

Some refugees in Serbia fear government help would limit freedom

Zorica Loncar, Special for USA TODAY Published 6:25 a.m. ET June 19, 2017 | Updated 6:25 a.m. ET June 19, 2017



(Photo: Muhammed Muheisen, AP)

10CONNECTTWEET 7LINKEDIN 4COMMENTEMAILMORE

BELGRADE, Serbia — In recent months, Serbian authorities have tried to provide shelter, food and medical care to thousands of refugees from the Middle East, Asia and Africa camping within its borders.

But the newcomers don't want any of it.

This country is quickly becoming the Calais of the Balkans, a reference to the northern French city where refugees live in limbo while awaiting either deportation, asylum or continuing their journeys in hope of landing in a more welcoming European country.

"I tried to leave Serbia 17 times," said Jawad Afzali, 17, an Afghan who has lived for the past six months with 1,500 other Afghan, Iraqi and Pakistani migrants in abandoned warehouses and a tent village that sprung up behind the bus station.

"Every time, they bring me back here," he added. "Two days ago, I tried to enter Croatia. Now I'm here again."

Afzali is one of 7,000 refugees stuck in Serbia since the European migrant crisis erupted two years ago in this economically struggling country, and his situation underscores the clash between policy and reality for the migrants.

Bulgaria, Hungary and other European Union members that border Serbia, which is not part of the 28-nation alliance, have closed their borders to refugees seeking to escape war and economic stagnation in Syria and elsewhere. They want to move to Germany, Britain and other wealthy European countries in the north.

Some of those countries adamantly refuse to take them. The European Commission said last week it would file suit against Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic for failing to take their share of refugees as part of the 2015 plan to distribute 160,000 migrants stuck in limbo in Italy and Greece across the European Union. Other countries such as Sweden and Germany are tightening restrictions for asylum and increasing deportations.

Meanwhile, more migrants continue to arrive, mainly to Italy and Greece: 75,000 made the sea crossing since January, according to the United Nations refugee agency.

In Serbia, around 6,000 refugees are in official asylum reception centers that provide education and other services, according to Nenad Ivanisevic, the state secretary at the Serbian Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Issues. But he said some refugees aren't interested in going to the centers.

"Serbia is ready to accept a certain number of people and could offer them a full support for their integration into Serbian society, but the refugees don't want that," Ivanisevic said. He said Serbia is seeking more international funding for refugee programs, in addition to the \$55 million the EU has already given.

Others said refugees fear they won't be able to leave the centers. In most European countries, refugees usually must stay in the country where they initially arrived. As a result, a common practice since 2015 is for refugees to avoid registering or providing fingerprints so they can reach their desired country in Europe and won't be ordered to return to the nation where they first arrived.

That puts migrants in a Catch-22, said Kais Ayoubi of the Real Medicine Foundation, a U.S.-based charity that provides health care to refugees in Serbia.

"The situation here is awful," Ayoubi said. Migrants lack clean running water, toilets or electricity — and they burn garbage and tires to keep warm in the winter, harming their

lungs, he said. "These people didn't want to register with the authorities, therefore they don't get help from the state."

The political climate doesn't help. In April, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic won the Serbian presidential election with 55% of the vote. He has pledged not to build a wall or close Serbia's borders, like Hungary, but he also repeatedly vowed not to let the country become a "parking lot for illegal immigrants."

In May, the government began to empty the abandoned warehouses behind Belgrade's bus station and relocate refugees to official asylum centers across the country. The makeshift camp had become a focal point for people smugglers and a health hazard, so the migrants will get better protection in the asylum centers, the government added.

Many refugees are concerned they will be locked in the asylum centers with limited freedom of movement — and won't be able to get out.

Furman Ali, 25, a Pakistani who wants to go to Italy, said the fear of being moved, added to worries of being deported, is setting everyone on edge.

"We don't sleep at night because we don't know when police will come and take us away," said Ali, who has been living in the camp behind the bus station since January. "People fight every day. Sometimes every 10 minutes, sometimes for no reason."

Afzali just hopes he can get out of both the camp and the country.

He and his cousin want to go to London, where his brother lives. But Croatian authorities keep catching him when he attempts to exit the country. He's now planning on trying to cross the Romanian border before heading to Britain.

"I am (of the age) when I should get education," he said. "I cannot get that here."