



Macedonia has become a major thoroughfare for migrants and asylum seekers attempting to reach northern Europe.

Follow the migrants' trail on the increasingly popular Western Balkans route

ON THE MIGRATION ROAD IN MACEDONIA



Prison cells, "the jungle," Afghan gangs, police beatings, killer trains, cramped detention centres, Albanian guerrillas, and then, of course, there's Ali Baba's hostage house. For migrants wanting to avoid the deadly sea crossing from Libya to Italy, the route through Macedonia has many dangers of its own.

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, a country of just two million, has become a major thoroughfare for migrants and asylum-seekers intent on reaching northern Europe.

Most started their journeys in Turkey where they boarded smugglers' boats to one of the Greek islands. After arriving in mainland Greece, they travelled north to Thessaloniki and then headed for the border.

The first major problem for the migrants is crossing the border from Greece into Macedonia.

"Migrants do not have the right to go to the Greek border areas," says a police officer in Evzoni, a small Greek village on the border with Macedonia that has been overwhelmed by migrants in recent months.

"Every day, 200 to 300 people try to reach Macedonia. We keep them in front of the police station until the next morning at 6am, when they are set free. And [then] they come back again."



A group of migrants caught by the police get ready for a night at the police station. They will be released the next morning.

In a cell in front of the police station, 20 Syrians, including families with children, wait to be released.

"I was an engineer in Syria. I fled the war and I find myself trapped in these conditions," sighs Walid*.

Hours earlier, they were arrested in the parking area of a hotel where migrants and asylum-seekers, mainly Afghans and Syrians, bed down every night on makeshift mattresses before crossing the last few kilometres to Greece's border with Macedonia and embarking on the so-called Western Balkans route.

AN INCREASINGLY POPULAR ROUTE

According to the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, the number of asylum-seekers using the Western Balkans route quadrupled between 2012 and 2014, from 5,000 to 20,000. Another 22,000 asylum claims were lodged in Serbia in the first five months of the year.

UNHCR estimates that at least an equal number did not bother registering asylum claims before proceeding to Hungary, Austria and elsewhere in northern Europe.



A group of Afghan refugees walk through the buffer zone at the Greek/Macedonian border.

The section of the route that passes through Macedonia, a country with no real asylum system and some of the most violent gangs in Europe, is probably the most dangerous.

In a border area nicknamed “the jungle”, a gang of Afghans has gained control of the border crossing.



An Afghan woman and her daughter rest in the border area known as "the jungle" where a criminal gang has been extorting migrants.

““Migrants settled in Greece for several years have become smugglers. They steal from the migrants. It is an alliance of Afghans and Pakistanis against the Syrians, who have money.”

— Manager of a local hotel.

Those who refuse to pay are beaten up and sent back to Greece at night, sometimes seriously injured.



This Syrian refugee was beaten and robbed by a gang of masked men at the border.

"We were five; they were eight, and masked. They stole our money and hit us," says Taim, a Kurdish Syrian from Aleppo who IRIN meets in his hospital bed at the Macedonian border town of Gevgelija. He has stitches in his head and bandaged hands.

From Gevgelija, most migrants avoid public transport, where they can be easily detected, and instead follow 200 kilometres of railway line on foot until they reach the border with Serbia.



Heading north

Walking in groups, they try to avoid not only criminal gangs, but also the police, who are often equally brutal.

“We were a group of 160 people walking on the tracks. The police beat us when we arrived in Macedonia; women and children fell.”

— Karim, from Algeria

Danger comes in multiple forms and from all directions during this long trek. So far in 2015, according to the Macedonian authorities, at least 25 migrants have lost their lives on the railroad, killed by moving trains. More than half these deaths occurred in one incident on the night of 23 April, near the city of Veles in central Macedonia.

LOCALS COME TO THE RESCUE

Faced with the tragedies on their doorstep, some Macedonians are trying to help, in their own small way. In Veles, Lence Zdravkin distributes water and food supplied by UNHCR to migrants passing on the track in front of his apartment:

“I do not speak English, and I have no words to speak to them. But I can see the sadness in their hearts.”

In Gevgelija, Stéphane Markovski, a 24-year-old student, decided to put signs along the railway line, translated into English, French and Arabic, to warn migrants of the dangers.

"Eighty people died on the railway in the past three years. We have put about 60 signs between Gevgelija and Veles," he explains.



One of the 60 signs that a Macedonian man has put up along the railway line warning migrants of the dangers and directing them to water fountains.

Some migrants have adopted novel means of trying to avoid trouble. Several groups of Syrians are now travelling by bike on the hard shoulder of the motorway.

"We bought [the bikes] for 200 euros in Thessaloniki," says Ali, a Syrian from Damascus who IRIN meets on the highway, 40 kilometres north of Veles.

In his helmet and cycling shorts, Ali could be mistaken for a local cycling enthusiast, but his shoeless and bleeding feet give him away.

"I got my shoes stolen by bandits when we entered Macedonia," he says.



Ali and his friend are among an increasing number of Syrians who have taken to riding bikes as a faster and safer way of crossing Macedonia.

FEAR OF DETENTION

For many migrants, the biggest fear is being picked up by the police and taken to Gazi Baba, a detention centre for irregular migrants in a residential suburb of the capital Skopje.

Journalists are not allowed inside, but independent observers report that the conditions are over-crowded and unsanitary. Officially, the centre is supposed to hold only 100 people, but three to four times that number are being held there with access to only two toilets.



A cell phone picture showing the inside of Gazi Baba, a detention centre for undocumented migrants, which is closed to journalists.

"It's like a prison. The conditions are not very good. It is a difficult place. There is overcapacity and people are sleeping on the floor," says Mohammad Arif, who heads UNHCR's operations in Macedonia.

Migrants sometimes spend over six months at Gazi Baba. Indeed, a new law intended to combat human traffickers is forcing potential witnesses to their crimes to remain in the centre until cases come to trial.

"We are one of the few countries in the world where witnesses have to remain in detention," Mersiha Smailovic, a human rights lawyer in Skopje, tells IRIN.

“A Syrian witness stayed eight months in the detention centre.”

— Merisha Smailovic, human rights lawyer

For those who avoid detention or are finally released, more dangers still lie ahead. Northern Macedonia, where the majority of the population are Albanian, saw clashes between security forces and armed groups in May that claimed 22 lives. Several villages near the border, including Lojane and Vaksince, have become centres for human traffickers exploiting the large number of migrants passing through on their way to Serbia.



A group of migrants entering Vaksince where they are extremely vulnerable to kidnapping by criminal gangs.

AVOIDING KIDNAPPERS AND SMUGGLERS

Near the local mosque in Vaksince, Afghan watchmen monitor everyone's comings and goings. On a nearby café terrace, Macedonian people smugglers discuss their next group of migrant arrivals.

In this seemingly quiet village, a trafficker nicknamed "Ali Baba", an Afghan or Pakistani depending who you ask, has been kidnapping migrants and holding them for ransom in a house protected by high walls and a gate.

Brahim*, a Tunisian man IRIN meets in Presevo, the first Serbian town after the border, says he was held in Ali Baba's house for six days:

"They caught us when we arrived in the village and then took us into a house. They had knives and a pistol in their belts. Every day, 100 [more] people arrived. For us, the price [to be released] was 2,500 euros for four."

Jean, a Cameroonian now staying at a centre for asylum-seekers in Bogovađa in central Serbia, was also kept at a kidnapper's house in Vaksince.

"Once we arrived, we didn't have the right to go outside. It was 450 euros just to cross the border. We had to send the money to a Western Union account. Some were beaten and fled into the night."



Asylum seekers from Nigeria just arrived in Belgrade with only a plastic bag and their clothes. They had to abandon their backpacks in Macedonia when they escaped their kidnappers.

On 11 June, following a report broadcast on the UK's Channel 4 News, the Macedonian police launched an investigation and found 128 migrants in five houses in Vaksince. Four traffickers, including one wanted for murder, were arrested.

Human rights organisations and NGOs say the fight against trafficking here cannot be won until migrants and asylum-seekers have a legal right to travel across Macedonia, as they do in neighbouring countries.

"In Serbia as in Greece, they can travel once they get registered. The police give them a temporary paper. In Macedonia, they don't have papers. It's a big difference, because if you have no freedom of movement, you are scared and you are hiding. Then you are open to exploitation because you do not have legal protection," explains Arif of UNHCR.

Aware of the problem, the Macedonian government will soon adopt a new immigration law allowing migrants three days to stay in the country legally and the use of public transport. It is a considerable step forward, according to UNHCR.

"If you have a law, you do not need to be protected from the police by smugglers," says Arif. "With this law, we will kill 60 percent of the smuggling in this country."

* Names have been changed

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