

NOVEMBER 2015

SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



“THERE IS NO FUTURE FOR US HERE”

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNER ELIZA GOROYA SPEAKS ABOUT HER WORK WITH REFUGEES FROM SYRIA IN GREECE BETWEEN JANUARY AND DECEMBER 2015.

“With our interpreter Jowan, we set out to meet with refugees in Greece – those who survived the perilous journey and have just landed on the Greek islands, those who have been detained – for a few days or several months – and those in limbo, waiting. Some are waiting for their asylum claim to be examined or their papers to be issued. Others are continuing their journey to northern Greece and beyond.

Jowan is also a refugee from Syria, and a survivor of torture. He was targeted for being a journalist in his

country and was detained both there, in the infamous Saydnaya jail, and in Greece, in Corinthos detention centre.

“I was arrested while trying to leave Greece by boat to Italy. On my way to Corinthos, I was beaten by police officers... During my 50 days inside the detention centre, I saw daily how detainees were beaten mercilessly [by the guards].... We were denied medicine and medical care.... I did not receive any medicine although I had severe inflammation in my

Refugees and migrants wait at the Macedonia border near the village of Idomeni, Greece, 24 August 2015. © Amnesty International

lungs.... At times, it seemed better to ask for deportation, to be sent back to torture, death... many people told me they prefer to be killed in their country than being humiliated.... Many people after being informed they would be detained for some time, they signed a deportation request.... It is torture what is happening inside detention centres. When I remember Corinthos, I think Greece is a hopeless country.

"If you can't stop torture against refugees or immigrants your turn is coming next, as a citizen....," he explains. This is not unlike many other stories we heard during our visits to detention centres throughout the country.

Together with Jowan, we spend a few days on Lesbos, a small island known as one of the few small cracks in "Fortress Europe's" defences. With more than 442,073 refugees and asylum seekers arriving on its shores so far this year alone, this island has the highest number of arrivals in Greece. A soaking-wet, hungry and confused group of people has just arrived at the Moria reception centre. One of the families among them seems particularly distressed. We quickly find out that one of their relatives who was travelling with them is missing. He fell off the boat, and then they lost him in the dark sea, they tell us. This also explains the ominous helicopters scanning the horizon. Fortunately, several hours later, Mohamed* is found alive and we meet him at the hospital where an elderly Greek woman has taken on the role of looking after him:

"I tried to make myself visible, I held the light over me, but no one came close to me. The helicopter passed over me, but it didn't stop, they didn't see me... The moment we went on the inflatable boat, we felt something was wrong, it was losing pressure... it started to go down more on one side, most of the people had to throw their personal belongings in the water... we decided to jump in the sea and hold on to the boat on both sides so that it was not too heavy... two people caught the safe side... I was touching the water."

He shows us the salty stains on his clothes, then pulls his passport out of an elaborately-wrapped plastic bag. Like Mohamed, many know that they may have to swim for their lives, and seal their passports and money in waterproof materials. A desperate reality:

"The waves were between half a metre and 1 metre, they started to hit my face, and water went into my mouth... I started to get tired... a wave hit me on my face and the water went inside my lungs, and I started to cough... That's the moment I lost the boat... I saw the Turkish coastguard, and I was trying to give them a sign, but they didn't see me.

I tried to hold my mobile phone up to give them a sign with the flash, but a wave hit me again, my mobile went off... "I come from Latakia, a city by the sea, but it's been three years since I last swam...I could feel I was freezing, so I had to swim more to warm myself. I spent five hours trying to get close to the Greek island... I came as close as two or three hundred meters away from the coast, but the current was pushing me back... I tried several times before I became too exhausted, almost unconscious. A fishing boat picked me up... I woke up in hospital.

"When I fell in the water, I was not afraid. I thought 'my body is strong, and I can swim well. But what exhausted me, what made me suffer, was that I could not get to the shore..."

"My family is ok in Latakia which is safer compared to other cities. I had to leave because I am wanted for military service, and the intelligence services are after me for my participation in the pacifist movement.... I do not want to tell my family what happened to me.... For sure, I will not tell them what happened [in the sea]..."

"Back in Syria, I studied Business Management, and I was working as a designer, doing photography and editing. I hope that I can do that again."

Mohamed is lucky. An estimate of 3,601 people have lost their lives in the Mediterranean this year, 588 of them in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey. For those who survive, their arduous journey is far from over. They face squalid conditions often with no provision of shelter, food or sanitation. More often than not, they find themselves relying on the kindness of volunteers for even the very basics—for what Greece and EU have failed to provide.

On Kos, another Greek island, I am observing a group of refugees and asylum-seekers queuing to board a ferry to Athens. "What's so funny?" a police officer asks a father who is smiling. Police officers shout at him, and say he'll board last to punish him for his behaviour. The man is really affected by this aggression. He seems to be in pain, then falls to the pavement. His daughter holds his hand and cries out: "Papa, papa..." Just this one word. "He has a heart condition... and they insulted him", his son tells me, "he is a dignified man". He is given some medication, and seems to be recovering. After several minutes, an ambulance arrives, but he refuses to be taken to the hospital. "Going to the hospital means we stay here, on the island. We can't stay here! Not one more day!" he exclaims.

"What will you do if this happens on the boat?" we ask him

as he lays on the ground, weak but determined. His son answers: "It's worse if we stay here. We have to carry on." He is wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "Run to the sea".

On the same island, I witness a group of 15 to 25 people brandishing wooden bats, ready to physically attack refugees who are queuing to be registered outside the police station. They shout things like "go back to your countries" and other slurs. "If you take that camera out, you're dead", they threaten, circling us. Another activist has her camera removed and suffers injuries. At first the police doesn't stop them, and only intervenes after the physical attacks have started, using tear gas to disperse the crowd. The following day, a young Syrian man called Abdullah tells me: "I saw them circling you and came to help you. Fifteen of them beat me for coming near." Abdullah had to spend a few hours at the hospital, but he used it to translate for other refugees that did not speak English.

Abdullah's younger brother jumps in to say that he has now learned how to curse in Greek. "The police taught me!", and bursts into laughter.

The following day, I meet Zein, a 29-year-old Business Administration graduate. She arrived with her girlfriend on Kos and has waited for days to get her papers.

"I left my country with my girlfriend because we are a lesbian couple... it's impossible for us to live in Syria without feeling scared or being in danger... if someone was to find out about us... family, at college, at work... And with the situation in Syria it was impossible to live... the army in the street and then ISIS [the armed group calling itself Islamic State] came to our country... Everyone is fighting with each other.

"Here, on the island... there are no human rights. They treat us worse than animals... We need to leave quickly... We are in danger even among refugees because of our sexuality... Our journey was very stressful and hard... We are running away from a very bad place... but we need our time to restart our life, and deal with our problems... so, give us time and we'll have another chance to live normal lives again, and be active citizens in society."

But as refugees like Abdullah and Zein continue their journey to mainland Greece, problems follow them. Most ferries from the islands bring people to Piraeus Port, near Athens. I have come here to see what awaits the hundreds of vulnerable people arriving. Waiting for the ferry to arrive, I meet Ameen.

On his way to Europe, Ameen was on a boat from Libya that sank: approximately 250 people drowned including many of his friends and family. He was rescued and taken to Malta, from where he continued his journey. Two years later, he has come to meet his mother and sister arriving from the islands, and to continue their journey to safety and dignity together.

"It almost feels like what happened was to another person... a disaster... so much death. But today is a happy day", he says. He smiles widely as the boat approaches. He is optimistic; he perseveres. I stand back and observe the moving reunion. Activists welcome them and another 1,000 refugees arriving in Athens from the islands – no help is in sight apart from directions to "move on" from police officers. Most of these people are boarding private buses that take them directly to northern Greek borders.

Some wait here, and apply for asylum in Greece. The procedure can be very slow, and there are often no adequate provisions even for recognised refugees. I meet Nur and her family in a hotel in Athens. After their group was pushed back and ill-treated by Macedonian border guards, they applied for asylum in Greece. She is happy because she recently got her passport; she shows it off to us. When she grows up, she wants to "just go on a plane and fly away". "And professionally?" I ask. "Oh, I will be a doctor -- to help whoever is in pain." "There is no future for us here," her mother says as she tries to explain that they do not wish to stay in Greece.

With over four million refugees from Syria sheltering in just five countries in the nearby region, stories like Nur's, and the others shared here are all too common. In the past several months, we have become witnesses to what awaits people fleeing crisis and conflict– an ordeal which does not end in Greece. At risk of ill-treatment and violence, and forced to walk for miles in bad weather and to stay in squalid camps or out in the open, refugees and asylum seekers that survive the precarious journey at sea see little alternative but to continue onwards.

Amnesty International is calling for 400,000 of them - those the UNHCR considers to be the most vulnerable - to be resettled in wealthy countries by the end of 2016. Resettlement (and other legal forms of admission for refugees) offer a lifeline to the world's most vulnerable refugees. By the end of 2017, we estimate that 1.45 million people worldwide will need resettlement.

*not his real name

CASE FOCUS: SAFAA LALA

SYRIAN WOMAN DISAPPEARED SINCE 2013



Safaa Lala and her grandchild ©Private

Safaa Lala, 61 years old, lives in the al-Midan neighbourhood in Damascus and has two grown-up children. On 7 March 2013 she went to visit her brother to say good bye to him as she was scheduled to travel to Egypt the following day to stay with her son, Rami al-Attar. She was arrested at her brother's apartment and has since been held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance.

According to neighbours who witnessed the arrest, around 10 men in military uniform arrested Safaa Lala and six other members of the family at two apartments in the same building. The men were believed to be members of the security forces or the National Defence Forces. The apartment building was located

in an area controlled by the government, and a small National Defence Forces barracks was located on the roof of the apartment building.

Rami al-Attar told Amnesty International that a member of the family had an altercation with the local head of the National Defence Forces two days prior to the arrest, and the arrests could have been an act of retribution. However, the official reason for her detention remains unknown.

In May 2015 Rami al-Attar sent an official request to the military court in Damascus. The officials denied that Safaa Lala and her six family members were in custody. Rami al-Attar has also pursued informal channels, working with intermediaries in the Military Intelligence, General Intelligence, and Air Force Intelligence, but he has received no information on the whereabouts of his mother or his other family members. He told Amnesty International:

“She loved Damascus so much. I was pushing her to come to Egypt until things calmed down, and she refused. I finally convinced her just before she was arrested. She is the most important person for me, and I am the most important person for her. I don't have anyone else... A lot of things happened in the two and a half years since she was taken. My sister had a son, I got a new job, and I have so many stories to share with her. I had hair before, and now I'm losing it. I don't want to grow older. I don't want her to see that I am any different than I was before [she was arrested].”

CAMPAIGNING

To join Amnesty International's campaign against enforced disappearances, please visit:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/detention-in-syria>

For more information, please visit:
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2579/2015/en/>

MORE
INFORMATION