

Desperation at Sea

Tens of thousands of people from the Middle East and Africa are risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea to get to Europe

BY REBECCA ZISSOU

It was early in the morning on April 17, 2015, and 15-year-old Ali* sat in an inflatable plastic boat in the Mediterranean Sea. It had been three months since he climbed into the back of a pickup truck to leave his home in the African nation of Somalia. Desperate to escape the violence and poverty of his homeland, he'd arranged for smugglers to take him 4,400 miles across the Sahara Desert to the coast of Libya.

Now, crammed in the small boat with about 70 other **migrants** and **refugees**, he dreamed of starting a new life in Europe.

But after a few hours at sea, a hole appeared in the front of the boat and air started leaking out. Some of the passengers tried frantically to cover the opening, while others used a satellite phone to call the Italian coast guard. It took six hours for help to arrive.

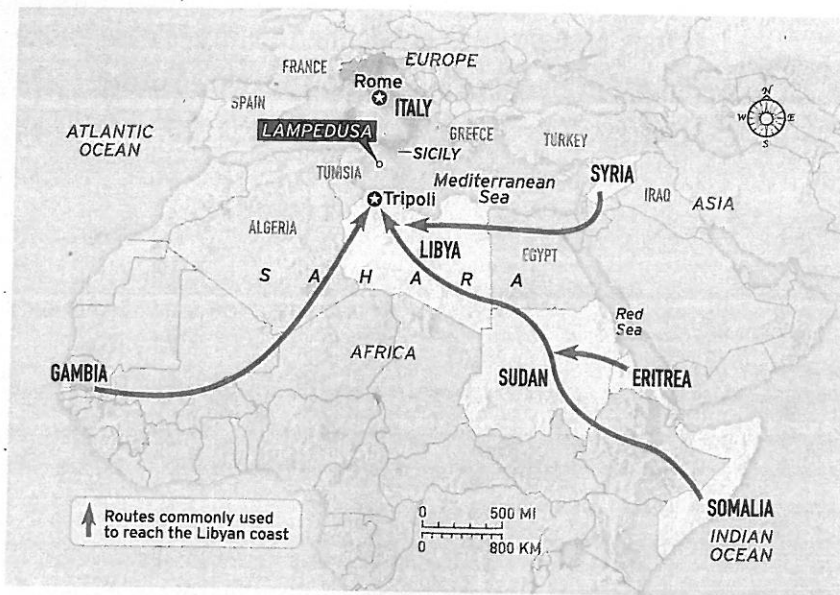
"Those six hours were the worst moments of my life," says Ali. "I thought I would never live again."

Luckily, everyone onboard survived. Hours later, they were taken to a reception center for migrants and refugees on the Italian island of Lampedusa. There they were given a hot meal—their first in months—and beds to sleep in.

Ali and his fellow travelers represent just a fraction of the →

◀ European ships have rescued thousands of people stranded on overcrowded, rickety boats in the Mediterranean Sea.

*Name has been changed for privacy



MAPPING MIGRATION

Thousands of people from Africa and the Middle East cross the Sahara Desert on their long journeys to Europe. Many of them set sail from Tripoli, the capital of Libya, on crowded boats (right).



thousands of people who have attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea to get to Europe in recent years. Many are escaping violence, poverty, or persecution in the Middle East and Africa. According to the United Nations (U.N.), more than 100,000 people arrived in Europe by boat in the first half of 2015.

Most, like Ali, are packed into rickety boats that were never meant for the high seas. The vessels often lack life jackets and navigation equipment. As of June, more than 1,800 people had drowned attempting the journey, up from 425 during the same period in 2014.

"The situation in the Mediterranean . . . cannot continue like

this," says European Union (E.U.) President Donald Tusk. "We cannot accept that hundreds of people die when trying to cross the sea to Europe."

Dangerous Journeys

Throughout history, millions of people have been forced to flee their homelands—often to escape war, poverty, hunger, disease, persecution, or natural disasters.

Today the U.N. estimates that nearly 60 million people are displaced worldwide—more than at any other time ever recorded. (See "A Global Crisis," pp. 12-13.)

Many of those seeking safety in Europe come from Syria, a country in the Middle East being torn apart by a civil war. Since

the fighting began in 2011, more than 200,000 people have been killed, and 4 million have fled for their lives. Thousands of others are running from poor, unstable countries in Africa, including Eritrea, Gambia, and Sudan. (See "Mapping Migration," left.)

In Somalia, where Ali was born, a violent militant group known as al-Shabaab has been wreaking havoc for years. The group's aim: to overthrow the country's Western-backed government and impose strict Islamic law. Al-Shabaab has kidnapped hundreds of children on their way to school and forced them to fight on the front lines.

"In my country, there is no peace," says Ali, whose parents died when he was 9 years old.

In January, he decided that it was finally time to go. Ali left Somalia with a 19-year-old friend whose father had paid smugglers to take the two teens to Libya. As they traveled north through the Sahara Desert—where temperatures can reach 110 degrees Fahrenheit—they were given little food or water. Then one day, Ali's friend fell out of the back of the pickup truck as it sped through the sand.

"[He] didn't make it," says Ali. "We buried him in the desert."

A Brutal Stop

Weeks later, Ali arrived in Libya alone and afraid. There is virtually no security along the Mediterranean coast of this North African country, allowing human smugglers to operate freely.

Conor Fortune of Amnesty International, an aid group, says smuggling networks in Libya often hold people for weeks at a time

**"IN MY COUNTRY,
THERE IS NO PEACE."**

—ALI, 15, FROM SOMALIA

until the refugees are able to pay thousands of dollars to secure a spot on a boat.

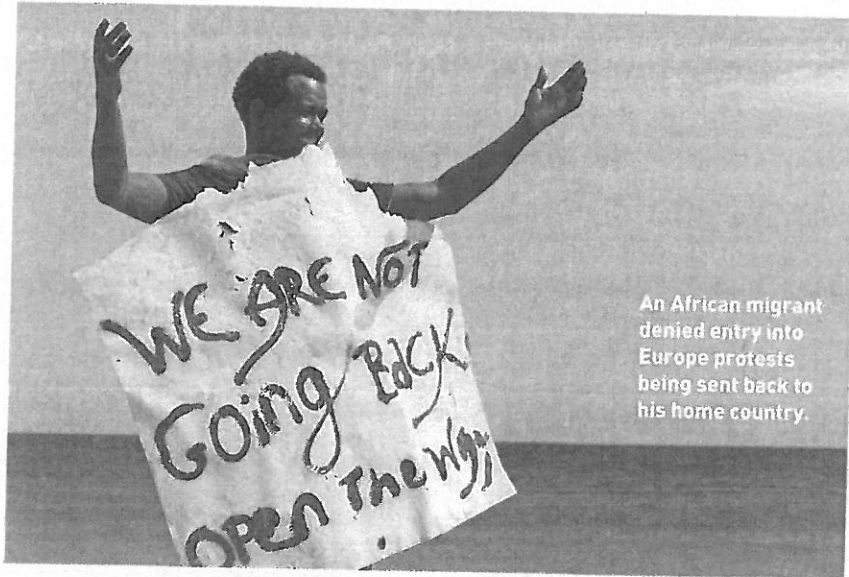
"They promise that it'll be a very sturdy, seaworthy boat," he tells *JS*. "But those often turn out to be false promises."

Instead, hundreds of people are packed into small vessels made of wood or plastic. The smugglers often abandon the boats, says Fortune, leaving the passengers to fend for themselves.

"The boats don't have enough fuel to make it across," he says. "They end up drifting on the high seas for days on end."

Long Road Ahead

For the migrants and refugees who make it to Europe, the future is



An African migrant denied entry into Europe protests being sent back to his home country.

often unclear. Once they arrive on dry land, they're taken to reception centers near the Mediterranean coast, where they receive food, shelter, and medical attention. Some stay there for months while European officials decide their fates.

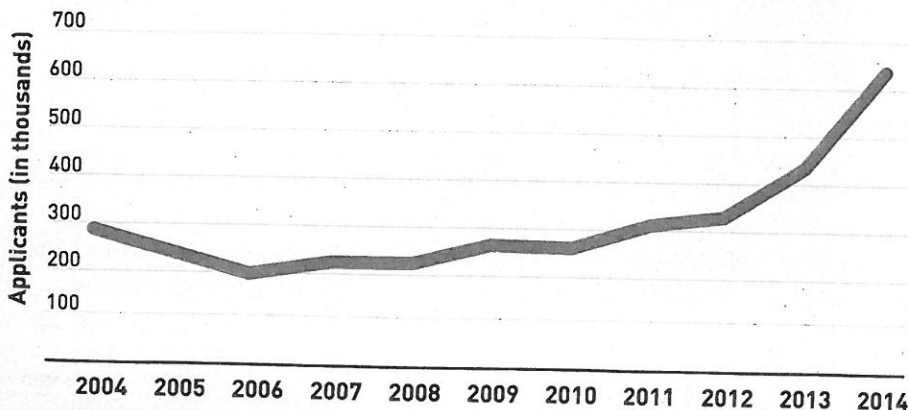
Those who face the greatest dangers at home may be granted asylum, which allows them to stay in Europe permanently.

(Asylum is protection given by a government to someone who has left their country to escape harm or persecution.) But thousands of others are eventually sent back. (See graphs, below.)

Fortune says that European leaders are reluctant to accept newcomers. Some fear that welcoming foreigners will encourage others to try to get to Europe. In addition, some leaders are concerned →

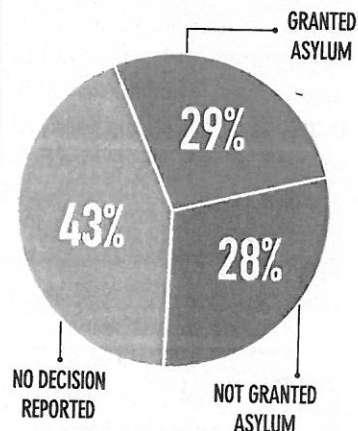
* SAFETY IN EUROPE?

The number of people applying for asylum in the 28 nations of the E.U. has doubled in the past 10 years.



SOURCE: Eurostat

Here's what happened to the 630,000 people who applied for asylum in the E.U. in 2014.



about the effect that migrants and refugees could have on their local economies. They worry that natives will have to compete with the newcomers for jobs.

In recent months, governments, humanitarian groups, and other organizations have come together to try to find solutions. This spring, European officials started working on a plan to resettle about 60,000 migrants and refugees across the continent. They also agreed to increase funding for search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

"THIS PROBLEM ISN'T GOING AWAY."

—CONOR FORTUNE,
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

But much more needs to be done, according to Fortune. He says world leaders should help build stable governments in the Middle East and Africa. That way, fewer people would need to seek safety abroad in the first place. Individuals can help too, he says, by raising awareness about the crisis.

"This problem isn't going away," Fortune notes.

For Ali, the dangerous journey has been worth it. He says that he's grateful to have arrived safely in Italy and is looking forward to starting over. He hopes he's allowed to stay so he can continue his education and find a job.

"I'm looking for a better life," he says. "I'd like to go to Norway." ♦

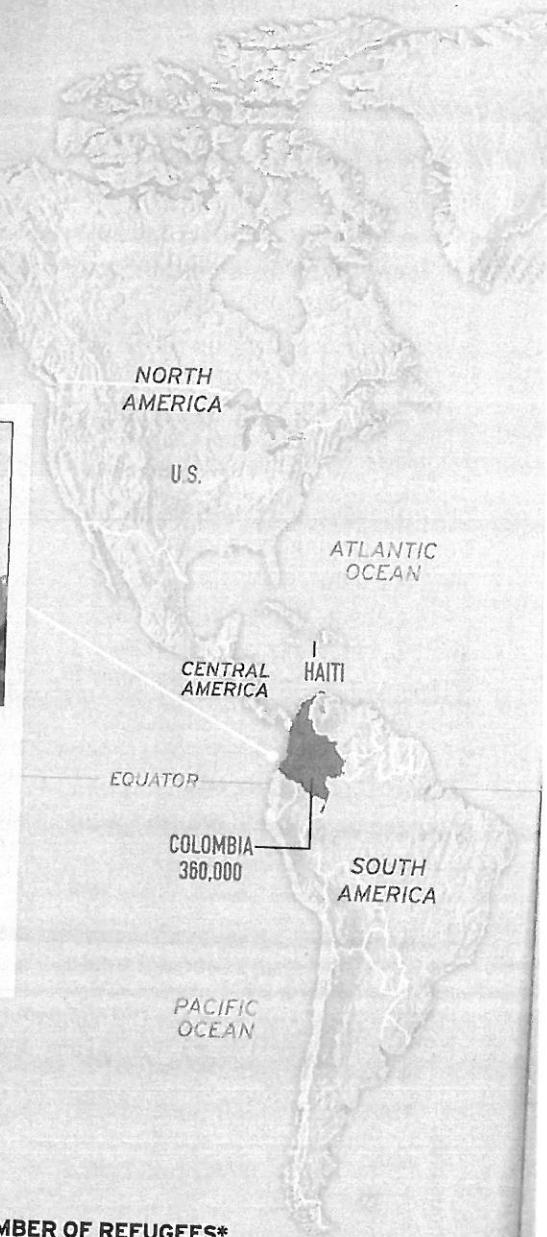


A GLOBAL CRISIS Millions of people worldwide are fleeing their homes to escape violence, poverty, or persecution. This map shows the estimated number of refugees by their country of origin. The 10 nations with the most refugees are numbered.



»» The Americas

Poverty and gang violence in Central and South America have driven tens of thousands of people to flee to the United States. How to deal with people crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally will likely be a major issue in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.



NUMBER OF REFUGEES*

- More than 500,000
- 100,000 to 500,000
- 25,000 to 99,999
- Fewer than 25,000

* Includes people in refugee-like situations

SOURCE: United Nations, end of 2014

YOUR TURN

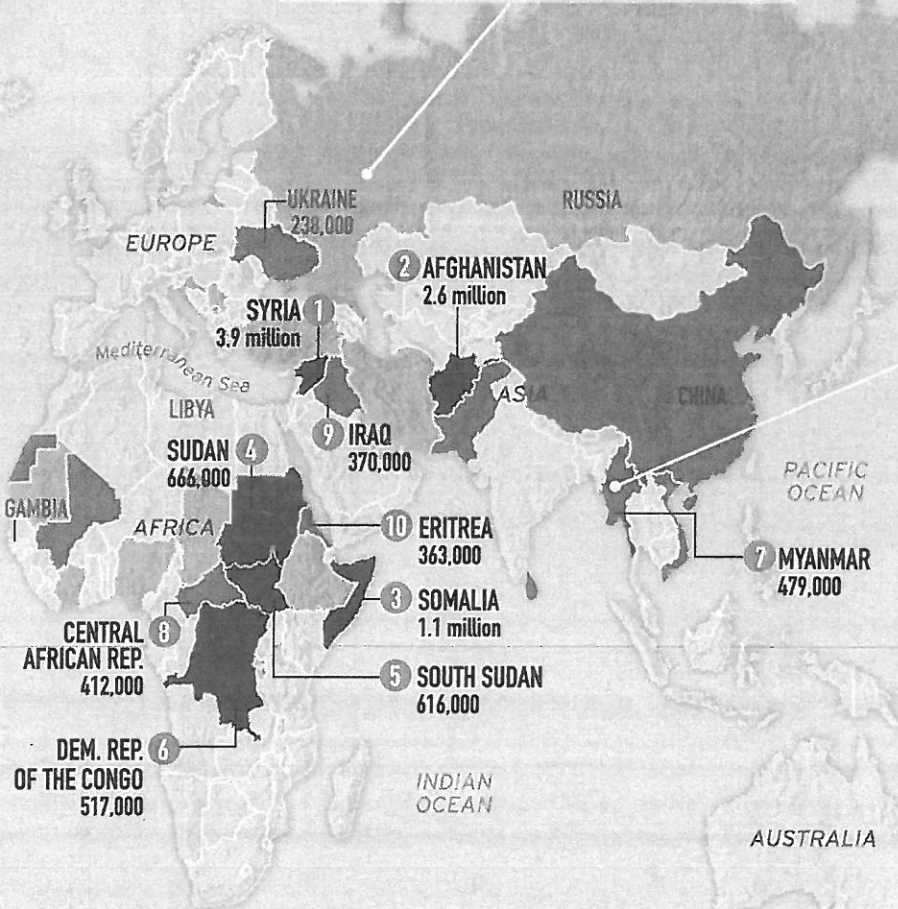
What challenges might migrants and refugees face in their home countries and in the countries they immigrate to?



Watch a video about the Mediterranean migrant crisis at scholastic.com/js.



» Ukraine
Thousands of Ukrainians have been displaced within Ukraine or have fled to other nations to escape armed conflict and a shrinking economy.



» Myanmar
Members of an ethnic Muslim minority in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) are traveling by boat across Southeast Asia to escape persecution.

QUESTIONS

- Which two continents have the most refugees?
- How many refugees are from Somalia?
- Which country in the Americas has the most refugees?
- How many more refugees are from Syria than from Afghanistan?
- Which body of water separates Libya and Europe?
- Who is escaping from Myanmar?
- Which countries in Africa have more than 500,000 refugees?
- Which country has about three times as many refugees as Eritrea?
- Why are people in Central and South America fleeing to the U.S.?
- Which is greater: the number of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan or the number of refugees in all of the other top 10 countries combined?

JIM MCKAHON/MAPMAN™ (MAP); ELIZABETH RUZ/AFPP/GETTY IMAGES (THE AMERICAS); ANDREY KRONBERG/AF/SETTY IMAGES (UKRAINE); RAOUF RAHMAN/REUTERS (MYANMAR)