

How the EU's Migrant Crisis Reached the Streets of Brussels

BRUSSELS — The city is freezing. At night, Hamza Khater eats and sleeps at a volunteer-run shelter. He spends his days hanging around the international bus stop next to the Gare du Nord.

“What am I looking for? I am looking for a life,” said Khater, 31, who fled the violence-ravaged Sudanese region of Darfur a year ago. Specifically, he is looking for a chance to reach Britain. He has been for months.

Sudanese migrants like Khater are increasingly visible in Brussels, around train stations, in public squares and parks, sometimes sleeping in the streets. Mehdi Kassou, an organizer for a volunteer group that provides shelter for about 500 migrants each night, estimates that about 45 percent of them are Sudanese.

Their presence reflects the latest phase in a migration crisis that has disrupted politics in one European country after another. It also leaves the center-right government of Belgium, which is set to hold elections next year, struggling to reconcile its legal and humanitarian obligations with its “tough but fair” rhetoric on migration, and a determination to avoid large-scale migrant camps in the capital.

Very few of the Sudanese people who have recently arrived in Brussels seem to be planning to stay: Sudan was not among the top 10 countries of origin for those applying for asylum in Belgium last month. Many, like Khater, hope to reach Britain, which is Sudan’s former colonial power and has a sizable Sudanese population.

And some are former residents of the “Jungle,” the camp near Calais, France’s main ferry port for travel to Britain, that became a symbol of the global migration crisis in 2015, home to migrants from the Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

When the French government closed the camp in October 2016, evacuating thousands and offering to resettle them around the country, many made their way to Brussels, another international transit hub. Over the summer, tents and

makeshift shelters appeared in Maximilian Park. Migrants who might once have headed for Calais continue to arrive in the city, hoping to journey onward.

Khater certainly does not want to stay in Belgium. “I am afraid here,” he said, “because I don’t have an education, I don’t have money, I don’t speak French.”

Most important, he added, “Belgium doesn’t understand the politics of Sudan; if I ask asylum here, Belgium may send me back to Italy immediately, or worse, even to Khartoum.”

European Union law requires migrants to apply for residency or asylum in the first country in the bloc they reach. In the past three years, tens of thousands of Sudanese have crossed the Mediterranean by boat, landing in Italy, Greece or Spain. Most applied for asylum, and only a few hundred have been deported, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Many Sudanese, however, seek to move on, in secret and without papers, to Britain. Often that involves camping for months near bus stops, truck stops, train stations or seaports.

So what do countries owe such transitory migrants? Belgium’s state secretary for asylum policy and migration, Theo Francken, has argued that the state cannot take responsibility for those who do not claim asylum.

His reasoning is that if Belgium allows a few hundred migrants to reside illegally on its territory, it could attract millions of others, potentially plundering Belgium’s generous social security system.

Seeing unauthorized migration rise in Brussels last summer, the Belgian government ordered a series of heavy-handed raids on informal camps and homeless shelters. Those raids — along with falling temperatures — have largely succeeded in breaking up camps in public parks and received wide popular support.

Even so, hundreds of Belgian families have reacted by inviting migrants into their homes. (Last month, the government proposed police raids on the houses of citizens suspected of sheltering unauthorized migrants.) Medical charities are providing food, clothes and assistance, and volunteers have set up shelters like the one where Khater sleeps, in a former office building. The total cost of

sheltering one migrant is about 10 euros per night, organizers estimate.

There have been several demonstrations against the government policies, and about 3,000 people formed a human chain around migrants at the Gare du Nord last month to prevent a police raid.

The crackdown has also exposed Belgium to the possibility of rebuke on human rights grounds.

In September, the government invited Sudanese officials to help identify and expel people in the country illegally who did not want to apply for asylum. Ten Sudanese were subsequently sent to Khartoum, and accounts quickly surfaced that at least three had been abused upon their return.

The Belgian government ordered an investigation of the allegations. It concluded earlier this month that Brussels had not done enough to assess the risks faced by those deported, and it warned that migrants who had not applied for asylum still had the right to be protected from torture.

The report said it was impossible to establish whether the abuses had taken place.

At the Gare du Nord, Khater and several fellow travelers showed wounds and scars that they said had been inflicted by the Belgian police. One had a dislocated thumb, another a fresh cut across his jaw, yet another a stitched eyebrow. Several had open wounds. All said they knew Sudanese men who had recently been deported to Khartoum and then dropped out of contact.

“Why aren’t the police kind to us?” Khater asked. “I am running for my life. I did do nothing wrong. I don’t understand the politics here.”

Kassou, the shelter organizer, agreed that “certain officers in certain towns, not all police” could be “pretty violent with migrants.” “We very regularly have people who enter with wounds, even bites from police dogs,” he said.

Sarah Frederickx, a spokeswoman for the Belgian police, said that officers treated transitory migrants in “a very empathic and humane way.” That being said, she added, “it is possible that during certain operations, for instance when people fiercely resist police actions, officers use force, but in proportion.”

Many aspects of what is happening are familiar, according to Johan Leman, an emeritus professor of anthropology at the Catholic University of Leuven who is an expert on Belgian migration policy and has worked with migrants in Brussels for decades. “Irregular migration from Africa to Europe isn’t new,” he said. Tough return policies have existed in Europe since the 1980s, and the continent experienced a refugee crisis in the 1990s after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

“What is new,” he said, “and what I have never seen before in Europe to this extent, is, first of all, that ministers are pounding their chests, saying, ‘Look at me, how many people I have deported now.’ And secondly, that people are being deported back to a country of which we manifestly know that the government is violating human rights — I am thinking of Sudan here.”

Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir, is wanted by the International Criminal Court for trial on charges of war crimes and genocide.

When police officers arrested several Sudanese migrants, including three minors, around the Gare du Nord last year, Francken, the state secretary for asylum policy, described the operation on Facebook as a “cleanup.” After a public outcry condemning the remark as xenophobic, he offered his apologies to the prime minister, who did not accept them.

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