

# Refugees stranded at processing camp outside Heidelberg, Germany

## “When will we finally be allowed to learn and to work?”

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The square in front of Patrick Henry Village fills up with people at 2 pm. Dozens are waiting on three shuttle buses to take them to the centre of Heidelberg. This is the only transport connection linking the refugees with their surroundings.

People come from North Africa, Syria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and other countries. Arriving in Patrick Henry Village, they have left behind a life of war and terror, and completed a grueling journey in smuggling boats over the Mediterranean Sea and thousands of kilometres on foot. They are worn out, but full of hope for a future in peace.

They do not understand what is happening to them here, why they are confined with nothing to do for weeks, detained in old military barracks and isolated from the population. The Patrick Henry Village is on the outskirts of the city of Heidelberg, more than half an hour from the closest stop on the tram line.

The village was a residential area for US army personnel in the 1950s. Since the September 11 attacks in 2001, the entire 100-hectare facility has been sealed off by a barbed-wire fence.

At the beginning of November, 5,500 refugees were at the Patrick Henry Village. The central registration centre for Baden-Württemberg is located there, and it is to become the location of one of the rapid processing centres recently adopted by the government.

The German government, including the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), agreed last week to establish five centres for the accelerated processing of refugees, so as to separate refugees from “safe countries of origin” from the rest, who are to be deported more quickly.

The Patrick Henry Village is ideally suited to this purpose, “a type of model project,” Baden-Württemberg’s state premier Winfried Kretschmann (Greens) said last week. Here, in 30 “unified processing streams,” German army soldiers collect fingerprints and biometric data, register refugees and x-ray them.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team visited the location, but was only permitted to go as far as the guarded entrance. There we spoke with people stranded in Patrick Henry Village. They know little about what the government has

planned for them, but they are full of hopes and plans.

“I would like to learn German and find a job,” said Manouar (all names have been changed by the editor) from a village on the Algerian-Tunisian border. He had been lucky, the 17-year-old said, because he was in the programme for “unaccompanied minors,” meaning that he would be accepted into a home operated by the Heidelberg youth department. “I’m very hopeful about the new transfer so that I can attend school at last,” he said.

Manouar has been in Heidelberg for three months and is teaching himself German from a handbook. He tells us his story in German and French. At age six, he was able to attend school for one year, but then his father died and “there was no more school for me.” He has worked to maintain his family since he was seven, assisting with the apple and tomato harvest and breaking stones for building sites, “I did everything. But my heart died in the process,” said Manouar. There is no future in Algeria or Tunisia for young people, he added.

“I have seen so many terrible things,” Manouar continued. “But the worst was my crossing of the Mediterranean Sea.” He has “twice seen death” during the journey, he said. In an overcrowded small boat, he witnessed people drowning. He would never forget that, Manouar said. After landing in Mazara, Sicily, he went to Agrigento and Palermo, before traveling through Italy via Rome and Milan, and on to France. In Paris and in Strasbourg, he “always lived on the streets.”

He was brought to Patrick Henry Village after arriving in Germany. But he was “very much looking forward” to finally getting out of here. “The food isn’t healthy here. There are only carbohydrates, whoever eats it falls asleep immediately. It is food for prisoners, and it made me sick.” There was “no respect for the people. There is nothing to do, just eating and sleeping.”

While waiting for the shuttle bus into the city, we spoke with a group of young Syrians. As Jamal explained to us, his dream is to become a kitchen designer. However, in Damascus he was no longer able to pursue his training. “The entire youth of Syria is fleeing,” he said. Khaliq and Safiye are a couple, who married while fleeing through Turkey. Khaliq studied

economics and Safiye communications. Iskandar, their friend, is a cook and hopes to find work in Germany.

“In Syria, civil war has been raging since 2011 and everything has been destroyed. Our future as well,” Khaliq said. “There were attacks every day. We couldn’t live anymore because we lost everything.” The young people had placed all their hopes on Germany. “We just want to live in peace,” Safiye said. They had only arrived in Heidelberg two days earlier, and have slept most of the time since. “We were so tired from the journey and are just relieved that we have made it.”

Their 6,000-kilometre journey took around four weeks. “It was virtually impossible to sleep during the last week,” stated Khaliq. “We travelled practically the entire way on foot, a few routes with a bus and finally a bit with the train.” The worst part of all was the trip from Turkey to Greece. “We were with 40 people on a 9-metre-long boat—it was horrible. We feared we would all drown.”

Asked about the conditions in Patrick Henry Village, a young man from Bangladesh expressed his extreme dissatisfaction. There was little space, the guards were often unfriendly and the food was bad. He would try to find another better place to live, he said.

Samir, a young man from Afghanistan said that after a 48-day trek on foot, he was accepted at a barracks in Mannheim two weeks ago, before being transferred to Heidelberg, where he was waiting to be registered. Samir believes he was already registered during his arrival in Germany and doesn’t understand why and for how long he has been transferred to Heidelberg.

He is certain he will be recognised as an asylum seeker. Samir stated, “I come from a war zone. My village was fired on from two sides, from the Taliban and from ISAF and government troops. It was too dangerous to live there so I left for Germany.” Samir hoped to be able to learn German soon, look for a job, and earn enough to live.

Samir knew nothing about the plans of the German government and NATO to launch new air strikes against the Taliban, or their plans to send refugees back to the country. Several days ago, German interior minister Thomas de Maizière declared that Germany had paid high sums in development aid to Afghanistan, and it could thus be expected that “Afghans stay in their own country.”

Samir then spoke about his odyssey through the Balkans. “It was terrible,” he said. In Iran, the refugees were shot at, and in Bulgaria, border guards encouraged dogs to attack them. “I watched as the dogs tore a piece of flesh from another refugee’s arm, and I myself was bit on the arm twice by the dogs.” The only city during their journey where they had been given something to eat and accommodation was Belgrade. “All of my clothes and shoes are ruined. Here I have yet to receive any clothes, a friend lent me what I am wearing now.”

A young woman who studied German in Damascus

explained, “It is not so bad here; it was much worse on the German border: we were left standing in the cold from 11:00 in the evening until the early morning waiting for a bus. I was able to recover somewhat here.”

Three young Kurds from a northern Syrian region around Aleppo told us about their journey. “We crossed Turkey and then travelled across the sea to Greece, then we crossed Macedonia and Serbia on foot. But the worst was in Hungary: at the train station in Budapest, we had to wait for five days. We are relieved to have it behind us!”

Mansur, 22, would like to work as a teacher. “I just had a year to go until I finished school. Then came Daesh [the Arabic name for Islamic State] and shortly afterwards the American and Russian warplanes. Our school was completely destroyed.” He was now here with his 17-year-old brother, Mansur reported. His second brother and father stayed at home.

“First we were taken to Zerndorf near Nuremberg, then Sasbachwalden near Achern, and now we have been in Heidelberg for twenty days. I don’t know what will happen next.”

The young men explained that food was only available twice a day in Patrick Henry Village. “In the morning we get breakfast, then something to eat at lunchtime. But that’s it until the next morning,” Mansur stated. “It isn’t so bad for me, but it is horrible for my younger brother. He’s always asking: when will we get out of here? When will we move into a real house? When will we finally be allowed to attend school or work?” But during the three weeks since their arrival in Patrick Henry Village, they had not been given an appointment for a discussion of their asylum, or a health check-up. “My younger brother can hardly bear the waiting and the endless inactivity.”

After stepping off the bus and crossing to the street at the main train station, the refugees catch sight of a massive advertisement for the German army. “You won’t solve crisis situations by waiting and drinking tea. Do something that really counts. Bundeswehr.”

The placard is part of a new advertising campaign financed by tens of millions of euros to recruit young people for military interventions in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

“Now we can clearly see,” Safiye from Damascus said. “It is the governments which are leading wars. Ordinary people do not want war. People in Germany have given us a very friendly welcome.”



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