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Running Out of Options, Afghans Pay for an Exit

By Adam B. Ellick
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KABUL — Through two decades of war, Abdul Ahad never contemplated leaving Afghanistan. But as his country started to deteriorate rapidly in 2007, so did his life. He was laid off from his full-time driving job and forced to take the only work he could find: a once-a-week driving gig through Taliban territory.

In the past eight months, a suicide bomb and a firefight nearly took his life. Now, Mr. Ahad, 26, has had enough. He has begun scouting potential smugglers to take him to Europe, he said, looking to join the surge of young Afghans who are abandoning their country, frustrated by endless war, a lack of prospects and the slow pace of change.

While foreign diplomats hold out hope that the August presidential elections and President Obama's new troop deployments could change things here, Afghans are voting with their feet.

Last year about 18,000 Afghans applied for asylum in Europe, a figure nearly double the 2007 total. The spike was the highest increase for any major country in 2008, according to the United Nations. By comparison, applications from Iraqis fell 10 percent.

"People can't find jobs here," Mr. Ahad said. "And if you go to a place where there's work, you'll be killed in a week.

"I'm desperate," he added. "It's not a big dream. I just want to finish my studies and live normally."

Willing to gamble on the risks, young men like him are turning over their savings — up to \$25,000 in some cases — and their lives to smugglers, who arrange routes over seas to Australia or over land to Europe, where the Afghans then try to seek asylum.

Finding a smuggler is not as difficult as it might seem. In interviews in the capital, Kabul,

several smugglers, all of whom requested anonymity because their work is illegal, estimated that business was up 60 percent over last year. One said he was turning away customers for the first time in his 11-year career.

“It’s out of my power to deal with the demand,” he said. “I never imagined it would get like this.”

The country’s dire situation has even prompted some privileged Afghans to leave. They include the host of “Afghan Star,” an “American Idol”-style television series, who disappeared after a documentary based on the show won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival; as well as a media officer who worked for President Hamid Karzai and deserted his delegation during an official visit to the United States in September.

Just a few years ago optimism abounded here, as the American-led invasion seemed to have ousted the Taliban, and wooed more than 3.5 million Afghan refugees back home while setting off a series of promising reconstruction projects.

But since 2006, waves of Afghans have fled the Taliban resurgence, endemic corruption and the government’s inability to provide basic services like electricity. They are turning up in perilous waters near Australia, in Turkish prisons, at Rome’s main railway station and in Le Petit Kabul in Paris, or Little Kabul.

In Calais, France, an immigration detention complex dubbed the Jungle is keeping about 600 Afghans in conditions that are “very, very bad compared to two years ago,” said Jean-Philippe Chauzy of the International Organization for Migration, an intergovernmental agency based in Geneva, who visited the camp in May. French officials have vowed to close the center by the end of 2009.

Migration officials and recent deportees said many other Afghans abroad just disappear, are sexually exploited by truck drivers or are forced into labor. Applications for asylum often fail, too.

“It’s death or destination,” said Shuja Halimi, who expressed no regrets after he was deported back to Afghanistan from the United Kingdom, after a two-month journey across 12 countries, including Bulgaria, where he says he eluded gunfire at the border.

He said living conditions in Europe were awful “but not as bad as Afghanistan.” Now in Kabul, Mr. Halimi, who has three children, has not found a job.

“We’ve got a president called Hamid Karzai who has done nothing for Afghan people,” he said, echoing the sentiment of many young Afghans.

On a recent day at the Kabul airport, 30 young deportees from England returned home for the first time in several years. Equipped with only a plaid canvas bag, Akbar Khan, 20, vowed to try again. “We’ll try to go back in about a month after we save some money,” he said.

In an attempt to curb the migration, the International Organization for Migration ran a media campaign here warning against the hazards of smuggling. The Italian government, which noted a 202 percent rise in Afghan asylum applications last year, financed the initiative.

Pakistan and other neighboring countries historically offered Afghans refuge during crises like the Soviet occupation. But today Pakistan faces an internal refugee crisis of its own. Iran, too, is cracking down, now deeming the Afghans economic migrants rather than victims of war and deporting about 700,000 last year.

As other avenues close, Afghans are now engaged in “what has become an intercontinental migration,” said Mr. Chauzy of the International Office of Migration.

The most common route out for Afghans, then, is by road — from Iran via Turkey to Greece — and costs around \$16,000, the smugglers said. They said that for about \$25,000, they could guarantee an air journey eased by forged documents or prepaid bribes to immigration officials.

Once in Europe, Afghans apply for asylum most often in the United Kingdom, Turkey, Greece and Italy. Scandinavian countries and Switzerland receive far fewer applicants but accept a significantly higher rate of Afghans, according to data from the European Commission.

Migration experts say the widening and tight-knit Afghan diaspora in Europe has encouraged the trend, anchoring new arrivals and providing increasingly sophisticated advice on the asylum process.

European officials trying to curb illegal migration have broken up several high-profile smuggling operations recently. In June, British officials convicted an Afghan man calling himself “the smuggler of Europe,” who claimed his multimillion-dollar operation served thousands of young men, according to phone conversations recorded by authorities. Some men were forced to work at a chain of pizza restaurants to pay off their debt.

But officials in Afghanistan have been slower to crack down on smugglers. One smuggler chuckled when asked if he feared being arrested, saying his business operated much like a travel agency, and almost as openly.

“In this government, three things work very well: relations, money and acquaintances,” the smuggler said. “When these three exist, anyone can get what they want.”

Noor Haidiri, an adviser to the Minister of Refugees, placed some of the blame on Afghanistan’s regional neighbors. Many Afghans, he said, leave legally and hire smugglers in Iran or Dubai. As for the networks that exist here, he said, “only five years ago we had our first elected government, and it goes slowly.”

But many Afghan youths feel that, given the danger in the country, legality is a secondary concern.

“I love this country, but it’s totally going in the wrong direction,” said a teary-eyed 26-year-old man, who did not want to give his name because he was planning to leave. “I want to live like a normal person: wake up, go to work, and be with a wife — or a girlfriend, preferably.”