 already looks on pace for a record number, with 22,000 arrivals in Hungary in the first two months.

One pivotal point for the route is Turkey, a magnet for refugees of wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The Turks provide easy travel visas to residents of most of Asia and Africa, too.

Another is EU neighbour Greece, where migrants can claim asylum and usually, after a short detention, are permitted to travel freely within the country. But few intend to stay in Greece, with its debt-crippled economy and locals' antipathy to the migrants.

"Europe has not faced a situation like this since World War II, with so many conflicts happening so near to home, with fallen states from Libya to Syria and unrelenting conflict in

Iraq and Afghanistan,” said Frontex spokeswoman Ewa Moncure. “And it’s a lot easier to take a boat from Turkey to Greece than to cross the open Mediterranean. Thousands drown taking the other route.”

3. FROM ABIDJAN TO ATHENS

“Never in my life was I even on a boat,” says Jean Paul Apetey, a 34-year-old Ivorian with a reputation as a sharp-witted opportunist. And so, when smugglers ask him if he wants to pilot the vessel to Greece in exchange for a free ticket, he goes straight to the stern engine of the rigid inflatable boat, overloaded with 47 migrants, and acts as if he knows what he is doing.

Smugglers rarely ride on one-way journeys, facing prison if caught. Instead, they charge €1,000 (\$1,360) or more per passenger, rich compensation for the sacrifice of a boat. The smugglers point Apetey to a Greek island in the distance — he doesn’t know if it’s Kos, Samos or Lesbos because he had no map — but boasts of reaching the target in 17 minutes flat. “I have many witnesses,” he says proudly.



Photo 3. In this June 29, 2014 file photo released by the Italian Navy a motor boat from the Italian frigate Grecale approaches a boat overcrowded with migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.

4. THE SAFE HOUSE

The walls are sweating in the safe house in Thessaloniki, Greece, a windowless basement apartment with no furnishings, two bedrooms and a camp-style cooker on the floor. It's the end of February, and an African smuggler has brought 45 clients to this base camp to escort them on off-road paths through Macedonia to Serbia. Among the group are 11 women, including two with 10-month-old children.

The smuggler, a former soldier, agreed to allow an AP journalist to accompany them on condition he not be identified because what he's doing is illegal. He goes from migrant to migrant, checking their readiness for the journey to Serbia. By car, it would take less than five hours. On foot, it's an estimated 10 days.

When some giggle at his questions, he sets a stern tone: "Shut up. This isn't a joke once you're out there. If you think it's funny, I'll send you back to Athens."

He's taken three other groups on the route, and charges those on this trip a wide range of prices, depending on their ability to pay but averaging around \$500. Discounts apply if they help him keep the others supplied and disciplined. Kids go free.

Most are French speakers from Ivory Coast, Mali, Cameroon and Burkina Faso. Only a few speak English. One — a Congolese whose communist parents named him Fidel Castro — speaks both.

All are hungry, so a Malian woman named Aicha "Baby" Teinturiere boils macaroni on the camp stove, adding to the humid air. The smuggler sends others to stock up on sleeping bags, socks and gloves for those who haven't brought the necessities.

5. SHAME AND REGRET

Some are confident of reaching Germany or France. Sekou Yara is not.

The 28-year-old Malian has failed three times to breach EU immigration checks at airports, costing him at least €3,000. This is his first attempt on foot, and he has mixed feelings.

"I left many people whom I love so much. I left my wife and our 4-year-old child," said Yara, frustrated at sacrificing so much only to be stuck in Greece, where he says migrants can't find jobs and sometimes must dig for food in the trash.

"It is shameful to live like this. I just want a normal life," he said.

Yara's trip doesn't last long. The next morning, he and another Malian are arrested shortly after the 45 arrive at the Thessaloniki bus station. Unlike the others, those two have no ID papers.

The smuggler deliberately keeps his distance at the station, communicating by phone to reduce chances of being spotted as a trafficker. Tell police you're going to Athens, not the border, he instructs them. Don't all sit together; spread out.

In every direction are migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea, all looking suspicious. Some hide in toilet stalls as the police canvass the crowds, checking documents. At least 20 from other groups are taken to a nearby police station.

Fear of arrest keeps the West Africans from boarding their intended morning bus north to the frontier town of Polikastro. It's not illegal for documented asylum-seekers to board a

domestic bus in Greece, so nerves eventually settle, and all 43 get on four later buses: Greeks in front, Arabs in the middle, and blacks in the back.

They're a half-day behind schedule as the last members arrive in Polikastro. The hatred of some locals toward the Africans is clear near the town square as women prepare to boil water for the babies' formula. A motorist drives over their bags, smashing the milk powder and cooking gear as he curses them. The easy part of the trip has ended.

6. BRIGHT START

The first day's hike from Polikastro takes the group along a rail line, and they must navigate a rickety wooden bridge, hoping no train comes. Within the first hour, both women carrying infants become weary.

"This is my souvenir!" jokes Apetey as he agrees to carry Sandrine Koffi's daughter, Kendra. Another man takes Christian, the 10-month-old son of a Cameroonian woman, Mireille Djeukam. Kendra was born in Turkey, Christian in Greece. Both have relatives in Paris.

After 10 hours, the 43 reach the border with Macedonia before midnight. They don't bother with tents, preferring sleeping bags in the open air.

The smuggler doesn't want the full group to cross the border in daylight, but they're already short of supplies — and the cheapest local shop is on the Macedonian side. So he leads three men on a reconnaissance trip through the trees. A border patrol vehicle sits on a hilltop but doesn't move.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Residents of every nation in Africa and all but one in Asia - Malaysia, if you're wondering - need a visa to enter the European Union. Entry requirements of the United States are even more intimidating for most Africans. Ndiaye applied unsuccessfully for visas from France, Italy, Spain, Holland, and Norway before booking illegal passage on a fishing boat.

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