

What Refugees Face on the World's Deadliest Migration Route



Refugees and migrants are rescued by aid workers of the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms, after leaving Libya trying to reach European soil aboard an overcrowded rubber boat, Feb. 18, 2018. Credit Olmo Calvo/Associated Press

Stinging, salty waves crashed over the deck as frantic figures climbed on board. It was midnight in November, and we were 30 miles off the coast of Libya, where our small ship was quickly filling with scores of terrified, freezing refugees whom we had rescued from the chilly waters. I stepped over an elderly paraplegic man sprawled on the deck so I could wrap blankets around a teenage Egyptian boy battling hypothermia. His eyes rolled back in his head as he tried to stay awake.

"Doctor, my name is Rafiq," he told me in broken English. "I am alone. I am 15 years old. If I die, please tell my family."

I peeled his clothes from his clammy body and wrapped my arms around him to try to keep him warm. I felt his heartbeat flutter and wondered if he would make it until morning. Beside him, the paraplegic man searched in vain for his small

knapsack, which he had lost during the rescue. Nearby, a Sudanese mother cradled a wailing, emaciated 40-day-old baby covered in lumpy skin lesions.

These refugees, and others like them, risked everything to make this treacherous journey because the lives they left behind posed an even greater danger than the sea. The Syrian war has displaced millions who are desperately seeking an existence free from barrel bombs and chemical weapons. Others travel thousands of miles over land and water to escape poverty and authoritarian governments. Most of these migrants flow through Libya in the hope of making it to Italy by boat across the Mediterranean Sea — since 2015, nearly half a million have reached the Italian coast. From there, many continue their travels into Europe.

This migration route is not only the most trafficked in the world; it is also the deadliest, with more than 15,000 deaths recorded since 2014. In 2018, more than 550 people have already died or are missing trying to cross the sea. Refugees still pay enormous sums of money for space on a cramped and unsafe vessel that may not withstand the journey, and nongovernmental organizations in patrol boats remain one of the few forms of protection for those being ferried over the Mediterranean by human traffickers. But even these rescues are becoming harder and more dangerous to make. One in every 14 people has died this year crossing the sea from Libya to Italy, compared to one in 29 people for the same period in 2017, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency

Though the media coverage of the global refugee crisis has waned, violence and unrest continue to displace thousands of people every month. In crucial ways, the European Union has taken action against the waves of migrants arriving on its shores as the political environment around migration routes has become more perilous and toxic than ever.

Under international law, if an NGO like ours, Proactiva Open Arms, finds refugees in international waters, it must transport them to the nearest safe port, which used to be Italy. Last year, however, the European Union struck a deal with Libya to curtail the flow of migrants to Europe. Italy now provides the dysfunctional Libyan military — which works with militias and human smugglers — with patrol boats, training and intelligence. Aid groups have watched helplessly as Libyan coast guardsmen beat migrants pulled aboard their ship and delivered them back to inhumane conditions.

Just last month, the Libyan coast guard threatened to kill the crew of Proactiva Open Arms, the same ship I volunteered on in November, in international waters if they didn't turn over the refugees on board. The crew refused. Once they reached land, Italian police officers closed in, impounded the boat and placed the captain and mission head under investigation for facilitating human trafficking. Their crime? Rescuing 218 refugees from a leaky dinghy in the Mediterranean Sea.

These tense conditions have led larger NGOs to stop their rescue efforts, leaving maritime rescue operations to smaller groups that cruise the African coastline helping people escape slavery, war, poverty and grim futures back home. It's a risky mission that brings together a motley crew of tattooed, chain-smoking sailors and volunteers like me for a few weeks.

Seventy years ago, my grandfather was like these refugees. A persecuted Muslim in pre-Partition India, he left Hyderabad in the middle of the night, fleeing north toward Pakistan. He eventually sent for my father, then a toddler traveling with relatives. They boarded a boat in India and sailed north to become some of the first citizens of the newly created Pakistan. Reunited with my grandfather, they immigrated to England and, later, America, but they could have just as easily become bodies floating in the sea.

Over the past few years, I watched the refugee crisis upend continents. In these acts, I recognized my family story and had to help them.

On our first patrol on Open Arms, a 120-foot salvage tugboat transformed by a Spanish aid group into a refugee-rescue ship, we picked up more than 420 people, but for several hours we had nowhere to take them. Lampedusa, the tiny Italian island close to the North African coast that routinely takes in refugees, was too small to accommodate so many people. On the bridge, the captain made call after call on the static-filled radio as he tried to find a place where we could safely debark.

Every rubber boat we encountered meant more desperate souls: refugees with open wounds and oozing crimson skin on their feet, burns from the diesel fuel that leaked into the flimsy dinghy. On the crowded deck, we passed out blankets, diapers, sanitary pads, baby formula and food. It was not lost on me that I was the only doctor on board. If anyone froze to death, if anyone died silently before dawn

while hidden beneath their blankets, it was on me to call their time of death; it was my name on the death certificate and my conscience I had to live with.

We were already carrying a body, transferred to our rescue ship from another. We were told her name was Lula and that she was a 28-year-old who had fled Eritrea for Libya, where she gave birth to her rapist's child at six months. The child was stillborn. Then Lula herself died trying to cross the Mediterranean. That's all we knew about her. We didn't want her body to become just another buoyant ghost that haunted the sea. She deserved dignity, even in death, so we wrapped up her body and laid it on the top deck, until we could hand it over to authorities.

After several hours, our port was finally decided: Augusta, Sicily. It was nearly a two-day journey. Two days is a long time to keep 423 frail, traumatized people alive. We had two bathrooms, and our supplies dwindled quickly. Our passengers crowded in every corner of the ship. We moved the ones most likely to die to the workshop, the warmest place on board.

They then settled into groups. The Moroccans, most of them seeking better job opportunities in Europe, crowded in one corner under makeshift tarps set up to protect them from crashing waves enveloping the deck. The Syrians, mostly women and children, were on the lower deck. It eventually became impossible to walk across either deck. People were spread out everywhere. The paraplegic man tugged at my sleeve whenever I walked by. I had worked in refugee camps and war zones around the world but never experienced anything quite like being aboard this dystopian Noah's Ark.



Migrants look out from the deck of the Proactiva Open Arms vessel as they wait to reach the Italian coast, Sept. 7, 2017. CreditBram Janssen/Associated Press

Throughout the journey, the migrants slowly started telling their stories from their homelands: Cameroon, Egypt, Senegal, Mali, Algeria. Some had crossed the Sahara. Some had fled militias or narrowly escaped slave markets. Others recoiled at every loud noise on the boat, traumatized by years of war. All had tragedy engraved in their minds; some had it etched, literally, on their backs.

As the sun came up on the second day, the picturesque Sicilian coastline came into view. The refugees caught sight of land and spontaneously broke into song; some had fashioned their blankets into head wraps and clapped out a beat as the boat crept into the coast. They waved and whistled as we approached Sicily. I imagined they were songs of freedom and liberation.

Rafiq, the Egyptian boy, looked up at me and gave me a thumbs up. We'd made it, at least this far. I wanted to tell them that the days ahead would be free of poverty and desperation, that their lives were certain to get better. As the granddaughter and the daughter of refugees, I wanted to tell them that they could find a better life in the West, but I knew this was a new era. I knew that their next journeys

were likely to be rougher than the seas we'd just passed, and that many of them would be turned back. Some refugees would be detained and spend weeks or months in the refugee center. Others would be deported back to their countries of origin immediately. For most, they still had hundreds of miles to traverse over land, by any means possible — hopping trains or buses or even crossing the Alps on foot — to reach their final destination. Nothing was guaranteed, even now, not even survival.

Instead, I said nothing and allowed their songs to fill me with a few minutes of necessary hope.

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