

Sudan deal plunges migrants in Israel into new uncertainty

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TEL AVIV: Usumain Baraka speaks impeccable Hebrew, considers Israelis among his best friends and can quote passages from the Old Testament. But as a Sudanese asylum seeker, Baraka has no legal status in Israel and lives a precarious life tethered to the whims of the Israeli government.

Now, after Israel and Sudan agreed to normalize ties, Baraka is among 6,000 Sudanese in Israel once again fearing for their fate.

Israel already has indicated it will seek to settle the migrant issue in upcoming talks with Sudan, whipping up trepidation in the community that Israel might forcibly return them to Sudan, a place they say they fled because of conflict or persecution.

"If I return tomorrow or the day after when there is the official peace they are talking about, something awaits me there, and that's danger," said Baraka, 25, who fled Janjaweed militia attacks on his village in Darfur at the age of nine.

Israel and Sudan announced earlier this month they would normalize ties, making Sudan the third Arab country to do so in as many months.

The announcement brought satisfaction to Israelis. But after years of failed Israeli attempts to remove the migrants, it has renewed fears among the Sudanese who have long had an insecure existence in their adopted home.

African migrants, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea, began arriving in Israel in 2005 through its porous border with Egypt after Egyptian forces violently quashed a refugee demonstration and word spread of safety and job opportunities in Israel. Tens of thousands crossed the desert border in often dangerous journeys.

Israel initially turned a blind eye to their influx and many took up menial jobs in hotels and restaurants. But as their numbers swelled, there was a backlash, with growing calls to expel the new arrivals.

Israel considers the vast majority of the migrants to be job seekers and says it has no legal obligation to keep them. The Africans say they are asylum seekers who fled for their lives and face renewed danger if they return. Many come from Darfur and other conflict-ridden regions.

Sudan's former leader, Omar Bashir, has been charged with genocide for a campaign of mass killings that took place in Darfur under his watch. The area still experiences tribal clashes and rebel violence.

Under international law, Israel cannot forcibly send migrants back to a country where their life or liberty may be at risk. Critics accuse the government instead of trying to coerce them into leaving.

Over the years, Israel has detained thousands of migrants in remote desert prisons, left thousands of asylum requests open and offered cash payments to those who agreed to move to third African countries.

It also has built a barrier along the border with Egypt that stopped the influx and reached a deal with the UN to resettle thousands of migrants in Western countries while allowing thousands of others to remain in Israel –

though the deal was quickly scrapped under pressure from anti-migrant activists and hard-line legislators.

The migrants' presence has long divided the country. Their supporters say Israel, a country founded upon the ashes of the Holocaust and built up by Jewish refugees, should welcome those seeking refuge. Opponents claim the migrants have brought crime to the low-income south Tel Aviv neighborhoods where they have settled. Some Israeli politicians have labeled them infiltrators, with one calling them "a cancer" threatening the country's Jewish character.

"I believe they are economic migrants and they act as if they own the place," said Sheffi Paz, a prominent anti-migrant activist.

Publicly, Israeli leaders have been guarded about their plans. On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israeli and Sudanese delegations would soon meet to "discuss cooperation in many fields, including in the field of migration." A spokeswoman for Israel's Interior Ministry declined to comment.

A top Sudanese military official with direct knowledge of the early contacts with Israel said the matter of returning the migrants has not yet been discussed. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter in public.

Israel deported about 1,000 migrants back to South Sudan in 2012 after an Israeli court determined they were no longer at risk in their home country, which had just gained independence. But activists say some died there from disease and others fled renewed conflict.

Israel has acknowledged in recent court proceedings that the situation in Sudan remains volatile, and advocacy groups that work with the migrants say that deporting them will come up against stiff legal challenges.

"If Israel will dare to deport Sudanese with open asylum claims it will be a grave violation of the most fundamental principle of the refugee convention," said Sigal Rozen, public policy director at the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants.

She said Israeli leaders may nonetheless be raising the issue to prompt some Sudanese to leave voluntarily.

Migrants have already been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, their jobs in restaurants and hotels threatened by repeated lockdowns. Without proper status in Israel, they are not entitled to claim unemployment insurance. Rozen said some sympathetic employers have kept on migrant workers just to give them a lifeline.

In the south Tel Aviv neighborhood where many migrants live, a pedestrian street typically lively with shops and restaurants was dreary on a recent day. Grey shutters sealed the entrances to many businesses and some mask-wearing migrants lingered on stoops.

Baraka fled Darfur after his father was killed in front of him. He settled in a displacement camp along the border with Chad before departing on a precarious journey north, through Libya and Egypt, to be smuggled through the desert into Israel, where he has lived for more than a decade.

He submitted an asylum request to Israel in 2013 and it remains open. While he welcomes any deal that stabilizes relations between Sudan and Israel, he doesn't believe that opens the door for his return.

"I do believe in what they're talking about now, normalization between Sudan and Israel," Baraka said. "I support it, but we need to know who it's being

done with, when to do it and how to do it.”



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