**Europe's Deadly Borders: An Inside Look at EU's Shameful Immigration Policy**

By Maximilian Popp

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Carlos Spottorno/DER SPIEGEL

The EU is doing all it can to keep out refugees.

**Along the frontiers between Spain and Morocco, Greece and Turkey and Hungary and Serbia, the EU is deploying brutal methods to keep out undesired refugees. Many risk everything for a future in Europe and their odysseys too often end in death.**

Green dots and lines document the course of the border on wall monitors in the situation room of Fortress Europe, on the 23rd floor of a skyscraper in Warsaw. Klaus Rösler, 59, a German police officer and 40-year civil service veteran, is in command. He uses terms like "storm on the borders," "risk regions" and "overcoming crises." Rösler is the director of the operations division at the European border agency, Frontex, and he makes it sound as though his agency is defending Europe against an enemy.

The green dots identify refugees who have been apprehended. The dots are small and sparse between the coast of West Africa and the Canary Islands. They become more dense in the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece. The sea route between Libya and Italy is almost entirely green.

Rösler has worked as a senior official with the German Federal Police in Macedonia, at the German-Czech border and at the Munich Airport. He took the position at Frontex in Warsaw in September 2008.

For a long time, there were only a handful of politicians in Brussels with an interest in the work at Frontex. The agency has been beefing up Europe's external borders against an influx of refugees since 2005. But now the civil war in Syria is creating millions of new refugees, and the next exodus is beginning in Iraq, as the terrorist group Islamic State continues to make inroads into the country.

In the Mediterranean, the Italian coast guard picks up desperate people from rickety vessels almost daily. In Germany, close to 20,000 people applied for asylum in July, the greatest number in 20 years. Some 200,000 refugees are expected to arrive in Germany this year.

**A Question of Europe's Values**

Given such numbers -- given the images of over-filled boats in the Mediterranean, border fences and overcrowded intake centers in cities across Europe, the question of the European Union's border policy is becoming a question of the EU's character and values. When 387 people drowned last October in a disaster off the Italian island of Lampedusa, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström called it a "horrible tragedy." The coffins lined up in a hanger at the Lampedusa airport were incompatible with the image "we Europeans have of ourselves," German President Joachim Gauck said in Berlin in late June, as he urged the EU to accept more refugees. Many citizens feel compassion for those who embark on the dangerous journey to Europe.

Nevertheless, the policies of European leaders have not changed since the Lampedusa calamity. The Italian coast guard and navy have frequently rescued boats in distress since last October, when operation Mare Nostrum began, bringing about 70,000 people onto Italian soil. But there was another disaster in late August, when 200 refugees died while attempting to cross the Mediterranean in a decrepit wooden boat. Italy has also announced that it will end its rescue operations, which cost the country €9 million ($11.7 million) a month, saying it wants Frontex to take over. A division of the border agency called Frontex Plus will now assume at least a portion of the Italians' duties, although funding remains unclear.

There is virtually no legal path to Europe for refugees -- not for most Syrians, of which only very few are brought to Germany as so-called contingent refugees, not for Iraqis and not for people from troubled West African countries. Those wishing to apply for asylum in the EU must arrive illegally first -- on smugglers' boats, hidden in minibuses or traveling with forged passports on commercial flights. The EU is sealing itself off, fearing that if it fails to do so, even more people will come, particularly from poorer countries. But it is also true that the transformation of the EU into a fortress has created the conditions that have led to deaths along its borders. Many refugees choose the extremely dangerous route across the Mediterranean because Frontex is sealing off land routes.

Rösler coordinates Europe's defenses against migrants. His agency's annual budget has skyrocketed from roughly €6 million in 2005 to almost €90 million today. On Frontex's recommendation, EU countries send police officers and equipment to border regions. Under the Frontex mandate, officers from Germany, France and Romania jointly patrol Europe's external borders.

According to Rösler, Frontex's job is to control migration rather than prevent it. But the agency's success is based on how effectively it defends Europe against irregular immigrants -- and, therefore, potential asylum seekers.

The organization analyzes data from national border agencies including Spain's Guardia Civil and the Greek coast guard. They count illegal border crossings and collect information about traffickers and migration routes. Under Frontex leadership, the EU launched a new €340-million program last December to monitor its borders with the aid of drones and satellites.

**A Staggering Death Toll**

One number that Frontex does not record, however, is how many people die on Europe's external borders.

A consortium of European journalists found that more than 23,000 people have lost their lives while attempting to reach Europe in the last 14 years.

In Greece, refugees report abuse by coast guard officers. Hungarian prison doctors systematically administer sedatives to keep refugee camp inmates calm. Moroccan soldiers mistreat migrants camping out on the border with Spain. Aid organizations have documented these incidents.

Frontex is almost never involved in such human rights violations, and yet almost all of these incidents of brutality occur within the agency's sphere of influence -- and involve methods that make a mockery of what Europe represents.

**Spain-Morocco**

On the night before his dash across the border, Claude Eog has a brief, dreamless sleep. The wind blows across his tent of torn plastic and he is awakened at midnight by noise in the camp on Mount Gourougou. Refugees from Mali, Somalia and Guinea are warming their hands over a fire. Eog puts on his worn jeans and pulls a shirt over his emaciated body. He can see Europe's lights sparkling in the valley below, in Melilla.

At about the same time, Lieutenant Antonio Rivera sits down at a computer in the Centro Operativo Complejo in Melilla, the control center of the Spanish Guardia Civil. Fluorescent light shines from the ceiling. Rivera and his colleagues are reviewing the images recorded by surveillance cameras on their monitors.

There are less than 10 kilometers (6 miles) separating police officer Rivera, 56, the father of two children, and Eog, 22, a half-orphan from Central Africa, and yet the two men are worlds apart. The land border between Africa and Europe runs through Melilla, a Spanish enclave on Moroccan soil.

Starting in 1998, and to a greater extent after 2005, the Spanish government, with EU assistance, built a €30 million bulwark along the Melilla border. It consists of three fences, 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) in length, six meters (20 feet) high, guarded by Moroccan soldiers on one side and the Guardia Civil on the other, to seal off Europe against immigrants. The border fence has become a symbol of Fortress Europe. Nevertheless, migrants repeatedly manage to breach the fence. Last year, Frontex reported almost 7,000 illegal border crossings for the two Spanish enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, and for the Strait of Gibraltar.

On Mt. Gourougou in northern Morocco, Claude Eog and the other refugees are discussing their strategy. Hundreds of them, as he later related, plan to leave the mountain, under cover of darkness, hoping to reach the fence without being discovered by Moroccan soldiers.

Eog worked as a mechanic in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. He fled when rebels murdered his father last summer, he says. Traffickers brought him to Morocco, and in November he boarded a minibus headed for Gourougou.

**'Life in the Camp Is Hell'**

The Moroccan government estimates that there are between 25,000 and 40,000 undocumented migrants living in the country and that about 1,000 men and a handful of women are hiding in the forests on Mt. Gourougou, where they built makeshift camps. There, they wait for an opportunity to get over the border to Europe, sometimes for years. The refugees have formed groups based on their countries of origin, with Nigerians, Cameroonians and Malians sticking together, as do those from other countries in Africa.

A group of men are squatting around a cooking pot at around noon on a summer day. In the forests of Mt. Gourougou, people eat the food scraps they find in the garbage of local residents, although on some days they find nothing. Empty bottles, cans and other debris litter the ground. The air smells like burned plastic. "Life in the camp is hell," says 14-year-old Mohammed, who fled from Guinea.

The immigrants sleep under tarps and cedar trees, little protection when temperatures drop below freezing in winter. The sick and the injured sit propped up against trees. Local security forces raid the camp almost every week, burning down the refugees' tents and beating anyone who doesn't manage to get away, aid organizations in the area claim. The military also captured Eog several times and he claims that the soldiers beat him with wooden sticks, and spat and urinated on him. "They torture us like dogs," he says.

Many times, Eog thought about giving up and heading back home. But the Central African Republic, where he is from, has disintegrated and is terrorized by warlords and militias. Observers liken the conditions in the country with those in Rwanda at the time of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi ethnic group. Staying in Morocco isn't an option, either. Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa have almost no prospects of finding work or housing in the country, partially due to discrimination because of their skin color. "We want to live a decent life," says Eog.

[](http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/bild-989502-748034.html)

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Graphic: Spain's Border Exclaves

In the Centro Operativo Complejo, Lieutenant Rivera receives radio messages from the Moroccan patrols. Informants in the camps have told them that the migrants are planning an "attack on the wall." Rivera grew up in Melilla and he remembers the pre-2005 days, when the border was merely secured with a slightly better-than-average wire fence. "The fence has transformed our city into a prison," says Rivera. The Guardia Civil now has 600 officers working in Melilla.

The EU does not sanction violence by Moroccan soldiers. Still, it treats the Moroccan-Spanish border zone as a test site for the future of immigration control, delegating its defenses against immigrants to neighboring countries. In the context of the MEDA program alone, Europe paid Morocco €68 million to protect the border between 2007 and 2010. Frontex coordinated joint operations between Spanish and Moroccan security forces.

**'Excessive Violence'**

In a report, the organization Human Rights Watch sharply criticizes Spanish and Moroccan border guards in Melilla for using "excessive violence" against refugees, claiming that even pregnant woman and children are beaten and abused. Last year the aid organization Doctors Without Borders (MSF) terminated its program in Morocco in protest against "institutionalized violence" against migrants. Between 2010 and 2012, MSF treated 10,500 sick or wounded refugees, some who had become victims of the border guards. "We found men with broken arms and noses. One man had been beaten so badly that he had a triple skull fracture and a brain hemorrhage," says a doctor.

Despite accounts like this, the EU has expanded its involvement with Morocco and it is currently negotiating an agreement under which people who have reached EU countries illegally through Morocco can also be deported back to the country. In Libya, German police officers are training militia members to become border guards under the auspices of the European EUBAM mission, despite reports by Human Rights Watch of torture in Libyan refugee internment camps.

The representative of the Spanish government in Melilla, Abdelmalik El Barkani, a member of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's conservative People's Party, praises the EU's "excellent cooperation" with North African countries and insists that the migrants are the source of any violence.

Residents of Melilla are tired of talking about refugees. Tourists sunbathe on the beach and young women drink beer in the bars while retirees play golf next to the detention center.

Some migrants pay traffickers €3,000 to take them from Morocco to Spain by boat. But Eog used up his money traveling to Morocco, so his only option is to climb the fence. In his first three attempts, the razor wire sliced into his arms and legs. Moroccan soldiers apprehended him on the African side of the fence, he says, and then they beat him and took him to Algeria, far away from the EU border.

He returned, and this time, on March 17, Eog managed to approach the border fence unnoticed and he hid in bushes until darkness fell. At around midnight, Lieutenant Rivera noticed movements by large groups of people on his surveillance monitor. He later learned that there were 800 people on the move that night, one of the largest numbers ever. Eog was one of the first to run at the fence. Blinded by the floodlights, he hooked his fingers into the small mesh openings of the fence. His arms and legs ached. But they were no patrols on the path in front of him, and he knew that he would make it to Europe this time.

**'Freedom! Freedom!'**

Two months later, Eog is leaning against the wall of the refugee center in Melilla, his hands are scarred. He says that 120 migrants made it to Europe on the night of March 17. They were drunk with joy as they walked through the streets of Melilla, shouting: "Freedom! Freedom!"

Now Eog is housed in a camp but he hopes to be transferred to the Spanish mainland. He wants to continue on to Germany, where he wants to work as a mechanic.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Rivera is trying to figure out what went wrong on the night that Eog climbed the fence. He drives through Melilla in a Guardia Civil SUV. The pressure at the border has grown steadily in recent years, he says. More refugees scaled the fence in the first few months of 2014 than in the entire previous year. "We can deter individual migrants, but we are powerless against large groups," he says.

Even the Guardia Civil labor union protested against the sharp razor wire used in the Melilla fence, saying that its officers could no longer bear to look at the heavily injured refugees and were questioning the purpose of their work. The Spanish government has announced its intention to spend additional millions on the border barrier, including installing a fence with smaller mesh openings to make it more difficult to climb.

Rising refugee figures always elicit the same reaction from Europe: more deterrence. In the next seven years, the EU plans to invest another €2.8 billion in a new internal security fund. And then there are the expenditures of individual member states and research funds to develop new border technology, which will include, for example, robots carrying surveillance cameras to repel refugees.

Individual routes are blocked temporarily. For instance, in the course of Operation Hera, Frontex was able to reduce the number of illegal border crossings between the West African coast and the Canary Islands from almost 32,000 in 2006 to only 250 in 2013. Nevertheless, the total number of refugees reaching Europe hasn't declined, because immigrants are simply choosing other, often more dangerous routes instead.

**Greece-Turkey**

On Jan. 19, a boat carrying refugees capsized en route from Turkey to Greece and 12 people, women and children, drowned in plain view of the Greek coast guard. At least seven migrants died in a similar accident in the Aegean Sea in March, six in April and at least 22 in May.

Rana Fida, 42, steps onto the balcony of her refugee apartment on the Greek island of Lesbos. Looking out at the sea she crossed to get there, she says: "It's a miracle to be here."

Fida and her 12-year-old twins, Aya and Abdullah, tried three times to flee to Europe from Syria, using the land route through Turkey. Twice they were detained by Bulgarian security forces and sent back to Turkey and the third time Turkish police detained the family. On the fourth attempt, Fida risked her life and that of her children by boarding a trafficker's inflatable boat.

This is a direct consequence of Frontex's efforts to secure the borders. Until recently, refugees in the southeastern Mediterranean region were able to reach Europe by land. But then, in response to pressure from the EU, Greece sealed off its border with Turkey. In 2012, the Greek government applied the Melilla model and built a 10.5-kilometer border fence at the Evros River, deployed 1,800 additional police officers and opened new internment camps for migrants. In 2011 and 2012, Frontex invested about €37 million in Operation Poseidon to secure the Greek-Turkish border. A few kilometers to the north, Bulgaria, with EU support, has just completed a 30-kilometer metal fence along a section of the border.

The technical upgrades are all part of "effective border management," say officials at Frontex.

More and more refugees are now taking the sea route. At least 218 people died in the Aegean between August 2012 and July 2014. According to human rights organizations, the Greek coast guard forced some of them back into the open sea, where they drowned.

Rana Fida, who doesn't want to use her real name, is rubbing prayer beads. She is wearing a long black skirt and a headscarf.

Fida worked as an elementary school teacher in Damascus, where her husband was a manager for a bus company, but the Syrian civil war tore the family apart. To avoid military service, the two eldest sons fled to Sweden and Denmark when the fighting began in 2011. Fida persevered in Damascus with her husband and the twins. "I didn't want to leave my country. Until the end, I hoped that the war would end soon," she says. But when thugs working for dictator Bashar Assad abducted Fida's husband last summer, she fled to Lebanon and flew to Istanbul from there.

More than a million refugees have arrived in Turkey since the civil war in Syria began. Roughly a third are housed in temporary camps, where they receive regular meals and their children go to school. But most of the new arrivals are forced to make do without government assistance.

Fida and her children lived in a one-room apartment in Istanbul that acquaintances had found for them. To help pay the rent, her son Abdullah worked as a runner in a brokerage firm. Fida wanted to continue to northern Europe, where her sons live and for €800, a trafficker guided the family to the Bulgarian border.

Fida's voice falters when she talks about her first encounter with Europe. Holding her two children by the hand, she and two dozen other migrants wandered aimlessly around the Turkish-Bulgarian border region at night. Bulgarian police using dogs tracked down the refugees in a forest. Fida was arrested and the security forces beat her son, she says. The family spent a day at a police station, until the Bulgarian police took them back to Turkey.

**Profiting from Desperation**

EU member states are obligated to review the situation of each individual refugee. But nations on the EU's external borders, like Spain, Bulgaria and Greece, repeatedly ignore this rule. In the course of illegal "push-back" operations, they simply return refugees to neighboring countries.

After half a year in Istanbul and another failed attempt to reach Europe by land, Fida followed the advice of other migrants and risked the dangerous passage across the Mediterranean. "It was our only choice. How were the children and I supposed to make a living in Turkey?" she asks.

[](http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/bild-989502-747971.html)

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Graphic: Crossing the Aegean Sea

Human traffickers profit from the desperation of refugees, because almost none of them reach the border with Europe without their help. Fida paid €2,500 for the trip to Greece, using money she had borrowed from relatives. She paid another trafficker to smuggle the family from Istanbul to the south in a minibus, and from there to a Greek island on an inflatable boat. Fida gave the fee to a middleman, who was to pay the trafficker once they had arrived in the EU. In the first attempt, Turkish police stopped the vehicle and arrested the driver, but then, a week later, the refugees made it to Izmir.

The city, 330 kilometers southwest of Istanbul, has developed into a hub for migrants in recent years with the traffickers' buses departing from Izmir for the coast. On a muggy summer afternoon, dozens of refugees -- families from Syria, and men from Sudan and Somalia -- sit and wait in the alleys behind the Basmane train station.

Faris, a young Syrian, explains how the trafficking business works. He fled the war in Aleppo in 2012 and worked for a year and a half in construction in the Turkish border city of Kilis. An acquaintance found him a job as a driver for a traffickers' network in Izmir. "I never wanted to work as a trafficker. But I need the money for Europe," says Faris.

Gangs have divided up the immigrant business in Turkey, and their leaders hire refugees like Faris as helpers. Faris is paid a commission to smuggle migrants from Izmir to the coast.

**A Combat Zone**

Under a deal the EU signed with Turkey last December, Ankara agreed to take back refugees who had reached the EU through Turkey, in return for the prospect of visa-free travel for Turkish citizens in Europe. It is yet another attempt by the EU to stop refugees before they reach its borders. But the Turkish police only monitor traffickers' routes intermittently, because the area is too large to control. Besides, says Faris, some officials receive bribes from traffickers. Fida and her children reached the Turkish coast after spending a night in Izmir. The smuggler dropped the family off in a cove and sent them to a boat.

Fida clung to her son Abdullah during the passage across the Aegean as water splashed into the overfilled inflatable boat. She was so terrified that she vomited. But the passengers were in luck, and after four hours at sea they reached the island of Lesbos without being detected by Greek patrols.

The passage between the Turkish Mediterranean coast and the Greek islands has turned into a combat zone. According to Frontex, in 2013 some 24,800 migrants tried to reach the EU from Turkey illegally, mainly by sea, more than in almost any other region. An army of Turkish, Greek and other European border guards has been deployed to stop the flow of migrants.

A light breeze is blowing across the Aegean Sea. Panagiotis Polidoras, the captain of the Greek coast guard on the island of Lesbos, has invited reporters to accompany his team on patrol. He wants to demonstrate how conscientiously the coast guard is on Lesbos. His speedboat glides across the smooth water. The lights of Turkish towns flicker in the distance.

Operations in the border region are subject to strict rules. One of them is that the Greek coast guard may not patrol in Turkish waters. If Polidoras discovers a refugee boat on his radar, he notifies his Turkish counterparts. This approach enables the Turkish coast guard to stop quite a few migrants before they cross the maritime border.

Under national and European law, the Greek coast guard may detain refugees who reach Greek waters but not send them back to Turkey. Most migrants are traveling on unseaworthy boats, and Polidoras says his team often saves refugees from drowning.

But human rights observers accuse the Greek coast guard of sometimes using brutal methods to fend off migrants. Last year, a number of Syrians told the organization Pro Asyl about mistreatment at the hands of Greek patrols.

According to the Syrians, men in black uniforms forcibly took refugees to a military base, where they beat them with wooden sticks, tied their hands behind their backs and confiscated their mobile phones and passports. "We thought we were in Europe and in safety," said one of the refugees, adding that they were locked into a windowless room for many hours. According to the refugee, the security forces placed the migrants on boats with empty gasoline tanks and towed them out to sea in the evening. Turkish patrols eventually picked up the refugees.

Antonios Sofiadelis, the head of the Greek coast guard on Lesbos, denies the allegations, saying that any such cases were isolated incidents. But the Syrian refugees' accounts coincide with reports by Amnesty International and the bar association in Izmir, which investigated similar cases. According to Pro Asyl, between October 2012 and September 2013, about 2,000 refugees were sent back to Turkey, in violation of international law, at land and sea borders in the context of push-back operations that often turned violent. And according to Amnesty International reports, Greek border agents even shot at Syrian refugees with live ammunition in March.

**An Impossible Task**

Konstantinos Triantafyllos, a Greek lawmaker, believes that the human rights violations in the Aegean point to a fundamental crisis in European refugee policy. The EU is entrusting countries along its fringes with an impossible task, says Triantafyllos: To seal of the borders, on the one hand, and to save human lives on the other. Italian authorities face the same dilemma.

As Greece struggles with the consequences of the economic crisis, the government's willingness to accept refugees is understandably low. Although Athens apparently doesn't openly urge the coast guard to engage in push-back operations, it also doesn't actively oppose such operations. Any migrant rescued by Greek patrols in the Aegean is a potential asylum applicant. When he was the opposition leader in 2012, Prime Minister Antonis Samaras promised to "recapture" Greek cities from such asylum applicants. Meanwhile, the former Athens police chief said in a speech: "We must make life unbearable for the migrants."

The EU encourages this treatment of refugees. In the last three years, it has paid Greece more than €12 million to care for migrants. In the same period, it deemed securing the Greek borders to be worth €228 million.

Fide now lives in an apartment provided by a Greek aid organization on Lesbos. She wants to join her sons in Sweden and has filed a petition with the authorities to allow the family to be reunited. Very few migrants apply for asylum in Greece because conditions there are miserable for recognized refugees. That's why many are now living illegally in central and northern European countries.

The Dublin Convention, which regulates the jurisdiction for asylum cases, came into effect in 1997. Under the Convention, any refugee who reaches Europe may only apply for asylum in the country he or she reaches first. It benefits Germany, which is surrounded by EU countries, but it also tempts overwhelmed countries on the external borders to treat refugees poorly so that they will choose other routes.

**Hungary-Serbia**

A shiver runs through the body at first, says Abu Naffa. Your hands and feet become numb, your nerves tingle and you feel dizzy. "The pills kill your mind," he says. "You become a zombie."

Naffa, a refugee from the Palestinian territories, spent half a year in an asylum prison in northern Hungary. He says the guards there gave the inmates Rivotril, a drug used to avert epilepsy and anxiety attacks and which is classified as a controlled substance in Germany, to keep them calm. The drug can become addictive very quickly. Naffa claims that security forces at the prison went from cell to cell at night and forced the migrants to swallow the medication.

In 2011, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) warned that Hungarian asylum guards were using drugs to sedate migrants. Máté Szabó, the human rights officer of the Hungarian parliament, says that 7,800 tablets of Rivotril, along with thousands of other sedatives, were given to 922 inmates at the Nyírbátor asylum prison within one year.

Szabó says conditions there are worse than in an ordinary prison. The refugees sleep on worn mattresses in cramped cells, and the lack of toilets sometimes forces them to urinate into plastic bottles. Migrants who need to see a doctor or go to a government agency are led through the town on a leash and in handcuffs.

Naffa is 22 but he looks like an old man; his hair is shaved around his ears and his teeth are brown stumps. Naffa runs his hand over pink scars on this stomach explaining that he cut himself with a razor blade when he was withdrawing from Rivotril. "I couldn't live without the stuff," he says.

**No Functioning Asylum System**

Hungary has no functioning asylum system. The few existing facilities are overflowing, so that many refugees are housed in former military barracks or community buildings that were converted into prisons for migrants. In April, more than 40 percent of all male asylum seekers were being housed in a prison. The reasons for arrest are arbitrary and unclear. As a rule, migrants are held for a month without having committed a crime. The UNHCR is critical of conditions in Hungarian asylum prisons, calling them "inhumane and demeaning."

On a Saturday in May, several dozen demonstrators have gathered outside the Debrecen asylum prison on the Hungarian-Romanian border. They have come there by bus from Budapest to protest against their government's treatment of refugees. Supporters of the right-wing extremist party Jobbik, wearing bomber jackets and combat boots, have taken up positions along their arrival route. Police officers are patrolling the site.

A few hours earlier on this Saturday, Abu Naffa was transferred from the prison to an open camp in Debrecen and he has now joined the protest march. "We want Europeans to know what is being done to refugees in Hungary," he says. When the demonstrators reach the prison, inmates rush to the windows -- men from Afghanistan, women from Syria and children. They wave white towels and shout: "Save us!"

[](http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/bild-989502-748035.html)

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Graphic: Hungary's Hot Spots

Naffa left Gaza City and fled by land across Turkey and the Balkans and into the EU. After finishing school, he saw no future for himself in the Palestinian territories and dreamed of a life in France or Germany. His hopes were dashed when Hungarian police picked him up and locked him into a prison with many other migrants in the northeastern part of the country.

Naffa complains of regular abuse by security forces and says that many of his fellow inmates have become addicted to Rivotril, and that some have tried to commit suicide.

After coming under international criticism, Hungary eliminated the worst persecution of refugees in January 2013. But when the number of asylum seekers arriving in the country increased sharply, the government of Prime Minister Victor Orbán introduced a new incarceration regime half a year later. The primary purpose of the asylum prisons is deterrence, says Júlia Iván of the Hungarian human rights organization Helsinki Committee. They are intended to encourage refugees to avoid Hungary or continue migrating to Western and Northern Europe.

Those who do not leave Hungary voluntarily are often deported north to Ukraine or south to Serbia.

Migrants have set up a camp on the edge of a landfill in Subotica on the border with Hungary, the fifth-largest city in Serbia. Several hundred refugees, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, languish there in huts made of plastic tarps and plywood. They eat food scraps found in the garbage and bathe in a pond. They are waiting for family members to send them money to continue their journey. Abu Naffa lived in the Subotica camp for a short time after Hungarian police officers had deported him.

Every week, Pastor Tibor Varga goes to see the refugees and hands out blankets, bread and aspirin. The pastor is one of the few people in the city who attend to the needs of the migrants. Varga parks his car in the courtyard of an abandoned brick factory, walks through tall grass and follows tracks on the ground. The camp is deserted on this particular morning. The ground is littered with clothing, telephone cards and cooking pots. A few days earlier, the Serbian police raided the site and arrested any migrants who were unable to flee.

Like other neighboring countries, the EU is also urging Belgrade to prevent refugees from approaching the border, hoping that Serbia can deter refugees from reaching Hungary. Frontex police officers patrol in the Hungarian-Serbian border region. The Serbian government introduced an asylum system in 2008, but only three people have been granted refugee status since then. "No refugee can live in Serbia permanently," says Pastor Varga.

Most migrants continue northward after a few weeks. In his second attempt, Naffa made it to Austria unnoticed. The police detained him there and forced him to return to Hungary.

Now he is sitting in front of the entrance to shipping containers used to house refugees, looking somewhat lost. He says that the open camp to which he was transferred isn't much different from the prison. Migrants still live in cramped conditions and guards patrol the cells. Now Naffa wants to try to reach Germany a third time. "The police can arrest me and beat me. I won't give up."

**Europe's 'Disgrace'**

According to the UNHCR, more than 50 million people were displaced last year, the biggest number since World War II. Developing countries accept nine of 10 migrants. A million Syrians currently live in Lebanon, a country with about 4 million people. In the EU, only 81,015 refugees from Syria applied for asylum in the last three years. Immigration to Europe is far lower than to countries like Lebanon, says Volker Türk, the UNHCR Director of International Protection.

Cecilia Malmström, the outgoing commissioner for home affairs, wants EU leaders to create more legal pathways for refugees. Until now, it has been all but impossible for people from poor countries to obtain work visas for the EU.

Equally slim are the chances of being admitted to a resettlement program, which permanently places refugees from acute crisis regions like Syria or South Sudan in safe countries without bureaucratic asylum proceedings. The UNHCR is currently seeking resettlement slots for 94,000 refugees. The United States recently accepted more than 50,000 people in the resettlement program, while the entire EU accepted more than 5,000 and Germany 300. Commissioner Malmström calls it "a disgrace" that Europeans are accepting so few refugees. "I am convinced that the EU member states must do far more to help people who are fleeing hunger, poverty and violence in their nature countries."

The European Union has protected its borders until now. It ought to begin protecting people.

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*