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‘Everybody is leaving Afghanistan:’ Refugees flee increasing violence

by Sabra Ayres

10/3/2015

Six months ago, Ajmal Sherzad was an IT specialist making \$400 a month as a computer repairman in Kabul’s trendy Shar-i-now district. His shop was in one of Kabul’s newer business centers, and from its window, he could look out and see how the Afghan capital was changing.

What he saw wasn’t encouraging.

In the last year, Afghanistan’s capital has seen an increase in bombings and other attacks by the Taliban. With more than 5,000 civilian casualties so far, 2015 may be Afghanistan’s most violent year since the war started in 2001. This week Afghan and U.S. forces battled the Taliban for control over Kunduz, a key northern Afghan city. The intense fighting added to Afghans’ fears that the country’s security situation is continuing on a rapid decline.

Afghanistan elected a new government last year, but stability has yet arrive, either economically or politically. Corruption is rife, and jobs are few and far between.

In February, after years of waiting out the war, 32-year-old Sherzad and his wife packed up their three young children and left Afghanistan for good.

While Syrians fleeing a civil war in its fifth year account for most of the refugees seeking asylum in Europe, Afghans are the second-largest group, with roughly 64,000 first-time asylum applications filed so far this year in Europe, according to Europe’s statistical agency, Eurostat.

Afghans make up 18 percent of the some 387,000 who arrived on Europe's shores via the Mediterranean so far this year.

"This is what I care about, my children's future," he said, stroking his 4-year-old son's thick black tussle of hair. Hugging his father's leg in the hot sun, the boy flashed a smile despite having spent several days sleeping in fields as they traveled through Serbia. "I want my children to have opportunities, to be doctors and engineers. There is no opportunity in my country. No security. Nothing."

Sherzad, his wife and their children are now part of a growing number of Afghan refugees in an overwhelmed Europe, seeking safety, security and a chance at a better life.

And many more hope to make the journey.

"Everybody is leaving Afghanistan," Sherzad said. "The only people who will be left there are President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah." Ghani shares power with Abdullah, who is referred to as Afghanistan's CEO.



Afghan refugees after arriving on the Greek island of Lesbos from Turkey, Sept. 29, 2015. Aris Messinis

Like many other asylum seekers, Sherzad said he saw an open invitation when Germany and other European countries said they would take in refugees. Most important, Sherzad saw hope for his children's future, one in which they would have everything that he missed in his youth after years of war in Afghanistan.

Since they left Kabul, the family's trip has been a long and grueling one, taking them through Iran, Turkey and the Balkans. Many nights were spent on the streets, with the family huddled together trying to keep the youngest ones warm.

And it has been expensive. So far, Sherzad has spent \$15,000 to get from Kabul to this town on the border between Serbia and Hungary, which they reached in mid-September. To reach his dream of resettling his children in Europe, Sherzad had to withdraw his life savings and sell his car and almost all their belongings.

“Come on, move along! Go to your mother,” he said, encouraging his son to keep walking along a road leading away from Hungary. They had spent the previous 16 hours waiting to see if Budapest would give an order to open the fence it recently built along the border and let the refugees pass through. The order never came, so Sherzad was searching for a bus that was supposed to come along this stretch of road to take refugees to the Serbia-Croatia border.

Up ahead, his two girls, ages 3 and 5, trailed his wife, who wore her hair wrapped up in a fashionable headscarf. Both parents carried small backpacks, which held all the family’s belongings with which to start a new life. Sherzad had a small fleece blanket folded and thrown over his shoulder and a plastic bag of food and water. His son carried a brightly colored Lego piece, which, to his father’s irritation, he kept dropping on the asphalt.

The conditions along the journey have been worse than he and his wife imagined. In Greece they slept outside on the sidewalk while they waited for paperwork to board a ferry to the mainland. The crossing through Macedonia was somewhat smoother, and aid stations had plenty of water, food and medical assistance for families with children.

They traveled through Serbia on a bus for nearly 12 hours with few problems, until they reached the closed border with Hungary. So they rerouted through Croatia to try their luck at the border with Slovenia, where they hoped to move on to Austria and then Germany.

In the two weeks since Sherzad and his family left Horgos, some 88,500 migrants have followed in their footsteps, making their way to Germany, Sweden and other European nations, where most will apply for asylum.

Today refugees avoid Horgos and go directly to the Serbia-Croatia border, where they wait out in hastily erected camps like the one in Opatovac, Croatia. Overwhelmed by the number of refugees arriving in Croatia, the government has said it could begin busing them to the border with Slovenia.

“This is really very difficult, but we are going to go as far as we can. We have no other choice,” Sherzad said.

On the migrant trail, Afghans naturally form groups, as do the other asylum seekers with a culture and language in common. By the time refugees reach Serbia, they have organized themselves into groups of 50 to 60, typically the people who have been sharing buses for hours

on end. They offer one another moral and logistical support and often keep an informal headcount.

Some Afghan refugees complain that the Syrians get preferential treatment from European nations because there are so many of them and the Syrian civil war is so new.

“Europe has forgotten about the war in Afghanistan,” Sherzad said.

In Kabul, Afghans are watching the news of their countrymen making the difficult journey through Europe with both envy and worry, said Shakib Oraikhel, 24, who works on an international development project funded by the U.S.

He said young men see the dangers and problems Afghans have in Europe, but many would gladly confront the same challenges to get out of Afghanistan. His family and friends talk about fleeing to Europe every evening. In the last year, 15 to 20 of his friends have tried to leave by paying a smuggler to take them through Iran and then Turkey.

A close friend who made it to Iran watched as Iranian border police shot and killed seven members of his group. He and two others returned to Afghanistan, but he said he will try again as soon as he can come up with \$1,300 to \$1,700 to pay a smuggler.

“Everyone sees the news that Germany and other places in Europe are willing to take in refugees, so we are willing to try at any cost,” said Oraikhel via Skype from Kabul.

A few of his friends have secured visas to the U.S. through a special immigrant visa program available since 2012 for Afghans who worked for the U.S. government in some capacity and can prove they are being threatened by the Taliban. But the application process is extremely selective and can take months if not years.

This month Ghani made a public statement asking young Afghans not to leave the country. The Australian and Germany embassies in Afghanistan have run television ads and posters warning Afghans not to make the dangerous journeys across the Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean Sea.

Despite the efforts, there doesn't seem to be any slowing in the number of refugees arriving in Greece each day, hundreds of them Afghans.

“I've applied to get a new international passport, just in case we decide to take this option,” Oraikhel said.