

Braving dangerous waters, Iranians seek a better life in Britain

Author:

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LIVERPOOL: The traffickers told Fardin Gholami that a fishing boat would take him from France to England at midnight, but when he and five other Iranian asylum seekers got to the beach, all they found was an inflatable dinghy with nobody to sail it.

Gholami had paid €16,000 to human traffickers to take him from Kamyaran, in western Iran, to Britain. But on the seashore near Calais he realized he and his compatriots would now have to fend for themselves.

“They showed us a red light on the horizon and said we should sail toward that,” said Gholami, 31, one of hundreds of Iranians who have risked their lives to cross the English Channel.

The Channel is one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes, and the migrants’ inflatable boats are not equipped to cross it, especially in treacherous winter weather.

“Sometimes there were big ships. It was scary. We knew if we crashed into them, that would be the end of us,” he said.

Mohammad Salehi Bakhtiari, 47, crossed the Channel in October. “The waves were coming from all directions. It was a nightmare. We saw death many times in the four hours it took to cross. Those four hours felt like four months,” he told Reuters.

More than 500 migrants – mostly Iranians, some of them children – attempted to travel to Britain in rubber dinghies in 2018, four out of five of them in the last three months of the year. Some were turned back to France.

British Home Secretary Sajid Javid cut short a family holiday to address the issue. Britain has doubled the number of patrol boats in the Channel to four, along with a naval ship.

One month after he was arrested near the port of Dover, Gholami lives in a hostel in Liverpool, temporary accommodation provided by the government while his asylum claim is being processed.

His roommate, Babak Hajjipour, 40, also crossed the Channel in December. “We thought that if we did not succeed we would die and it would be over once and for all,” he said.

British media described the Iranian exodus as a final effort to reach Britain before it leaves the EU. But all the asylum seekers that Reuters spoke to said Brexit was not a factor for them. One had not even heard of it.

Gholami, a teacher, left Iran after his environmental activist friends were arrested and he feared he would be too.

Bakhtiari, an electricity project manager, spent two years in prison for distributing information about labor rights in factories. He fled the country while on temporary release.

Hajjipour, a plumber and electrician, left after being beaten by police on the street for wearing shorts.

"I think sanctions, the economic situation on Iran, and mixing religion with politics are the main reasons why people are leaving the country," he said.

He hoped eventually to bring his family to Britain, including his 7-year-old daughter. "She will not have a bright future in Iran," Hajjipour said.

Dead end

Other Iranian asylum seekers in Europe and Turkey told Reuters they decided to leave Iran after giving up hope in the face of growing economic and political difficulties.

Last summer, US President Donald Trump pulled out of an international agreement to restrict Tehran's nuclear program, imposing sanctions that caused prices to soar in Iran.

In 2018, more than 21,000 Iranians left the country to seek asylum in Europe, Turkey, the US, Canada and Australia, UN figures show.

Iran's Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Baqeri, said: "Foreign enemies are encouraging young people to leave Iran and turn their backs on the values of the Islamic revolution, persuading people that resisting superpowers will lead to war."

In the third quarter of 2018, the number of Iranian asylum seekers in Britain increased more than 30 percent from the previous year. The Home Office said most asylum applicants last year came from Iran.

"Here and maybe in other countries, there are more Iranian refugees than Syrians," Gholami said.

"The situation in Iran is worse than a country at war. Especially recently, because of the country's nuclear ambitions, the economic situation has deteriorated and I think there will be a new wave of Iranian economic refugees," he said.

A 37-year-old Iranian, who asked not to be named because he feared for the safety of his family in Iran, said he sold his house to come to Britain.

"I never dreamed of coming to Europe. I had a decent life in Iran, a car, a small factory with workers."

He said he felt humiliated queuing for food in Liverpool, where he receives

35 pounds a week from the British government. But a bus ride in the city costs 2.50 pounds and he has to pay more than 30 pounds for an Internet connection on his phone to talk to his family back home.

There, a worker earns only enough in a day to buy half-a-kilo of meat. "Because of sanctions, people are at a dead end," he said.

Affluent but without hope

Economic hardship might have triggered an exodus from Iran, but Roya Kashefi of the Association of Iranian Researchers believes Iranian refugees should be considered political, not economic migrants.

"Iranian asylum seekers are mostly middle class and educated. Some are affluent enough to pay \$16,000 to human traffickers," said Kashefi who works with the Home Office on Iranian asylum seekers.

In Calais, Maya Konforti, secretary of the Association l'Auberge des Migrants, believes Iranian asylum seekers resort to extreme measures like sewing their lips together, hunger strikes, or crossing the Channel in small boats, because of their middle class background.

"They had a decent life, from a financial point of view, in Iran, while living conditions in Calais are horrendous. They were used to living in a house, and here they have to live in a muddy tent in the cold. So they cannot stand it," Konforti told Reuters.

"They tell us staying in Calais is like dying one day at a time. They are ready to try anything. They say OK, boats. We don't care. We take the risk, we might die, but at least we will die quickly."

The number of Iranians in and around Calais began growing in late 2017 after Serbia scrapped visa requirements for Iranian citizens, opening up an easier route to the EU.

Serbia canceled the initiative 14 months later after 1,100 Iranian sought asylum there. Others moved on.

One Tehran resident told Reuters that many young people and families wanted to leave for a better life.

His first attempt in June to reach Europe via Russia failed after almost a month on the road.

"The human traffickers asked us for more money. We didn't have any, so they took our mobile phones and left us in the middle of the road. We really struggled to return to Iran."

He is saving money for his next journey to Europe through Turkey.



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6 Iranians found on English beach as Channel crossings mount
Facing new sanctions, Iranians vent anger at rich and powerful

[Yemen prisoner swap terms expected in coming days, says govt delegate](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-01-23 21:34

ADEN: Yemen's warring parties are expected to agree on the terms of a prisoner exchange in around 10 days, a representative of the internationally recognized Yemeni government said on Wednesday.

Talks between the two sides took place in Jordan last week. Both parties need to agree on lists of prisoners to be swapped.

"We expect that in 10 days time the final signing will have happened," the head of the government delegation to the prisoner-exchange talks, Hadi Haig, told Reuters by telephone.

The UN is pushing for the exchange and a peace deal in Yemen's main port, Hodeidah. That could open the way for more talks between the Iran-backed Houthi militants and the Yemeni government on ending the country's civil war.

The swap was one of the least contentious confidence-building measures at December's UN-sponsored peace talks in Sweden, held amid Western pressure to end the conflict. The fighting has lasted nearly four years, killed tens of thousands of people.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said on Wednesday that it hopes to see "progress in the coming days" and urged the warring parties not to let the opportunity slip away.

"This is a crucial moment for the people of Yemen," Red Cross regional director Fabrizio Carboni said in a statement.

The ICRC official said it was preparing for the swap by increasing staff numbers and arranging medical support.

The ICRC was also preparing two planes to carry detainees between Sanaa and Sayoun, a town under the control of the Yemeni government, he said.

The conflict pits the Iran-backed Houthis against Yemeni forces backed by an Arab coalition, which are trying to restore the government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

The conflict began after pro-democracy unrest forced the former president, the late Ali Abdullah Saleh, to step down in 2012.

Hadi was elected to a two-year term to head a transitional government. Later Hadi was forced into exile by the Houthis, which prompted the Arab coalition to intervene in Yemen in 2015.



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Yemeni troops stop Houthi advances, inflict further casualties
Al-Qaeda suspects among 1,200 who escaped from Yemen prison

[Thousands at funeral of Palestinian killed in Australia](#)

Wed, 2019-01-23 21:56

BAQA AL-GHARBIYA, ISRAEL: Thousands of mourners attended the funeral on Wednesday of Aya Maasarwe, an Arab Israeli student killed in Australia, in her hometown of Baqa Al-Gharbiya in northern Israel.

The 21-year-old was raped and murdered in Australia's second-largest city Melbourne shortly after midnight on Jan. 16 when she was on her way home from a comedy show.

Her body was found by passers-by in bushes near a tram stop.

Police in Australia, who have described the attack as “horrific,” have arrested and charged a suspect, 20-year-old Codey Herrmann, with her rape and murder.

The murder of Maasarwe, who had been studying in Australia for a year, shocked the country and sparked a huge outpouring of grief that saw thousands attend vigils in her memory.

“I appreciate the support of all these people, in the whole world and also in my town,” said her father, Saeed Maasarwe, with Australia’s ambassador to Israel, Chris Cannan, by his side.

Thousands of people gathered in silence at Baqa Al-Gharbiya, a town with a Muslim majority, as mourners carried the coffin containing Maasarwe’s body to her family home.

The only sound that could be heard was of Muslim prayers from loudspeakers.

Youths marching in a procession held up black banners that read “It’s time to say: Stop killing women” and “Women have the right to live in peace” in both Arabic and English.

A crowd of mourners then followed Maasarwe’s coffin as it was taken to the Al-Sarat Mosque and cemetery where she was laid to rest.

Hours earlier, the town’s mayor, Khaled Abu Mukh, and Israeli Arab MP Ahmad Tibi accompanied Maasarwe’s father as her coffin arrived at the airport.

In a video posted on social media, Tibi said Maasarwe was now the daughter of all Arab Israelis.

Arab Israelis are descendants of Palestinians who remained on their land following the creation of Israel in 1948.

They account for some 17.5 percent of Israel’s population and largely support the Palestinian cause.



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Israeli student murdered in Australia while on phone with sister
Australian police arrest man over Israeli student's death

[Italy's Salvini says France has no interest in stabilising Libya](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-01-22 23:42

ROME: Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, continuing a war of words between Rome and Paris, said on Tuesday that France was not looking to bring calm to violence-ravaged Libya because its energy interests there rivalled those of Italy.

Relations between Italy and France, traditionally close allies, have grown frosty since the far-right League and anti-establishment 5-Star Movement formed a coalition last year and took aim at pro-EU French President Emmanuel Macron.

France's Foreign Ministry and the French president's office declined to respond immediately.

On Monday France summoned Italy's ambassador after Salvini's fellow deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, accused Paris of creating poverty in Africa and generating mass migration to Europe.

Salvini backed up Di Maio, saying France was looking to extract wealth from Africa rather than helping countries develop their own economies, and pointed particularly to Libya, which has been in turmoil since a NATO-backed uprising in 2011 that overthrew strongman Muammar Qaddafi.

"In Libya, France has no interest in stabilising the situation, probably because it has oil interests that are opposed to those of Italy," Salvini told Canale 5 TV station.

A French diplomatic source said it was not the first time that Salvini had made such comments and that it was probably because he felt he had been upstaged by Di Maio.

The source added that the accusation was baseless and reiterated that French efforts in Libya were aimed at stabilising the country, preventing the spread of terrorism and curbing the migration flows.

Italy's Eni and France's Total have separate joint ventures in Libya, but Eni's CEO Claudio Descalzi denied in a newspaper interview last year that there was any conflict between the two firms in the north African state.

Salvini is head of the League, while Di Maio leads 5-Star. Both are campaigning hard for European parliamentary elections in May and are eager to show they have broken with the consensual politics of center-left and center-right parties.

The two men have repeatedly targeted neighboring France and accused Macron of doing nothing to help handle the hundreds of thousands of mainly African migrants who have reached Italy from Libya in recent years.

Asked about the latest diplomatic spat with Paris, Salvini said on Tuesday: "France has no reason to get upset because it pushed away tens of thousands of migrants (at the French border), abandoning them there as though they were beasts. We won't take any lessons on humanity from Macron."



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Almost 500 migrants brought back to Libya after foiled attempts to reach Italy
HRW criticizes Italy, EU's Libya migrant policy

[Sudan security forces tear gas protesters in Omdurman](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-01-22 20:45

KHARTOUM: Sudanese police fired tear gas at crowds of demonstrators in the capital's twin city Omdurman on Tuesday protesting against the fatal wounding of a demonstrator last week, witnesses said.

The demonstration, which came ahead of planned nighttime rallies in both Omdurman and Khartoum just across the Nile, was the latest in more than a month of escalating protests against the three-decade rule of President Omar Bashir.

Bashir has made defiant appearances at loyalist rallies in Khartoum and other cities.

Chanting "overthrow, overthrow" and "freedom, peace and justice," the catchword slogans of the protest movement, the demonstrators had gathered near the home of their dead comrade.

The doctors' branch of the Sudanese Professionals' Association (SPA) said he had died on Monday from wounds sustained when demonstrators clashed with security forces in Khartoum on Thursday.

The SPA has taken the lead in organizing the protests after hundreds of opposition activists were detained, and its doctors' branch has taken casualties.

Human rights groups say that several medics have been among more than 40 people killed in clashes with the security forces since the protests erupted on Dec. 19, 2018.

The authorities say 26 people have been killed, including at least one doctor, but blame rebel provocateurs they say have infiltrated the protesters' ranks.

The mushrooming protests are widely seen as the biggest threat to Bashir's

rule since he took power in an Islamist-backed coup in 1989.

Triggered by the government's tripling of the price of bread, which brought demonstrators onto the streets of the eastern farming hub of Atbara and other provincial towns, the protests rapidly spread to the metropolis and other big cities as people vented their anger against the government.

A chronic shortage of foreign currency since the breakaway of South Sudan in 2011 deprived the government of most of its oil revenues, has stoked spiraling inflation and widespread shortages.

Bashir has survived previous protest movements in September 2013 and January last year.

But his efforts to blame the US for Sudan's economic woes have fallen on increasingly deaf ears as people have struggled to buy even basic foods and medicines.

"I am tired of prices going up every minute and standing up in bread lines for hours only for the bakery's owner to decide how many loaves I can buy," a 42-year-old woman, Fatima, said during protests last week on the outskirts of the capital of Khartoum.

Fatima and others speaking to the AP would not provide their full names, insisting on anonymity because they fear reprisals by the authorities.

Protesters described using medical masks soaked in vinegar or yeast and tree leaves to fend off tear gas. They said they try to fatigue police by staging nighttime flash protests in residential alleys unfamiliar to the security forces.

"We have used tactics employed by the Egyptians, Tunisians and Syrians but we have so far refrained from pelting security forces with rocks or firebombs," said Ashraf, another demonstrator.

They said there was little they can do about live ammunition except to keep medics and doctors close by to administer first aid to casualties.

They also described checking paths of planned protests to identify escape routes and potential ambushes by police. Some of their slogans are borrowed from the Arab Spring days, like "the people want to bring down the regime."



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Sudan protesters show resilience, employ Arab Spring tactics
Sudanese security forces deploy in large numbers ahead of fresh protests