

International

Migrants take new Balkan route through Bosnia, crisis continues

Matches the one taken by arms and drugs traffickers

SARAJEVO: A new Balkan route through Bosnia has opened up for migrants, four years after a crisis in which more than one million people landed on Europe's shores. Hundreds of thousands of people fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, took the so-called Balkans route northwest of Greece in 2015 and 2016.

The route was effectively closed in March 2016 and until recently the few still making the journey avoided Bosnia and its mountains. Instead they opted for a route through Serbia before dodging the Croatian and Hungarian authorities in order to make it into the European Union (EU). But now an alternative migrants' itinerary from Greece through Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia has emerged. The route, according to a western diplomatic source, matches the one taken by arms and drugs traffickers, indicating that human smuggling networks have been established.



700 have entered the country illegally

Thousands paid to people smugglers
One migrant Ahmed Wessam, who spoke to AFP in Sarajevo, left the northeastern Syrian town of Hassake a month ago having paid people smugglers to get him to Europe. "A thousand dollars (800 euros) to go from Turkey to Greece, a thousand euros to go from Greece to Albania and so on," Wessam told AFP. According to Bosnian authorities, since the beginning of the year 700 migrants have entered the country illegally and almost 800 were intercepted at the border.

Most of them are Syrians, Pakistanis, Libyans or Afghans. The authorities fear that the end of the cold weather could spell a big hike in numbers. "We have no capacity to accept thousands of refugees... although they

do not want to stay in Bosnia," Prime Minister Denis Zvizdic said recently. Head of the medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in the Balkans Stephane Moissaing dismissed concerns of a repeat of the 2015 migrant crisis. However, the Bosnian authorities should "handle (the situation) in a humane way, so it does not become a real humanitarian crisis", he said.

The country's current reception capacities are limited to a centre for asylum-seekers near Sarajevo, with space for just 154 people. The situation "gets complicated," Bosnian Security Minister Dragan Mektic admitted recently, stating that there were currently between 45,000 and 50,000 migrants between Greece and Bosnia, many of whom might try their luck through Bosnia. The border with Croatia, an EU member state, is 1,000 kilometers long and Sarajevo has only 2,000 border police officers.

According to Nidzara Ahmetasevic, a volunteer working with migrants in Sarajevo, the number of migrants in the country "is at least double" what the official figures show. "We are in contact with more than 300 people. We have found a solution (in terms of accommodation) for some 50, but we could fill two more houses of that size," she said.

Baby due

Initially intended to be a hostel in a Sarajevo suburb, the large building where Wessam and his relatives have been staying has individual rooms equipped with toilets. The house was made available by a Bosnian who lives abroad. Samira Samadi, 35, another migrant staying there, left the central Iranian town of Ispahan in early



SARAJEVO: Children sit in the living area of a repurposed Sarajevo suburban house, for migrants coming from Middle-Eastern, Asian countries. —AFP

2017 along with her husband. She takes advantage of an MSF doctor's visit to check if her pregnancy is proceeding well.

"I want to go to Germany but... because of my wife's pregnancy we can't continue," her husband Anoush Orak said. "We will probably wait here for the birth of

our child." The couple have already tried to illegally enter Croatia but the snow and forests put them off. Wessam, however, will depart in a "week, maybe 10 days". "I do not know how to cross the border but we will try and retry. We have already crossed many times," he said.—AFP

Iraqi widow saved recruits from slaughter

WASHINGTON: Aliyah Khalaf Saleh had already lost a husband, a son and a nephew to the terror that engulfed northern Iraq in 2014. But when a group of military cadets fled to her community near Tikrit to escape killers from the Islamic State group, she risked all to save them. In June 2014, the jihadists slaughtered hundreds of mainly Shiite Muslim recruits from the nearby Speicher military base.

A smaller group of young men tried to escape by crossing a river but Aliyah, now 62 and known at home as Umm Qusay, stepped in. "They were moving from Camp Speicher to Baghdad" when they came upon IS killing their comrades, she told AFP. The young men retreated 20 kilometers to an area where Umm Qusay's neighbors were clashing with the militants, and she took them in.

"There were Kurds and Iraqis, Muslims, Yazidis and Christians," she recalled. "I got them to my home." She gave women's clothes to some of the young men and hid them in the women's quarters on her farm. Others dug holes in a forest. IS fighters were hunting for the recruits, so Umm Qusay obtained university identity cards for some of them, giving them local names.

She taught those who were Shiite how to say their prayers like a Sunni to protect them from sectarian suspicions. And, over five months, she smuggled them to safety in Kurdish-held Kirkuk, hiding them in trucks surrounded by female relatives. "At first, the terrorists did not bother women," she said. In all she got 58 young men to safety before the Islamic State group's spies got wind of what she had done and she had to flee. Her family—her surviving sons plus their wives and children, 25 people in all—fled on foot through the night, she said.

Beacon of hope

They remained displaced, living in a single room, for a year before Iraqi government forces recaptured their home and they could return. Now, the government is triumphant, the Islamic State group is on the run and Umm Qusay's bravery and love has made her a beacon of hope. A Sunni, she has received a high Shiite religious honor and a national medal, but that is not her greatest satisfaction. "God took my husband, my son, and my nephew but he has given me in return these young men to console me," she said of the recruits. After the fighting, many of the young men returned to thank their savior, and to tell her story to a nation in need of hope. "They come to visit me, I come to visit them. Whenever there's a conference in Baghdad, they come with me," she said.

"Two of them got married, I attended their weddings. I was the happiest person there," she said, blinking back tears. Umm Qusay was honored again on Friday at the US State Department in Washington, where she was named an International Woman of Courage. Alongside nine other brave women, each with a story of their own, she received her award from First Lady Melania Trump.

"In recognizing the International Women of Courage, we stand for what is right," Trump told the guests. "In telling their stories, we can teach young women and girls all over the world what it means to have courage and to be a hero." It was a long way from the life of an Iraqi woman who married at 13 and lived through dictatorship, occupation and terror. But, as the women gathered for their group photo, Umm Qusay led them all in laughter, gesticulating to bridge the language divide. "I was reluctant to come at the beginning. I was also so tired, but I feel much better now," she said before the ceremony. "People smile at me in the street. It's like the smile regenerates you and makes you feel safe and secure," she explained. "People in Iraq have not been able to smile for many years now. All we do is cry and feel sad." —AFP

Syrians in Kurd city fear Turkey but bet on US

MANBIJ: In Syria's Kurdish-controlled Manbij, salesmen shout as customers bustle through the city's packed marketplace—an everyday scene that masks residents' deep fears of a Turkish attack. Despite the presence of US troops nearby, Manbij could become the next target of a Turkey-led battle against Kurdish militia in Syria's north. Ankara and allied Syrian rebels seized the northwestern city of Afrin on March 18, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly threatened to push eastwards and take Manbij.

"Everybody's scared, me included," said Hameed al-Damalkhi, 50, bent over a sewing machine as he stitched the sole back onto a used trainer at his shop in Manbij's covered market. He said he was still shocked by images of pro-Ankara fighters looting in Afrin, breaking into shops and homes and heading off with food, blankets and even motorbikes after Kurdish fighters retreated.

"What we hear about them is they're all thieves. You saw, they looted the whole (Afrin) area," he said, wearing a stained grey robe and greying beard. Turkey has said it aims to dislodge the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, which it labels a "terrorist" group, from the length of its border with Syria. "Where does he think he's going?" Damalkhi said, referring to Erdogan. "There are men here who can protect the area." The YPG has gained a reputation as a formidable force, especially as the backbone of a US-backed alliance that expelled the Islamic State group from much of Syria.

'Guarantees' from the US

Since Syria's war started in 2011, Manbij has



ARBIL: Iraqi Kurdish pop singer Dashni Murad performs on stage during the spring festival. —AFP

exchanged hands several times. Rebels overran the town in 2012. IS seized it two years later, turning it into a key transit point for fighters, weapons and cash between the Turkish border and its then de facto capital of Raqqa, further southeast. The US-backed and YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) took control of Manbij last year, handing the city's management over to a civil council. Dozens of American troops have since been stationed on the city's outskirts, with additional troops deployed there around a year ago.

Their presence offers some comfort to residents, especially after a delegation from the State Department and the US-led coalition visited the city council this

week. Ali Al-Sattaf, 50, who works at a money exchange, said the presence of US troops nearby was reassuring. "It makes us feel that nothing will rain down from the sky," he said. The YPG retreated from Afrin in the face of formidable Turkish and rebel fire power, including air strikes that pounded the Kurdish enclave. The US-led coalition stayed out of the battle for Afrin, but its presence outside Manbij has raised the spectre of a potential conflict between two NATO allies should Turkey attack the city. On Thursday, State Department official William Roebuck and US Army Major-General James B. Jarrard, who heads a US-led force fighting IS, visited Manbij Civil Council. —AFP

Croatians protest against treaty to protect women

ZAGREB: Several thousand people marched through the Croatian capital yesterday in protest against a European treaty designed to protect women. The demonstration gathered up to 10,000 people according to journalists' estimates and was held two days after conservative Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic's government sent the treaty for ratification by the parliament.

The Council of Europe convention—the world's first binding instrument to prevent and combat violence against women, from marital rape to female genital mutilation—has split the country. The Balkan nation's conservatives, supported by the Catholic Church along with hardliners from the ruling HDZ party, oppose the ratification. They argue that under the guise of protecting women the so-called Istanbul Convention promotes what they call a "gender ideology" which would undermine the traditional family.

"I'm a father not a parent!" and "Halt violence against Croatia!" read some of the banners carried by the protestors who gathered in front of the HDZ seat before marching through central Zagreb. The demonstrators, who also came from other parts of the country, waved Croatian flags, prayed and sang patriotic songs. "We feel threatened in our own country. The Istanbul convention is against Christianity," Gordana Turic told the crowd as they stopped at the main square.

The protestors chanted "Treason, Treason" when Plenkovic's name was being mentioned and the organizers urged MPs not to ratify the treaty. "I want family and family values preserved while the convention is against them," Ivana Horvat, a 38-year-old administrator, told AFP. In a bid to calm down tensions, Plenkovic, representing moderates within HDZ, amended a bill rat-



ZAGREB: Opponents to a treaty safeguarding women, backed by the Roman Catholic Church, protest against its ratification arguing it is imposing what they call a "gender ideology in the Croatian capital." —AFP

ifying the treaty. It includes a statement saying notably the treaty does not imply the need to "introduce gender ideology" in Croatia's schools or change the constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman. In the past weeks, the Catholic Church launched a fierce campaign against the convention's ratification with priests publicizing the protest after masses.

"The time has come to get out on the streets," Bishop Vlado Kocic said on Facebook urging Christians to join the protest. He earlier labeled the convention a "plague". Nearly 90 percent of Croatia's 4.2 million people are Roman Catholics and the Church plays an important role in society. The convention has so far been ratified by 28 countries, including 17 European Union member states. Croatia became the bloc's newest member in 2013. —AFP

Iran slams US sanctions over hacking scheme

TEHRAN: Iran yesterday slammed new US sanctions against 10 of its citizens and an Iranian company over their alleged involvement in a massive state-sponsored hacking and intellectual property theft scheme. The US Treasury Department unveiled charges on Friday against nine Iranians along with sanctions against 10 individuals and the Mabna Institute, which it accused of hacking hundreds of universities on behalf of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghassemi called the accusations "false". "Iran condemns the United States' provocative, illegal and unjustified actions, which are a major new sign of the hostility and animosity of US leaders towards the Iranian people," he said in a statement on the ministry's website. "They will not prevent the scientific development of the Iranian people."

The two founders of the Mabna Institute, Gholamreza Rafatnejad, 38, and Ehsan Mohammadi, 37, were among the nine Iranians indicted in New York and whose assets are subject to US seizure. Since 2013, the Mabna Institute carried out cyber intrusions into the computer systems of 144 US universities, the Treasury Department said, and 176 universities in 21 foreign countries. Mabna Institute employees and contractors "engaged in the theft of valuable intellectual property and data from hundreds of US and third-country universities... for private financial gain," it said.

"For many of these intrusions, the defendants acted at the behest of the Iranian government and, specifically, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps," Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said. The US Department of Labour, the US Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, dozens of private firms and non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund were also allegedly targeted. —AFP