

Africa's crossroads: How corrupt smugglers in Sudan drive refugees onwards



Sally Hayden
in Khartoum

The dream of escape to Europe is worth extreme risk to life and limb

Nurah suspected her 13-year-old son was dead when the smuggler who claimed to be holding him hostage refused to put him on the phone. That was three years ago, but the series of events still runs through her mind every day.

Her youngest had left home, without warning and leaving no goodbye note or clue as to his destination. Nurah – originally from Eritrea – was already anxious because just a month earlier her older son had abandoned Sudan, hell-bent on making it to Libya and then across the Mediterranean to Europe.

And then the angry man called, demanding a ransom of \$2,000 for the younger boy. "I said if my son was alive I wanted to hear his voice, but they didn't put him on," she recalls, hunched over in a hot, cramped room in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, her eyes staring firmly at the tiled floor.

Today, Nurah is on her own. Like most Eritreans and Ethiopians in Sudan she describes herself as a *habesha* – a second-class citizen. She used to work at one of the tea stalls dotted along the banks of the Nile river running through Khartoum, but unending harassment from locals and Sudanese security ended, she says, with two men following her home, kidnapping and raping her. Now she's afraid to go outside. Nurah's story (she requested anonymity because she fears retribution from smugglers or Sudanese security) is just one in a thick book of woes relating to Sudan. Here, young people are disappearing with startling frequency, many of them encouraged by smugglers to leave for Europe without telling their parents, who'll be hit later with a staggering bill for the passage.

Conflict and poverty

Most Sudanese migrants, escaping conflict and poverty, want to go to Europe. It's considered the closest safe region. But that's gradually changing because of new restrictions on nongovernmental search and rescue missions off the coast of Libya, new money from the European Union to help Libya, Sudan and other African countries to stop migration, and new EU training for the Libyan Coast Guard, which is cracking down on Mediterranean boat traffic.

All this makes the trip to Europe more costly and difficult. But it has not stopped would-be migrants in Sudan – especially the young – from plotting journeys to what they expect will be better lives.

In Kassala, on Sudan's eastern border, and in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, smugglers are easy to find. In Khartoum, they're often Eritreans who have made enough money to buy cars. Connections to smugglers are made through neighbourhood recommendations; a meet-up is likely after asking a few key people.

"Smugglers are very organised, it's organised crime," says Ismail Omer Teirab, deputy chairman of Sudan's National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCT). He believes what makes them difficult to root out is that gangs often work with the nation's security forces. "First they bribe policemen. Otherwise they couldn't get through the checkpoints."

For those fleeing Eritrea – Nurah left because of forced ending military service and severe economic and social oppression – the journey from Kassala to Khartoum costs \$300-\$450 (€250-€380) for boys and men, and \$750 for women. Why the difference? Families have been willing to pay more to ensure the safety of women.

Ransom fees

For those wanting to go further, passage to Libya costs from a further \$1,600 and \$1,800; going all the way to Europe from Khartoum – in a



smuggler's run – costs as much as \$5,000, a fortune even for working refugees who earn as little as \$50 a month as labourers.

When a ransom is added, the price skyrockets. And, if it goes wrong, some pay with their lives. The one near-certainty facing migrants is that they will fall into steep debt to the money managers who facilitate the journeys. Those who brave the voyage often fall into the hands of militias operating a vicious slave trade inside Libya, where multiple governments and many tribes are locked in a struggle for supremacy.

Refugees and migrants who unsuccessfully attempted the journey to Libya say it is common for smugglers to sell them to other gangs once they draw near the Libyan border. Pretty soon, they no longer know who's in charge, and the terms of their "contracts" can change without notice or negotiation. Some migrants are held in detention, suffering malnutrition and physical or sexual abuse. Others are forced to work until smugglers decide the debt is paid.

"Traffickers don't keep their agreements. They'll increase or double it and sell them to other traffickers," said one 27-year-old Eritrean, whose friends recently set out on the journey and an unknown fate. Europe "is only a hope, a wish", he said.

Deadly route

The central Mediterranean is currently the deadliest route to Europe. Some 600,000 people have crossed since 2014, while about 12,000 are feared to have died at sea. More than 2,800 are believed to have died so far in 2017.



■ An Eritrean teenager sits on his bed in the unaccompanied minors section of Shagarab refugee camp, eastern Sudan. PHOTOGRAPH: SALLY HAYDEN

Migrants and refugees in Sudan commonly originate in Eritrea. In Sudan, their movements are limited. They claim they face harassment by the police, who regularly round them up, threatening deportation unless they pay bribes.

"The police every day arrest Eritreans and Ethiopians here. They ask for your ID card, make you pay \$50. If you have an ID card they might take it and cut it [in half] says one Eritrean fa-

ney without telling their parents. "Go now, ask for money later," they tell them. "That way no one can stop you."

"I hid it from my family. I won't tell my parents until I get to Libya," explained a 24-year-old woman with delicate features in Khartoum. She says her parents have properties in Eritrea they can sell, a sacrifice that would leave them with nothing but if she is caught, she knows they will have to pay. "I will be exposed to slavery and sexual violence if they don't pay."

Another 24-year-old, a nurse from Eritrea who wants to be a doctor, says she is aware of the dangers: "I know but there is no more miserable life than this that I am now living. I want a chance... a better life."

Two weeks ago, her 18-year-old sister tried to follow her to Khartoum, but was kidnapped on the Eritrean border. Her family has been told the ransom is \$5,000, an impossible amount for them to pay. She worries that if the ransom is not paid, the girl may be moved up to the Sinai desert in Egypt. Among Eritreans, there are rumours that there is a trade in organ harvesting in that area, although the UN special rapporteur for Eritrea, Sheila B Keetharuth, says there is no evidence to prove those claims.

"There are many who tried to go to Libya and they are dead," says Azgiamin Tesialasi, a tired-looking Eritrean woman with braided hair, speaking in a dark, stone house in a low-income neighbourhood popular with refugees. "Some are lost in the desert and some at sea. For those who are dead, no one can help."

As she speaks, she repeats the words "*delati haisebat*" – which means human smugglers in her language, Tigrinya.

Meanwhile, smugglers search out young people and convince them to make the jour-

ney without telling their parents. "Go now, ask for money later," they tell them. "That way no one can stop you."

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"Our children are being kidnapped by smugglers here."

"If trafficking is business, now how can we make it non-profitable? I haven't an answer," Ismail Omer Teirab, the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCT) deputy chairman, says in an interview in Khartoum's oldest hotel, the Acropole. At least 100 people each month make it into Libya, Teirab estimates, though exact statistics are impossible to collect in a vast area with little technology and record-keeping.

Education

The NCCT was formed after Sudan adopted the much-lauded 2014 Human Trafficking Act. Teirab, a former teacher from Darfur, says he wants to run campaigns to educate refugees and Sudanese youth about the dangers of courting smugglers. He has received minimal funding – not enough for an office, other staff members, or even a photocopier.

"Every day young people see videos of Europe on their phones now, how can we combat that?" he asks.

Jeff Crisp, a research fellow at the public affairs think tank Chatham House and the former head of policy at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, accepts that if the Mediterranean becomes an impassable barrier, it's possible smugglers will begin sending people on new routes.

"It's something a lot of people say: if one route closes it diverts into another," Crisp says. "[But] it takes a while between one route closing off and then people taking up a different route."

Among refugees in Sudan, there is little knowledge of the world outside the destinations already travelled to by family members or acquaintances from home. Most simply express the desire to keep moving until they find a safe space with opportunity. "I don't know where would be good but I know I can't stay here," one refugee said.

South America

There is evidence that more migrants from northern and east Africa are even finding their way to South America, and by arduous and complicated routes. In one neighbourhood, families told of a Somali who ended up in Mexico, after he flew from Zambia to Brazil with a work visa. Another Somali travelled to Brazil from South Africa.

Another factor pushing migrants elsewhere is a growing recognition of the backlash against new settlers in Europe, and the magnitude of the Mediterranean crossing.



■ Main: Eritrean girls chat on a bed in the unaccompanied minors section of Shagarab refugee camp, eastern Sudan. From top: scenes from Shagarab refugee camp. PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN

risks involved with these journeys, or give them adequate information about what the situation on the other side might be.

"With the traffickers – no one tells you exactly how people live as refugees and how they arrive. They just tell you things are good."

He is camped out in a sparse compound that has been used by countless Eritreans on their way through Sudan. The four other young men staying there on this particular day have been in Khartoum less than a month.

On Tekulu's bicep is a tattoo from the early days of his forced military training, the imprint carried out with a pen heated over a burning tire. "It was not more painful than what was happening around us," he says.

Given what he's been

through, Tekulu isn't willing to shatter illusions for those who will no doubt follow him. "Even if I tell them not to come, how can they stay here? It is good for me to keep quiet."

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Escaping Boko Haram: the mother who hid her daughter in a ditch for nine months



Sally Hayden
in Gwoza

Zainabeu Hamayaji faked mental illness to deter Islamist militants from searching for her eldest girl

When she heard reports that Boko Haram was approaching her home town three years ago, Zainabeu Hamayaji had to think quickly. The Islamist militant group – whose name roughly translates as “Western Education is Forbidden” – had been terrorising the northeast of Nigeria since 2009, and now it was moving on to Madagali.

The 47-year-old’s biggest concern was her eldest daughter, Hassana Isa. At 12, she was young enough to enjoy childish games with her siblings, but old enough to be chosen as a wife for one of the violent militants whose organisation was becoming synonymous with destruction and bloodshed.

In that moment, Hamayaji made a decision that would change all of her family’s lives. Speaking about it now, a range of emotions flicker across her face as she recounts what happened next. She is sitting in an old schoolroom-turned camp for the displaced in Gwoza, a rural Nigerian town that served as the headquarters of Boko Haram’s once sizeable caliphate. Through a large bullet hole in the blackboard, she can see boys playing outside.

Eight years into a war that has caused tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of more than 2.5 million, the scale of the brutality of Boko Haram is still emerging. As more and more of the territory it seized becomes accessible, evidence of massacres, the use of child soldiers and other atrocities committed across Nigeria’s northeast are being laid bare.

So too come tales of heroism, bravery and ingenuity. Hamayaji’s story is one of these.

Hidden in a hole

“I dug a ditch within my compound,” she says. Inside it, Hamayaji hid almost 100 jerrycans of water, sacks of nonperishable food and some leather bags to use in lieu of a toilet. Then, she told her daughter to get inside the hole. Hamayaji covered the top of the hole with corrugated iron, and erected a tent on top. She kept her daughter hidden in that hole for the next nine months.

Within days, Boko Haram arrived in her town, killing her husband and many other local men, and quickly gaining total control of the area. “I saw them killing so many people because they were trying to escape, so I couldn’t leave,” Hamayaji says.

Next, as anticipated, the militants went door to door looking for young women.



■ Zainabeu Hamayaji in an old schoolroom in a camp for the displaced in Gwoza, a rural Nigerian town that served as the headquarters of Boko Haram’s once sizeable caliphate

PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN

Tipped-off about Hamayaji’s eldest, they turned up at her house. “I swore and swore I didn’t have a daughter but they didn’t believe me and kept beating me,” she says.

“They came every day to beat me and they were constantly terrorising me. So I decided to strip myself of all of my clothing and just walk around naked in the village. I un-plaited my hair to look like a mad woman. I urinated and put faeces on my hair and my body. I’d go to the town centre and roll around in trash so they would think I was mentally unstable.”

Her other three children – aged seven, 10 and 11 – backed up the charade, telling the sceptical militants that their mother had been attending a psychiatric hospital before the town was captured.

Hamayaji demonstrates how, while pretending to be mentally unwell, she would pull her other daughters close to her. She’d have flies swarming around her, attracted to the excrement. This was another ploy to save her children.

“Boko Haram decided they did not want a child from a madwoman. Previously they had killed a madwoman and the curse from the madwoman prevented them from any military successes. They didn’t want to kill another, so I was spared because of their belief. They wrote something on the wall saying nobody should attack this madwoman, it will be a curse. So I was protected.”



When the army’s soldiers arrived they were also suspicious of Hamayaji, asking her whether she had been married to a member of Boko Haram, unable to understand how she had survived without collaborating. She explained to them that her daughter had been living for nine months in the ditch she had dug for her.

Soldiers arrived

Nine months after Boko Haram arrived in Madagali, it was ousted by the Nigerian military.

For mother and daughter, the scars will last a long time. Hamayaji still has a dislocated shoulder from being repeatedly beaten – which, along with almost constant headaches, stops her from working. She has a scar on her forehead, and a missing tooth. She gesticulates wildly when telling her story, almost re-enacting the persona she had to adopt to get her through those nine horrific months.

“

Boko Haram decided they did not want a child from a madwoman . . . They wrote something on the wall saying nobody should attack this madwoman, it will be a curse. So I was protected

She readily accepts that what she did was unusual. “There are not a lot of women who sacrificed like that,” she says. “Other women actually gave away their children for selfish reasons, because Boko Haram were giving money at the time – they got food in exchange and needed to eat.”

The sum being paid for children ranged from 100,000 Nigerian naira (€278) to twice that amount, she says.

Hamayaji says sometimes the militants would give mothers land in the villages they had captured as a kind of dowry for their daughters. “Women would be so elated, they’d collect the money and the properties.”

Schoolgirls kidnapped

Boko Haram came to global attention when it kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from their dormitories in Chibok.

However, thousands of other women and girls have also been abducted or forced into marriages by the terror group. While some have few complaints about how they were treated, many have suffered physical and sexual abuse, and some forced into warfare.

Former wives have told stories of regular rape by both their “husbands” and other militants, forced labour and even the possibility of being made to carry a suicide bomb. The majority of bombings in public areas are currently carried out by women, some of whom may not know what they’re carrying, as the devices are detonated by militants from a distance.

For women and girls who escape, the threat of abuse remains. Last October, a Human Rights Watch report found that displaced women were being raped and sexually exploited by Nigerian authorities including government officials, police and camp leaders.

For now, Hamayaji says her eldest daughter is safe. Aged 14, she is at the Eid (end of Ramadan) celebrations when I meet her mother.

However, in common with some 11 million other children across northeast Nigeria, Hassana Isa is not in school and has limited opportunities. Hamayaji is reduced to begging for scraps to feed the family, she says, though it’s better than living under Boko Haram control.

“I will see what the future holds. I don’t know what will happen,” Hamayaji says, batting away flies in the dark, empty schoolroom, the sounds of hundreds of other displaced people outside. “I just know we’re safe now.”

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North Korea shrugs off sanctions to grow at fastest pace since 1999

CLIFFORD COONAN
in Beijing

North Korea’s economy shrugged off tough international sanctions over its nuclear programme to expand by 3.9 per cent last year, the fastest pace in 17 years, data from South Korea’s central bank has shown.

As well as cranking up tensions in the region, North Korea’s military spending, including investment in nuclear weapons tests and missile launches, helped give the economy a boost, Shin Seung-cheol, an official at the Bank of Korea’s economic statistics department, told the Yonhap news agency.

The growth mainly came from industries such as mining and manufacturing, as well as utilities such as electricity, gas and water supplies.

The Bank of Korea said it was the highest growth rate since 1999 when the economy grew 6.1 per cent. Last year, the isolated economy, which is believed to be heavily reliant on fuel and investment from its ideological ally and neighbour China, shrank by 1.1 per cent because of a devastating drought.

Travel ban US prohibits visits to North Korea

The US government will ban Americans from travelling to North Korea due to “the serious risk of arrest” after a US student was jailed while on a tour and later died, the state department said yesterday.

US secretary of state Rex Tillerson authorised a “Geographical Travel Restriction” on all Americans’ use of a passport to the country, spokeswoman Heather Nauert said. “Once in effect, US

passports will be invalid for travel to, through and in North Korea, and individuals will be required to obtain a passport with a special validation in order to travel to or within North Korea,” Ms Nauert said.

The move was due to “mounting concerns over the serious risk of arrest and long-term detention under North Korea’s system of law enforcement,” she added.

Ballistic missile
Despite slowing trade, North Korea has still been able to develop what it says is an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the US.

The South Korean unification ministry has renewed its call on North Korea to accept its offer of dialogue in the demilitarised zone that divides the two countries since the Korean War (1950-53) ended without a peace treaty.

North Korea’s main newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, said it was “nonsense” for Seoul to hope for improved relations as long as it continued to back sanctions and hold joint naval drills with the US.

China accounts for 93 per cent of North Korea’s foreign trade and mineral resources are a key part of their bilateral trade.

The Bank of Korea believes per capita income in the North

Thai court to deliver Shinawatra verdict

Thailand’s supreme court has set August 25th as the date for a verdict in the trial of the country’s former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who is accused of wasting billions of dollars on a rice subsidy scheme.

Ms Yingluck, overthrown in a 2014 military coup, faces up to 10 years in jail if found guilty in the trial, which has been going on for 18 months. Yesterday

was the last day for witness hearings. Ms Yingluck can make a closing statement on August 1st, the court said.

Ms Yingluck and her Pua Thai Party say the trial is politically motivated, aimed at discrediting a populist movement that has helped the Shinawatra clan win every election since 2001. Ms Yingluck’s brother Thaksin Shinawatra introduced the rice programme before he himself was ousted in a 2006 coup.

China under pressure to allow Nobel laureate’s widow move abroad

CLIFFORD COONAN

International pressure is growing to allow Liu Xia, the wife of the late Nobel Peace Prize-winner Liu Xiaobo, to leave the country if she wants to go abroad. She has been under house arrest for years.

Diplomatic sources in Beijing say intensive discussions are under way with Chinese authorities to grant permission to allow Ms Xia, a photographer and poet, to leave the country.

Liu Xiaobo, who was jailed on subversion charges, died of liver cancer on July 27th and China has been fiercely criticised over its treatment of the Nobel laureate.

Negotiations are proving tricky. Beijing has responded by saying that Mr Liu was a criminal under Chinese law, that he received excellent care and by telling western countries to back off what it sees as a sovereignty issue.

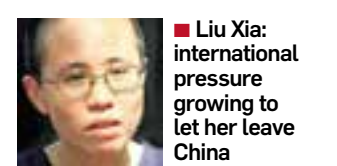
China has held a firm line saying “she is free” even though she has effectively been under house arrest for seven years since her husband won the peace prize in 2010. She has never been charged.

Communist Party

There are fears that if she were allowed to leave China, she would become a high-profile thorn in the Chinese government’s side, criticising the Communist Party for the way her late husband was treated.

The United Nations high commissioner for human rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Husseini said this week he will keep on pressuring China to allow Ms Xia to leave.

“We’re now focused on his wife and ensuring that she has – or trying to ensure that she



■ Liu Xia: international pressure growing to let her leave China

to go and visit her husband in Shenyang once a month. Her friends say she has suffered great mental anguish during her time in unofficial custody.

German chancellor Angela Merkel has reportedly raised the issue with the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, and US secretary of state Rex Tillerson has also called for Ms Xia to be allowed to leave China.

Legal scholar Jerome Cohen, director of the US-Asia law institute at New York University, wrote on his blog that Ms Xia’s case highlighted “what I call NRR – ‘non-release release’, another, lesser-known but insidious form of oppression”.

Syrians flee rebel-held Ghouta for second day

Air strikes kills dozens in embattled enclave as Syrian forces advance

Turks kill 27 after shelling Kurdish-held town of Afrin in multi-sided war

Thousands of civilians were fleeing from besieged enclaves on opposite ends of Syria yesterday as two major battles in the multi-sided war entered decisive phases, with hundreds of thousands of people trapped in the path of both assaults.

Air strikes killed scores of people in eastern Ghouta, a war monitor said, and weary residents streamed out on foot for a second day, as Russian-backed government forces pressed their campaign to capture the last big rebel bastion near Damascus.

gan its cross-border assault in Afrin in January. In both cases, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been trapped inside encircled pockets on the battlefield.

Backed by Russia and Iran, government forces have thrust deep into eastern Ghouta on the capital's outskirts, splintering the rebel enclave into three separate zones. The United Nations believes up to 400,000 people have been trapped in the Ghouta's satellite towns and farmland, short of food and medicine.

On another front, Turkish and allied rebel forces shelled the northern Kurdish-held town of Afrin heavily, killing at least 27 people and forcing 2,500 people to flee, the Syrian Observatory for Human

Carrying children
For the first time in the month since the government unleashed the Ghouta offensive, one of the deadliest of the war, residents are fleeing in their thousands, carrying children and belongings on foot to government positions.

An estimated 12,000-16,000 people had left eastern Ghouta in recent days, while fighting in the Afrin region had reportedly displaced more than 48,000, said Linda Tom, a spokeswoman for the UN humanitarian affairs office (OCHA) in Syria.

The Syrian army and allied forces have recaptured 70 per cent of the territory that was under insurgent control in the enclave, it said yesterday. The military statement said that after it secured the exit of thousands of civilians, authorities provided them with medical care and shelters.

"The army's general command calls on the sons of our noble people to come out," it added. Moscow and Damascus accuse the rebels of having forced people to stay in harm's way as human shields. The rebels deny this and say the government aims to depopulate opposition areas.

The observatory said air strikes in eastern Ghouta killed 80 people, including 14 children, in the towns of Kafr Batna, Saqba and Harasta, on Friday. Syrian state TV broadcast footage of men, women and children walking along a dirt road near the town of Hammouriyeh, many of them carrying bags, to leave rebel towns.

Some waved to the camera and said the factions had stopped them from going out. Russian news agencies reported that more than 4,000 people had come out yesterday.

The mayor of the nearby army-held town of Adra, Jassem al-Mahmoud, said about 5,000 people were sheltering there so far and as many as 50,000 were expected, who would be guaranteed food and medical help. -Reuters



“The Syrian war entered its eighth year this week having killed half a million people and driven more than 11 million from their homes

Rights war monitor said.
The Kurdish YPG militia defending Afrin said it was battling the Turkish forces who tried to storm the town from the north. The two offensives, one backed by Russia and the other led by Turkey, have shown how Syrian factions and their foreign allies are aggressively reshaping the map of control after the defeat of Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate last year.

Fled abroad
The Syrian war entered its eighth year this week having killed half a million people and driven more than 11 million from their homes, including nearly 6 million who have fled abroad in one of the worst refugee crises of modern times.

The government launched its offensive on eastern Ghouta a month ago, and Turkey be-



More evidence of systemic arrest and torture of returning refugees



Sally Hayden

Tens of thousands of Syrians risk being sent back by host countries

More reports of the arrest and torture of refugees who return to government-held Syria have emerged, following an *Irish Times* investigation into reverse migration by refugees leaving Europe.

In December, *The Irish Times* revealed that a growing number of Syrian refugees are returning home from countries including Germany, Sweden and Denmark, for reasons including family reunification applications being rejected and problems integrating in their host countries.

Since then, *The Irish Times* has received information that at least four returnees have been killed.

One man, who went back to Syria from Germany to care for his sick mother, went missing shortly after returning to his home in Damascus. The last his mother heard of him was when he phoned to say he was near the historic old part of the city – which has remained under government control. Eight months later, the man's body was found in a street nearby, according to a friend. The family could not confirm who was responsible for the killing. We also spoke to

a Damascus-based lawyer who witnesses death certificates issued for inmates who die in military prisons.

The lawyer – who can't be named because he fears repercussions – said he has received death certificates for three young men who had recently returned home from Europe, where they were living as refugees.

One returned to Damascus and two to government-held parts of Hama, a region in western Syria.

Prison deaths
All three men were arrested less than three months after coming back, and they died in military prison between two and four months after that. The cause of death in each case was listed on official documentation as a "heart problem".

Rights organisations have previously reported that explanations like "heart attack" and "respiratory issues" are regularly given for Syrian military detainees who die as a result of mistreatment and torture.

The Syrian government did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Late last year, we visited Damascus and interviewed a man who was arrested at the city's airport while going through immigration controls after returning from Germany.

He was imprisoned for a month and violently interrogated, before being conscripted into the army to fight Islamic State.

We met the man while he was on medical leave, which was granted after his unit was hit by a suicide bomb which killed many of his fellow soldiers.

Other returnees have spoken to *The Irish Times* about having their passports confiscated so they cannot leave the country



December 2017 report

again, and being called in for regular questioning by the police, who accuse them of having connections with opposition figures in Europe.

The latest reports come as the Syrian army gradually gains control of the country, prompting discussion among European politicians about when some of the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Europe can begin to return home.

The Syrian regime is keen to

“The cause of death in each case was listed on official documentation as a ‘heart problem’

promote President Bashar al-Assad's leadership as the most stable option for all Syrians, including the more than five million refugees who have fled the country. The government says it is implementing "reconciliation" procedures to allow refugees who supported the revolution to return home.

In an interview with *The Irish*

Times in November, Fadi Ahmad Ismail, the government representative for reconciliation in Aleppo, said any Syrians who fought government forces or spoke against the government in the media must go through a reconciliation process before coming back.

Refugees who left the country illegally should contact the ministry for reconciliation, Ismail said, and they may need to sign paperwork agreeing not to act against the government again.

However, Syrians who have applied for "reconciliation" said that agreeing to the government's conditions doesn't guarantee safety.

One former opposition member, who surrendered to Syrian forces in 2013 because he became tired of in-fighting among rebels and wanted to return to university, has said he finger-printed documentation stating he would give up any political activity.

He was then allowed home to study for several months before he was arrested for the first time. Over the following years, he was imprisoned twice – for periods as long as 18 months. He was also brutally tortured, he said.

Military prison

The man, now a refugee abroad who has asked not to be named because he has family in Syria, said he became emaciated in military prison. He said he was kept in a cell with at least 100 others in a space of just five by five metres. He struggled to describe how horrific the conditions were.

"The most bad thing is when one of your neighbours die," he said. "One time in the branch, my front neighbour died. I [was] hugging one dead person." He said the body was left in the cell for at least five hours

■ Civilians fleeing the Kurdish city of Afrin in northern Syria. A Turkish-led offensive to capture the enclave has forced 30,000 to leave.

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

afterwards. The man, who lives in Europe, said he was warned by officials during one violent interrogation: "Who told you reconciliation erases your past? We will return you to here every time."

Much of his account was corroborated by another former prisoner who shared a cell with him.

A report in February by six major international charities said hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees are now at risk of being forced to return home because of territorial gains by the Syrian government, combined with increased anti-refugee rhetoric in host countries.

The charities warning against forced returns were the Norwegian Refugee Council, Save the Children, Action Against Hunger, CARE International, the International Rescue Committee and the Danish Refugee Council.

"The reality... is that despite the shifting military dynamics in Syria and a marginal increase in the number of Syrians who have returned home in the last year, the country continues to be plagued by conflict and insecurity," the report said.

In 2017, 721,000 Syrians returned to their homes, according to the report. Of those, 655,000 were people who were displaced inside Syria, while about 66,000 were refugees, mostly from neighbouring countries like Lebanon and Jordan.

However, for every Syrian that returned home in 2017, at least three more were displaced.

Iranian leader likened to Hitler

BEN HUBBARD

Saudi Arabia's powerful crown prince has compared the supreme leader of Iran to Adolf Hitler and said his country would acquire a nuclear bomb "as soon as possible" if Iran developed nuclear weapons.

The comments by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ratcheted up the rhetoric in the increasingly volatile rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has fuelled sectarianism and war across the Middle East.

His statements were in an excerpt, released on Thursday, of a prerecorded interview with *60 Minutes*, the CBS News programme in the US. Iran's foreign ministry responded by calling the prince a delusional and devious novice who "has no idea of politics".

Sunni monarchy

Saudi Arabia, a Sunni monarchy, blames Iran for funding militias to undermine Arab states, while Shia Iran accuses Saudi Arabia of backing Sunni extremist groups.

Their struggle for regional dominance has put the two nations on opposite sides of conflicts in Yemen, Syria and Iraq that have killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions.

“He wants to create his own project in the Middle East very much like Hitler

Crown Prince Mohammed is due to arrive in the United States on Monday for an extended trip. His plans include meeting with President Donald Trump in the White House and with business, entertainment and technology leaders.

One of his primary goals is to persuade Americans to invest in his reform plans, which aim to help the Saudi economy diversify away from oil, increase the kingdom's military self-sufficiency and raise its citizens' quality of life.

His comments on Iran also suggested he would seek further US co-operation in combating Iranian influence in the Middle East, a goal he shares with the Trump administration.

When asked about his previous comments comparing Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, to Hitler, he replied, "Absolutely."

"He wants to create his own project in the Middle East very much like Hitler, who wanted to expand at the time," the crown prince said. "Many countries around the world and in Europe did not realise how dangerous Hitler was until what happened, happened. I don't want to see the same events happening in the Middle East."

"Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible," he said.

-New York Times

Briefs

Romania

Court rejects man's claim that he's alive

In a case reminiscent of a Kafka novel, a Romanian court has ruled that a 63-year-old man is dead despite what would appear to be convincing evidence to the contrary: the man himself appeared alive and well in court.

Constantin Reliu asked the judge in the town of Barlad to overturn a death certificate his wife obtained after he had spent more than a decade in Turkey, during which time he was out of contact with his family.

The court told him he was too late and would have to remain officially deceased.

"I am officially dead, although I'm alive," a bemused Reliu told local media.

A spokeswoman for the court explained that Reliu had been too late with his appeal against the death certificate and had therefore lost the case. The ruling is apparently final and cannot be appealed, leaving Reliu in legal limbo.

-Guardian

UK

Tube bomber in anti-terror programme



Ahmed Hassan: in deradicalisation programme for more than a year

A teenage Iraqi asylum seeker who planted a bomb on a crowded London underground train had been subjected to the government's deradicalisation programme for more than a year, it emerged at the end of his Old Bailey trial yesterday.

Ahmed Hassan was found guilty of attempted murder after his home-made device partially detonated at Parsons Green during the morning rush hour last September. He will be sentenced next week. Thirty people were injured in the attack. -Guardian service

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640d M-Sport Gran Coupe, Ruby Black met with Ivory leather, Pan roof, 20" alloys, Plus Pack & More, 18K..... €49,995</p> <p>162 BMW 18 1.5 Hybrid, Sophisto Grey met with Carum special leather, 20" Alloys, Blue highlights, €160k new, only 5K..... €29,995</p> <p>08 BMW M3 4.0 V8 Coupe Manual, Carbon Black met, Black leather, 19" alloys, Pro Nav, Xenons, H/Seats, only 46K..... €94,995</p> <p>142 BMW M4 3.0 DCT Coupe, Sapphire black met, Ivory leather, Sunroof, Black wheels, Blue brakes, €114k new, 37K..... €59,995</p> <p>171 BMW X3 2.0d X-Line 4WD Auto, Mediterranean Blue met with Oyster Leather, pan roof, Sat Nav, H/Seats, 14K..... €41,995</p> <p>152 BMW X5 25d M-Sport 7 Seater, Space Grey met with Ivory leather, 20" alloys, Pro Nav, H/Seats, Xenon lights, 31K..... €52,995</p> <p>161 Jaguar XF 3.0d Prestige, Ammonite Grey met, Black leather, Sat Nav, H/Seats, Xenon Lights, €390 Road Tax, Only 7k. €39,995</p> <p>161 Land Rover Defender 110 Adventure 7 Seater Ltd ed, Corris Grey met, Red 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€11,995</p> <p>161 Lexus GS 300 Hybrid SE Auto, Mercury grey met with Beige lthr, Sat Nav, Hd & Cooled seats, Adaptive Cruise, 14K..... €33,995</p> <p>151 Lexus NX 300 Hybrid Dynamic Auto, Pearl White with Black lthr, Sat Nav, H/Seats, Xenons, Privacy Glass, 20k..... €36,995</p> <p>12 Lexus RX 450 Hybrid SUV Auto, Jet black with Beige leather, Sat Nav, Heated Seats, Reverse Camera, 1 owner, 33K..... €28,995</p> <p>09 Maserati Gran Turismo 4.2 V8 Coupe Auto, Oceano blue met, Avorio lthr, Sat Nav, 19" alloys, full MSH, Only 33K..... €54,995</p> <p>141 Maserati Quattroporte 3.0 DV6 Saloon, Nero Met with Black lthr, Sunroof, 20" alloys, Carbon pack, Sat Nav, only 23K..... €49,995</p> <p>161 Mercedes C 350e Sport Premium Plug in Hybrid Saloon, Black met with Beige lthr, Pan roof, Nav, H/Seats & more, 17k €33,995</p> <p>161 Mercedes C 350e Sport Plug in Hybrid Estate, Black met with Beige lthr, Piano black trim, sat nav, H/Seats & more, 19k €34,995</p> <p>161 Mercedes CLA 45 AMG 4MATIC Turbo 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H/Seats, phone, only 18K..... €28,995</p> <p>152 Mercedes E 220 CDI AMG Sport Coupe Auto, Palladium Silver met with Beige lthr, Pan roof, Sat Nav, htd seats, 28K..... €30,995</p> <p>161 Mercedes E 220 CDI SE Premium (New Model), Iridium Silver met, Blk lthr, pan roof, Sat Nav, Htd seats, 18" alloys, 7k €39,995</p> <p>131 Mercedes GL 350 AMG Sport 7 Seater, Obsidian Black met with Black lthr, Sunroof, 21" AMG alloys, Sat Nav, D reg..... €69,995</p> <p>172 Mercedes GLE 350 AMG Line Premium 4WD, Obsidian Black met, Black leather, Pan roof, Sat Nav, H/Seats, only 9K..... €69,995</p> <p>171 Mercedes GLE 350 AMG Line Coupe 4WD, Polar White with Beige leather, Sat Nav, Side steps, 19" AMG alloys, 7K..... €72,995</p> <p>12 Mercedes ML 250 AMG Sport 4WD, Tenorite Grey met with Black leather, Sat Nav, Heated seats, 19" AMG alloys, 65K. €31,995</p> <p>131 Mercedes ML 250 SE 4WD, Tenorite Grey met with Grey leather, Sunroof, Heated seats, Harmon Kardon sound, 50K..... €34,995</p> <p>152 Mercedes S 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