

Syrian refugees speak about their protest in Dortmund, Germany

Our correspondents

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Refugees from Syria, a country engulfed by civil war, have been protesting for two months in the German city of Dortmund. They are demanding to be granted the right to asylum, which would enable them to secure the safety of family members still in Syria by bringing them to Europe.

On the morning of 9 June, around 120 refugees began a protest in front of the remotely located federal office for migration and refugees. During their weeks-long, and even in some cases years-long flight, they confronted many dangers, crossing borders in boats, cars and on foot in the hope of escaping a life of fear, deadly violence and bitter poverty.

The German government announced last year it would process the asylum applications of Syrian refugees within three months. But processing does not mean approving. European third state regulations specify that refugees who enter a secure European Union state such as Italy or Hungary can only apply for asylum there. Germany profits chiefly from this, since it is fully surrounded by secure third states. In Eastern European countries, refugees can expect to receive very limited or even no assistance. If they move on to escape the inhumane conditions, they automatically become illegal immigrants.

In Dortmund, a city disproportionately affected by poverty in the Ruhr region, the poorly equipped and designed reception centres are overrun. The centres responsible for refugee applications are overwhelmed. As a result, applications are not processed within the promised three months, but rather lie on desks for five, six or even twelve months.

During this time, the relatives of the asylum seekers live in Syria under the permanent threat of the various participants in the war, and refugees in Germany fear receiving grim news from their closest relatives back home. They are therefore protesting at the federal office against their uncertain status. They are demanding the lifting of the third state regulations and better conditions for refugees in Germany. These include obtaining the right to reside as quickly as possible, a relaxing of the conditions allowing

family members to resettle, immediate German language courses for all refugees, and easier access to jobs and education.

In mid June, the refugees established a camp in the centre of Dortmund, close to the main train station, where thousands pass by every day. With the help of local supporters they constructed a camp using plastic sheeting as a roof, and sleeping bags and mats on the ground where they also spend the night. Painted signs and banners draw the attention of passers-by to the predicament of the Syrian refugees, and call upon them to declare their solidarity with the protesters.

Fadi Khatib, one of the camp organisers, told us about the protesters. They were mostly, like himself, well-educated doctors, journalists, IT specialists and construction workers. “We come from all cities and regions of Syria, and are part of Arab, Kurdish, and Assyrian groups.” He travelled to Turkey by car, then took a boat to Greece, before continuing over land to Germany. He had been lucky with his journey, which only took 44 days. His family had been able to stay in Turkey, which was a comfort to him. The relatives of most in the camp still lived in Syria.

No place in Syria was safe, he continued. “People die every day. They are “attacked every day by the Syrian army or ISIS (Islamic State).” This had a strong impact on the protesters in Dortmund. “It is very difficult here. You see the men, some are beaten down, begin to cry, can’t do anything. Some are really desperate.” That’s why the bringing together of their families was the most important thing, he said.

Fadi originally reported a three-hour protest in front of the federal office for migrants and refugees in the belief that this would compel local politicians and officials to act. But the interest and “disappointment” of a Green politician lasted only briefly. The federal office maintained its silence on the long processing time for applications. Some refugees subsequently began a hunger strike when the protest began.

They have received a lot of support and sympathy from the population. An older woman spoke spontaneously to a

camera team filming a report on the protest, telling them that her mother had fled as a refugee with her two children after World War II to the eastern Ruhr. She could therefore understand very well how the protesters were feeling and suffering, because they had been forced to leave their homes and families behind.

Bani, 26, has survived an arduous odyssey. For four years, he fled from one country to another. First, he fled to Jordan, “then Dubai, then Iran, back to Dubai, then to Turkey and from there to Germany.” He obtained a visa in Germany and has been living there for 15 months. But his visa has now expired, so he has applied for asylum. He studied medicine for four years in Syria, but had to break it off because of the war.

He is obviously dealing with constant worry. Ten days ago, he learnt that the brother of his father-in-law had died, close to where his sister lives. “Luckily, my sister and her children did not die.” He and the others protesting wanted to “save our families, save human beings. People just like the people here on the streets. We can cooperate to save people. We have been saying this for four years.”

The Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, when the United States and the European powers seized an opportunity to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, who is aligned with Russia and Iran. As in many other Middle Eastern countries, the US and its allies are directly and indirectly supporting Islamist rebels against the Assad regime. The United States and Britain have repeatedly threatened a military intervention.

The German government is also provoking the conflict in the Middle East. Last September, the grand coalition of Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and Social Democratic Party decided to send weaponry and German trainers to the Kurdish autonomous region of northern Iraq to support Kurdish peshmerga fighting in Syria.

The consequences have been hundreds of thousands of deaths and a massive wave of refugees. According to UN figures, the Syrian civil war has claimed the lives of 230,000 people. One sixth of the population has fled the country: 2 million to Turkey, 250,000 to Iraq, 630,000 to Jordan, 1.2 million to Lebanon, 130,000 to Egypt and 25,000 to North Africa. Within Syria, 7.6 million people are rushing from one area to another to avoid the bloody clashes.

European governments have responded sharply and ruthlessly to the few refugees who have made it to Europe. Earlier this month, the German government restricted the right to asylum once again. The government intends to arrest all refugees who come to Germany immediately following their arrival.

Refugees in Dortmund explained how they were forced to give their finger prints at the border crossing, under threat of

imprisonment. If they do this, they are officially registered in a secure third country and must make an asylum application there. They must therefore leave Germany.

This was the experience of Abdulbari, 35, who was supporting the protesters for that reason. As a construction worker, he had no other option but to travel the entire way from Syria to Germany on foot with his family. He walked to Turkey with his wife and children, before completing a four-day march to Bulgaria. There he was forced to give his fingerprints. Abdulbari and his entire family subsequently moved on through Romania and Hungary, in order to arrive finally in Germany.

He has lived in Germany for one-and-a-half years, but has been deported to Bulgaria three times. Last time, the police searched his apartment in Hagen to deport him once again. His children were so mentally affected by this that the police sent them to a hospital.

Husin, a construction worker, looks older than his age, 23. The hard work and dangerous flight from Syria made him age. He began the same gruelling march on foot as Abdulbari with 35 other people. He arrived in Germany eight months ago.

He has been living in an asylum centre with the fear of being deported for five months. He is to be sent back to Hungary because his fingerprints were taken there. They are evidence that he is an “illegal immigrant” in Germany.

Unlike Abdulbari, Husin had to leave his wife and children in Syria, in an area where fighting is currently taking place. “I hope that my children and wife can come to Germany, that I will be allowed to start work, and that the little ones are allowed to go to school here and grow up.”

Work, education, escape and peace. According to European and German laws, Husin and his family have no right to these things. The destruction wrought in Syria by European governments, including Germany, and the US is forcing millions to flee. The German government is refusing to extend basic rights to those fleeing and instead wants to get rid of them as quickly as possible.



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