



## EUROPE

## EU-Turkey deal fails to stop refugee flow

A year after the EU-Turkey Deal came into force, thousands of refugees remain stranded in Greece. The most desperate try to reach Europe by any means. Marianna Karakoulaki and Dimitris Tosidis report from Thessaloniki.



SISYPHUS ORDEAL FOR REFUGEES IN GREECE

### No risk, no life

Mohammad (left), 18, from Algeria, smiled when asked how dangerous the attempt is to hide and sneak out on freight trains. "No risk, no life," he told DW.



SISYPHUS ORDEAL FOR REFUGEES IN GREECE

## How far will the money go?

Anwar M., (left) and Ahmed A. from Algeria wait inside an abandoned wagon for the next freight train. "I tried to leave hidden in a train three times, I was caught twice in Macedonia and once by the Greek police," says Ahmed. Anwar adds: "A fake passport costs 1,500 euros and the smuggler from the port of Patras to Italy 600 euros. I only have 25 euros left and I try to save them for Serbia."



SISYPHUS ORDEAL FOR REFUGEES IN GREECE

## Final destination?

Zaki, 29, from Algeria takes a rest inside an abandoned train wagon. He arrived in Greece nine months ago and worked on an olive grove for a month. He's tried six times to get to Germany. His latest attempt was at least partially successful and he is now somewhere in the Balkans.



SISYPHUS ORDEAL FOR REFUGEES IN GREECE

## Train to nowhere

A Moroccan migrant sits in his makeshift room inside an abandoned train plotting his escape. He says he got caught three times hidden on a train at the Greek-Macedonian border and once in the port of Patras trying to travel to Italy hidden in a truck.



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## Time to hide

Jalwan, 16, helps Abdel Raman, 23, squeeze into the bottom of a freight wagon, which stopped at the station in order to change engines. According to security guards, this is the first place where Macedonian police conduct their searches.



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## Destination unknown

Because the timetable of the freight trains is unknown refugees do not always know the destination of each train. Instead of reaching their preferred border destination in the north, they sometimes end up in Athens.



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## Last instructions

An Algerian asylum seeker gives his friend last instructions how to hide inside a wagon carrying metal. Asphyxiation and dehydration are just some of the many dangers migrants have to contend with on their journeys.



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## A quick getaway

Young migrants jump off a train in an attempt to hide from private security contractors who are responsible for patrolling the area.



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## Readying their supplies

Mohammad carries food and water from the nearby Softex refugee camp for his friends who are already hiding inside a freight train.



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## Turning a blind eye

Greek railway workers play cards during their afternoon break. Panagiotis (right) has been working there for 33 years. "This has been happening for almost a year but since last summer it's happening every day. They leave and after one day they come back. It is very dangerous but we can't do anything to stop them. Once I saw a Syrian mother with a baby trying to go inside a wagon storing petrol."



SISYPHUS ORDEAL FOR REFUGEES IN GREECE

## Warning sign

The Greek authorities have put up a sign in Arabic warning of the electricity cables. Last November an Algerian migrant was electrocuted to death after trying to jump on a train.

Author: Dimitris Tosidis (Thessaloniki)

Last year Idomeni - the small village next to the Greek-Macedonian border that had become a symbol of hope for thousands of refugees - was packed with people. A few days earlier the EU-Turkey deal had come into effect, yet thousands of people still hoped the borders would open.

[Read: Money makes the EU-Turkey deal go round](#)

Nowadays, Idomeni is empty; a sign with the message "Hope" and the fence between the two countries are the only reminders that this place once was Europe's largest refugee camp. From time to time foreign volunteers visit the area yet they are soon taken to the police station in the village for questioning. Journalists need authorization from the Greek authorities and are escorted by officers of the Greek army.

Frontex - the European border and coast guard agency - recently deployed officers in order to assist the Greek authorities in preventing irregular border crossings in the area. Frontex's current mission has 40 officers including specialists in identifying forged documents and officers who patrol a large part of the Greek-Macedonian border as well as the freight trains that pass by in order to locate people who may try to cross to the neighboring country.

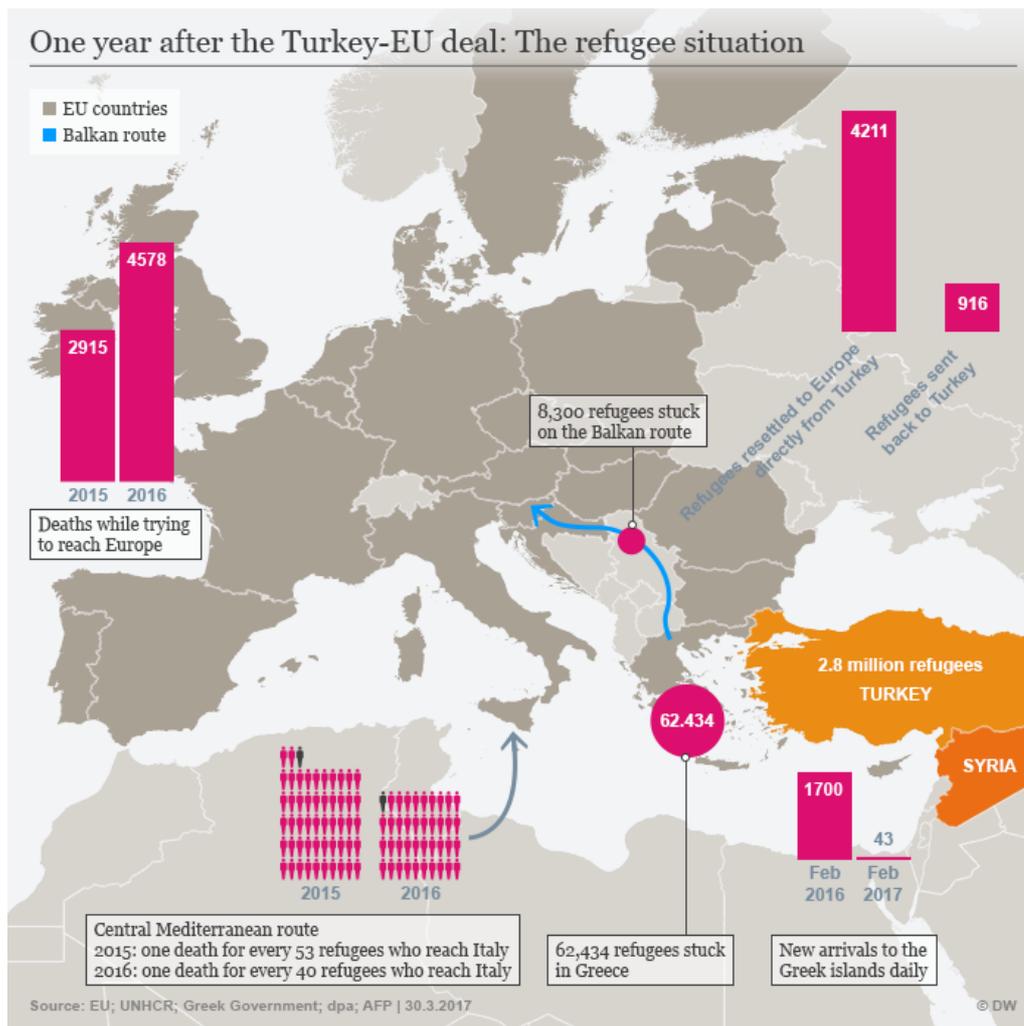
"There is some movement toward northern Europe, the numbers are not terribly high but in the first couple of months of this year we are talking about a couple of thousands of people," Frontex spokesperson Ewa Moncure told DW.

[Read: EU-Turkey refugee deal overburdens Greek islands](#)

### Crossing with GPS

Mohammed, a 24-year-old engineering student from Syria, is waiting for his relocation to northern Europe. His friends call him Mr. Smiley as he always has a smile on his face despite his ordeals. He arrived in Greece with his brother before the closure of the borders. When they arrived they each took a paper with a number; that paper indicated their turn to cross the borders. His brother entered Macedonia yet the border closed the following day and Mohammed was left behind. After staying in Idomeni for a while he decided to cross the border illegally to find his brother.

"I crossed the border with the help of some friends and by using my phone's GPS. We walked for nine hours, we crossed the river near the border, and once we were in Macedonia we went around the town of Gevgelija because there were too many police officers in the town. As soon we found the train track we followed it and we arrived at the refugee camp in Gevgelija," he told DW.



After months of waiting Mohammed and his brother decided to return to Greece and apply for the relocation program; They qualify because they're from Syria - others are not so lucky.

### Gone "missing"

Hundreds if not thousands of refugees have gone "missing" from the Greek refugee camps; some have already reached Europe, some went to Turkey on their own, others have returned to Syria.

[Read: 'The misery is still real'](#)

Behind the infamous Softex refugee camp near Thessaloniki, freight trains leave regularly for European destinations - usually Germany. The refugees here live inside the old, rusty train wagons and take food from the nearby camp; they have no money to go elsewhere and no chance of being relocated or receiving asylum in Greece as the majority of them are from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. They're all waiting to find the exact moment and the right opportunity to jump on a train in a bid to reach northern Europe. When DW visited, the Greek authorities had just stopped around 20 people who tried to board one of the trains.



Many refugees risk their lives to board freight trains heading for Europe

"I will try but this is very dangerous," said one young Algerian man.

### The art of smuggling

Then there are those who can afford to use smugglers to get them into Europe. Despite the EU-Turkey deal and the policing of the borders throughout Europe, the closure of the Balkan route has helped the smuggling business to blossom once again.

An abandoned building close to Thessaloniki's center has become a hub for homeless refugees who cannot access the camps and for those who wait for their smugglers' signal to move forward.

Abdullah, a 23-year-old Afghan refugee and a pre-med student, grew up in Pakistan; his family fled there from the Taliban before he was born. When the Pakistani government took a harsher line toward Afghans in the country, he went back to Afghanistan, but two months later he decided to leave. After a treacherous journey he reached Greece via the Evros River, the natural border between Greece and Turkey.

[Read: Pakistan's mass return of Afghan refugees raises concerns](#)

At first he tried to go to Italy via a boat from the port of Patras in southern Greece but he was arrested and put in jail for a few days. When he was released the police gave him a paper which allowed him to stay in Greece for a month and restricted him from going to border areas and Athens. His only chance now is to apply for asylum in Greece. Yet he still wants to try to reach Europe.

"I went to Athens and I paid a smuggler 3,400 euros (\$3,620) in order to get a passport, but I am still waiting for my smuggler to call me," he says. "I will wait and I will keep trying, it's the only chance I have. I want to go to France and meet my cousin who I grew up with," he continues.



Left out in the cold: Abdullah waits in vain for his smuggler to contact him

As DW talks to Abdullah, a new group of Afghan refugees arrive from Thessaloniki. They claim they were severely beaten by authorities at the Bulgarian border and were stripped of their clothing and left with nothing but their underwear.

[Read: Smuggling migrants through Bulgaria](#)

Abdullah is stressed and worried. Fifteen days have passed since he paid thousands of euros to receive his fake passport but he hasn't received any news from his smugglers. The memo he got from the police giving him only a month to stay legally in Greece expired a day earlier, and he is afraid that he will be apprehended by the authorities. He is desperate for answers regarding his status.

"If anyone asks for my advice on making this journey, I will tell them not to come. It is very dangerous here," he says, his voice trembling.

#### DW RECOMMENDS

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##### Money makes the EU-Turkey deal go round

Despite increasingly hostile politics, last year's 3 billion euro EU-Turkey agreement to assist refugees in Turkey and improve border controls is having an impact. Diego Cupolo reports from Ankara. (18.03.2017)

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##### EU-Turkey refugee deal overburdens Greek islands

More than 15,000 refugees are trapped on Greek islands. Complicated procedures make their situation even harder. Marianna Karakoulaki and Dimitris Tosidis have talked to some of them in Samos. (27.01.2017)

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##### 'The misery is still real'

The media has become quieter regarding refugees in Greece, but the situation is still difficult. DW spoke with Jochen Ganter, a physician for Doctors without Borders to find out more. (02.03.2017)

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##### Pakistan's mass return of Afghan refugees raises concerns

A new report by Human Rights Watch has raised concerns as Pakistani officials are forcing hundreds of thousands of refugees to return to Afghanistan. The United Nations has been accused of being an accomplice. (13.02.2017)

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##### Smuggling migrants through Bulgaria

For thousands of migrants who crossed the border between Turkey and Bulgaria the only alternative is to leave the latter with the help of smugglers. Ambra Montanari and Giovanni Piazzese report from Sofia. (23.08.2016)

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##### Sisyphus ordeal for refugees in Greece

Living in abandoned wagons near Thessaloniki's railway station, refugees squeeze into tiny holes inside freight trains as they try to sneak out of Greece. DW's photojournalist Dimitris Tosidis met them in Thessaloniki. (04.04.2017)

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