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EXODUS
Desperate migrants, a broken system

TINY GAMBIA'S BIG EXPORT

Cellphones, smugglers and rising expectations engender a flight from Africa

BY KEVIN SIEFF
IN DAMPHA KUNDA, GAMBIA

The village was losing its young men. Hundreds had left their thatched-roof huts and tiny squares of farmland for the promise of Europe. About 40 had died on the way.

Susso knew nearly all of them. He had prayed at the funerals after their boats capsized or their smugglers stranded them in the desert, ceremonies with mourners but no bodies. The grim toll complicated his plan, turned it into a secret he hid from almost everyone.

He, too, was preparing to join the exodus from Dampha Kunda.

Africa has never seen such a flood of young men heading for Europe. The number of migrants crossing by sea to Italy, a top entry point, nearly quadrupled from 2013 to 2014, reaching about 170,100. Sub-Saharan Africans made up a growing percentage of the total, with about 64,600 arriving last year. This year, the figure is expected to be even higher. Gambia, one of Africa's smallest nations, is a big contributor to that flow.

To deter the arrivals, European policymakers have proposed reinforcing their naval forces in the Mediterranean, conducting mass deportations and destroying smugglers' boats. When Susso turns on the radio in the bedroom he shares with his wife and six children, he hears all the ways Europe is trying to dissuade him from leaving.

But it has never been so alluring — or so easy — to begin the trip. Over the past two years, sub-Saharan Africa's smuggling networks have expanded, as Libya has descended into chaos, leaving its coasts unguarded as migrants set out for Italy, a few hundred miles away.

Stories of Gambians arriving on Italian or Spanish shores now reach even

PHOTOS BY JANE HAHN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

At top, Susso, 38, plays with his children, niece and nephew at home in Gambia. He has saved $500 to travel the "Backway" to Libya and then Europe. Above is the bus he will take to a way station in Niger.

A perilous path out of Africa to Europe

remote Dampha Kunda via Facebook and text message, like rumors of a gold rush. Most men keep their plans a secret until they leave, fearing an outcry from worried relatives or arrest by the country's authoritarian government. Susso asked that only his last name, common in eastern Gambia, be used in this article.

In the weeks before his trip, he veiled himself in routine, waking every day at 5 and working on the rice farm of the village's richest family. He played with his children, most of them half-clothed in torn shirts and underwear, telling them nothing of his plan.

Then, one day in May, Susso opened a drawer hidden under a yellow blanket and removed a small metal box with a silver padlock. He counted the money: 17,000 dalasi, about $500. It had taken him three years. It was enough to begin the journey.

Twice a week, a bus called the "TA Express," full of young men wearing sandals and carrying small bags, clatters past Dampha Kunda on its way to Agadez, a desert city in Niger that smugglers use as a way station on the route to Libya and Europe.

Soon, Susso told himself, he would be on it.

"The Western Route," experts call the web of migrant trails from Gambia, Senegal and Mali that now lead to North Africa. But Gambians have a different name for the dangerous path to Europe: the Backway.

"Say No to the Backway," reads a government banner near Susso's village, with a picture of a boat capsized in the ocean.

"Backway bad way," says a song funded by the U.S. Embassy in Gambia and played on the radio here.

Across Africa, there are different paths to Europe and different reasons for leaving. In Somalia, refugees flee the brutal al-Shabab rebels, following an "eastern route" winding through Sudan. In Eritrea, they escape a harsh military regime.

And Susso's reasons? He walked by them one day in the scorching heat shortly before he would depart, homes in sandy lots with numbers painted on the walls. House No. 1027, a mud-baked hut, was getting a cinder-block addition, thanks to money from a relative in Spain. House 301 boasted a flat-screen television, thanks to remittances from Germany. And House 311 had a big red tractor.

"So much money," he sighed.

Poverty had once imposed a kind of uniformity here — every house with a thatched roof and dirt floor, every meal a small portion of rice and okra, every job tending to patches of rice on a small subsistence farm.

Then the wealth gap that had always separated Europe and Africa began to

PHOTOS BY JANE HAHN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The market in Brikama Ba, a village in Gambia.

insinuate itself here. If you had a relative in Europe, you were rich. If not, you remained stuck on the edge of survival. It filled Susso with an envy that bordered on anger. He was 39, broad-shouldered and sleepy-eyed, older and wearier than most of the men making the journey north.

Susso could afford only two meals a day for his family. He knew he would have to pull his four sons out of school in their early teens, so they could work his small rice field or make money elsewhere. He shared his two-room home with 12 people, including his brother, nieces and nephews, a bedsheet hanging where the front door should be.

Like so many Gambians, no matter how much he was willing to work, his ambition yielded almost nothing.

A growing number of Gambians are literate, but with "little chance at employment that matches their skills, just like China by the 1960s and India by the 1970s," said Joel Millman, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration. "So they do the rational thing and they leave."

The Gambian government hasn't helped. Its longtime dictator, President Yahya Jammeh, has preached a life of subsistence. He has created a bizarre mythology around himself as a man who could cure AIDS and threatened to personally slit the throats of gay men. He has brushed off the thousands of men fleeing his country as failures and bad Muslims.

PHOTOS BY JANE HAHN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Above right, a tractor in the village of Dampha Kunda owned by a Gambian who lives in Europe and driven by Susso, who plans to take the "Backway" to Europe with money saved in a small metal box, center left. The tractor's owner, Alagi Ceesay, has sent home enough money that his family tore down their home and built two large buildings of concrete, including a room, above, where Ceesay's photo is displayed. "Life has been good to us," his brother says. IFor more photos, go to washingtonpost.com/world.

But even the farmers of Dampha Kunda knew migrants were the true success stories. Twenty percent of Gambia's gross domestic product now comes from remittances, according to the World Bank, one of the highest percentages in Africa. It's a nation with almost no industry or valuable natural resources, where the government dominates what little private sector exists.

"The only people who can make any money in the Gambia are those very close to the president. If not, you're making $100 a month, if that," said C. Omar Kebbeh, an

economist and expert in Gambian migration, now at the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Not far from Susso's house, there was a massive billboard with a picture of Jammeh, smiling in a white cap. "Grow what you eat and eat what you grow," it said.

For Susso, that policy had one palpable impact. "We're hungry," he said. "We're always hungry."

Susso had memorized the way Dampha Kunda looked from eight feet off the ground, as he bumped through the rice fields atop a big red tractor. The new two-story houses rose above the old, mud-colored huts. Across much of the cropland, plants were ailing. With the rising prices, few people could afford fertilizer.

The tractor was an extraordinary luxury in a place where almost no one owned a car. But it didn't belong to Susso. Its owner lived in Europe.

The first major wave of Gambians left villages like Dampha Kunda in the 1990s, mostly for Spain. By 2010, there were 65,000 Gambians abroad, around 4 percent of the population. One of the men sending money home was Alagi Ceesay, the owner of the tractor.

Source: Frontex

GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

Ceesay had left for Europe in 2002. Back then, the journey was expensive and often futile. Because Libya's borders were well patrolled, migrants traveled through Tunisia. Still, they were typically apprehended before crossing the Mediterranean.

Ceesay made it through. He found a job in a factory in Italy, where the economy was booming and authorities looked the other way when men arrived from Africa to work.

Ceesay sent between 200 and 300 euros home a month — as much as $450. His family tore down their home with its thatched roof and built two large, rectangular buildings out of concrete. Ceesay's photo now hangs

on a cream-colored wall, as if he were surveying his grounds from the frame, a proud man in a shiny brown suit.

"Life has been good to us, praise God," said Foday Ceesay, his brother, sitting beneath the picture.

By 2008, Ceesay was earning enough to send $9,000 back to Dampha Kunda in a single Western Union transfer — enough for a down payment on the big, red tractor. Susso has been driving the tractor for three years for the family, earning around $5 a day.

"All day, all I think is that I wish this tractor was mine," he said.

By 2009, cellphones had arrived in Dampha Kunda, and Susso's battered silver Nokia began to fill with numbers of Gambians in Europe. Their boats had arrived, but many of them had been taken directly to an immigration detention center, which Gambians referred to unironically as the "campus." They could spend months or years there, seeking legal status. The more you picked away at the stories of those who had made it to Europe, the slimmer Susso's chances seemed to be of succeeding. "I know what the risks are. I know it's very hard," he said. "Making it to Europe is luck."

Susso's family hadn't had much luck. One of his cousins had been left by his smugglers to die in the Libyan desert. Another had drowned at sea. Susso himself had made two previous attempts, and both had failed. He couldn't even swim.

Susso knew the realities, but it was as if poverty had narrowed his field of vision. He obsessed over the success stories, the men like Ceesay.

He thought about how much wiser he would be with the money. He would send his children to private school. His family would eat meat for dinner. He would build a more beautiful compound than Ceesay's, one that wouldn't flood during the rainy season.

"It's worth risking my life," he said. "The Backway is my only chance."

Here was Susso's plan: In the city of Agadez, Niger, he would meet a smuggler who would take him to Libya. And from Libya, after working and saving more money, he would board the boat to Italy. The development of the migrant route meant he could pay for the journey piece by piece, one smuggler connecting him to the next. If everything went right, the trip would cost around $2,000.

When he revealed his plans to a few people, even the ones who disagreed with his decision were hesitant to admonish him. A few days before he boarded the bus, Susso went to the village's imam, Saikou Drummeh.

Drummeh convened a group of men who had studied the Koran, and they prayed over Susso. It wore on the imam to see a succession of men leave on the dangerous odyssey; he had lost his own brother to the Backway when the man's boat capsized.

"But what can I do?" the imam said. "They've already made up their minds.

PHOTOS BY JANE HAHN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

At top, Fissa, 33, sits on his bed at his house in the Gambian village of Perai. Like many other men in his village, Fissa plans to take the "Backway" journey overland from Gambia to Libya, then board a boat to Italy. Above left, Isa puts away his backpack on a bus as he begins the trip from Banjul, the capital of Gambia, through several other countries before making his way into Europe. Above right, women pound grain near a tree and livestock in Perai.

There is nothing for them here."

Last year, the U.S. Embassy held a concert called "Say No to Backway," paying 12 musicians to record songs about illegal migration and perform them in an amphitheater. "But not many people came," said Fattoumattah Sandeng, one of the performers. "A lot of people are planning to go the Backway, and they didn't see the reason to go to a concert like that."

Even Gambian migrants themselves are trying to persuade their countrymen to stay home. Nfalamin Gassama, a Gambian in Italy, started a Facebook group called

"Difficulties Faced by Migrants in Libya" to underscore threats of kidnapping and extortion.

Instead of deterring people, though, Gassama was flooded with messages from people who needed a smuggler's contact or more money to pay their way.

"The whole country is running for their lives," he said.

The white bus pulled up in downtown Banjul, Gambia's capital, on a warm Friday night, glittery streamers hanging from its windshield and palm-tree air fresheners dangling from the ceiling.

The men waiting for it were typing text messages and making final calls on their cellphones to their families. A 19-year-old named Amadou was dialing his smuggler in Niger, but the call wasn't going through. "He told me to call him, but he doesn't answer," Amadou said, exasperated.

Some of the men sitting at the bus stop in the 100-degree heat clutched winter coats. They had been warned that in the lands north of Libya, they should be prepared for rain and cold.

The journey through West Africa to Libya once could take months. Now, thanks to the bus, it's a six-day drive.

The men awaiting the bus hardly look like men at all, each in his late teens or early 20s. One sold a laptop computer to afford the $150 bus ticket. Another worked for a year baking bread at a restaurant. Another got a loan from a neighbor.

A skinny man working at the bus station came out to survey the crowd. "The journey is step by step. This is the first one," he said.

It was dark when the bus left Banjul, driving through the city's sprawl, past stores called European Fashions, Swiss Secondhand Goods, German Enterprise. It continued on Gambia's only highway, a two-lane road that splits vast acres of scrubland.

It passed the village of Dumbuto, where last month a teenage boy quietly sold his family's only cow to fund his journey. It passed the house of 20-year-old Buba, who had been kidnapped in Libya on his own journey. His brother, Lamin, was repairing bicycles for $5 a day to pay the kidnappers their $350 ransom.

The television on the bus played an American action movie starring Will Smith, flashing scenes of car chases and money falling from the sky. Amadou's smuggler finally called him back. "Let me know when you get to Agadez," he said.

It was well after midnight when the bus neared Susso's village. He was sleeping in the one room he shares with his wife and six children. Under his bed he kept a photo album. A few days earlier, he had pulled out a picture of himself and four friends. "Everyone else has already gone the Backway," he said, referring to the men in the photo who had left Gambia.

Susso wasn't ready to catch the bus that night. He still had a few last-minute things to do. He had to follow the instructions of a traditional healer, giving away food and other charity in exchange for good

fortune. He had to buy the small knapsack he would fill with clothes and photographs. He had to reveal his secret to his mother.

He was growing restless. The men in Europe, even the ones at the detention center, were beckoning every day by text message.

"They tell me, 'We're here. We made it. It's okay,'" he said.

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JAVIER MANZANO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

In Agadez, Niger, migrants take their positions on the back of a pickup truck headed for Libya. For more images, go to washingtonpost.com/world.

Smugglers' haven in the Sahara

The route to Europe for many African migrants passes through the underworld of a city in Niger

BY KEVIN SIEFF
IN AGADEZ, NIGER

The smuggler walked past the diaper aisle, through the back door of the convenience store and into the metal shed where the migrants were hiding.

It was a Monday in one of the world's human-smuggling capitals, the day when trucks crammed with Africans roar off in a weekly convoy bound for Libya, the threshold to Europe. For Musa, an expert in sneaking people across the Sahara, it was time to get ready.

He walked around the white Toyota pickup parked next to the shed, loaded with

One last stop before a trek across the desert: A Saharan city run by human smugglers

jugs of water. Then he glanced at the cluster of 30 people waiting to climb atop the load.

One of them was an 11-year-old girl from Burkina Faso, sucking a lollipop. Another was a mother who held her wailing 6-month-old baby. Next to them, 27 men, from five countries, shifted their eyes nervously between Musa and the truck. If they weren't caught or stranded or killed, it would take them three days to get from the stash house to Libya.

"We need to leave soon," Musa said, examining the truck, its windows tinted, its license plate missing, prayer beads hanging from the rearview mirror.

Since the 15th century, Agadez has been one of the continent's most important trading hubs, the gateway between West and North Africa. Now, it is a city run by human smugglers.

Across the developing world, migrants and refugees are leaving home in historic numbers. Increasingly, they are turning to smugglers, who load them onto flimsy ships or overcrowded trucks for treacherous journeys that kill thousands each year. Authorities in Europe and Asia have vowed to crack down on the multibillion-dollar industry. But the business of human cargo is thriving.

Musa, 38, knew the risks. He knew that if his truck broke down in the 120-degree heat, he and the migrants might survive no more than two days. He knew that his pistol was little help against the bandits who roamed the Sahara. But he also knew how to bribe the police and military to let him pass. And he knew the desert as well as anyone. Or he claimed to.

So this Monday, like every other Monday, he and his brothers counted the men and women who had arrived at the stash house tucked behind the gray storefront advertising soap and baby food. The sun had set. The migrants were covering their faces with scarves. Musa strolled past them in a long white robe, as if preparing for a leisurely drive.

He had permitted a Washington Post reporter and photographer to spend a week observing his operation — a rare window into the world of migrant smuggling. Like several others interviewed for this article, he spoke on the condition that his last name not be used.

"Before we had migrants, but not like now," Musa said, standing next to his truck. "Now, there are so many that I can't remember them all. Every week, the trucks are full."

Outside his mud-walled compound were dozens of other stash houses, which locals call ghettos. They were hidden

Passengers pray during a sandstorm at the side of the road on their journey to Agadez, Niger. Migrants are routinely harassed by police and military personnel.

behind homes, next to mosques and market stalls, part of the city's secret geography, the architecture of a booming illicit economy.

It is a boom driven by the collapse of the Libyan government, which has left a vast stretch of North African coast virtually unguarded. But just as important has been Africa's explosion of cellphones and social networks, which have linked smugglers to potential migrants.

"Now, in sub-Saharan Africa, you're never more than two conversations away from someone who can get you to Europe," said Tuesday Reitano, a human-trafficking expert at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, a think tank.

Hundreds of men and women from across West and Central Africa pour into this desert outpost every week. The majority are fleeing abject poverty. Others are escaping violence in Mali, northeastern Nigeria or the Central African Republic.

Many have only one thing in common: They arrived in Agadez with Musa's phone number.

Konissa had stepped off the bus in Agadez the previous night, just after 11 o'clock. He had been traveling for three days from the Ivory Coast, and his legs felt stiff and heavy. When he walked through the parking lot, men started approaching him, his small black backpack giving him away as a migrant.

"You going to Libya?" they asked in French and Hausa.

"You need some help?"

But Konissa, 25, already had a contact in Agadez. His uncle had traveled to Libya last year.

"This man can help you," the uncle wrote in a text in May, pasting in Musa's number.

A few minutes after getting off the bus, Konissa dialed the number. The parking lot was full of young men sleeping on the ground. On the wall was graffiti in several languages.

"Ali from Cameroon was here," one line read.

"A Guinean was here," said another.

Konissa held the phone to his ear. He had spent two years saving for the trip to Europe, eking out a living as a tailor. If he made it to France or Italy, the money he sent back would change the lives of his parents and siblings and their children.

"Je suis arrivé," he said to Musa. "I'm here."

Fifteen minutes later, Konissa was driven to the large shed where Musa and his brothers kept the migrants. The ground was strewn with cardboard boxes and old tires. Five wild antelope, captured from the desert, skittered around the adjacent dirt yard.

Other migrants were sleeping next to a roaring yellow generator. The scene felt strange and scary. Konissa had never been this far from home. He lay down on the ground and used his bag as a pillow. He had brought a winter jacket, assuming it would be cold in the desert, but now, even after midnight, it was nearly 100 degrees.

He didn't feel any closer to Europe, the place he had seen in the Facebook photos of his friends who had already migrated. They were always standing on pristine streets, or inside nice buildings.

"They always have the best clothes," he said.

Before going to sleep, Konissa called his father in a village in the Ivory Coast.

"I found the place," he said.

Source: Frontex GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

Western officials portray smugglers as hardened criminals who have driven the surge in migrants to European shores — where more than 100,000 have arrived this

year. The smugglers are "21st-century slave traders," as Italy's foreign minister, Paolo Gentiloni, put it. And indeed, there are alarming accounts of brutality by smugglers, including a recent Amnesty International report detailing how migrants crossing Libya faced rape, torture and abduction.

But in Agadez, smugglers see themselves as businessmen, providing a service that Niger's desert tribes have mastered.

Musa's father shuttled goods for years between Agadez and Libya, where U.S. and U.N. sanctions made legal trade difficult. By the time Musa was 20, he was crossing the Sahara, too. He learned to navigate by ruts in the sand during the day and by the stars at night. In 2011, Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi was overthrown, and suddenly no one was stopping boats from leaving the country's ports for Italy, just 200 miles away. Throngs of migrants began to arrive in Agadez. Musa was ready to profit.

He and his brothers bought a fleet of Toyota pickups stolen from Libya. They built the shed in the store's back yard and laid down old mats and carpets where the migrants could sleep. They started taking between 25 and 100 migrants across the Sahara every week, charging about $300 each.

"My phone number became famous

Tuareg camel traders walk past the Agadez Mosque. Agadez is the largest city in central Niger, with a population of over 120,000 people. The city is on one of West Africa's largest human smuggling and drug trafficking routes.

PHOTOS BY JAVIER MANZANO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

ABOVE: Saly, left, an 11-year-old who had traveled 1,000 miles to Agadez from Burkina Faso, waits with other migrants for nightfall and the start of the drive through the desert. Her uncle said she had been sent by her parents to get a job in Libya as a domestic worker. RIGHT: Konissa, second from right, from Ivory Coast, wanted a Post photographer to take a picture of his group before the 72-hour trip.

across West Africa," he said.

In about three years, Musa was a millionaire. He bought homes in Niger and Libya. He bought cars and camels and smartphones, his selfies reflecting his swagger, a man lying next to a pistol in the desert. He married one woman in Niger and another in Libya. He tried to hide his enterprise from his four children, telling them that he was a trader. It was a rare glimmer of shame.

Countries around the world have vowed to fight the smugglers. The European Union recently announced a major

operation to detain smuggling ships coming from Libya. But breaking up the networks is a colossal task.

"There's so much money at stake that this has become almost impossible to stop," said Mohammed Anacko, the president of the Agadez regional government council and the top official in the city.

In June, a delegation from the European Union traveled to Agadez seeking to strengthen Niger's law enforcement agencies. Police and soldiers, however, are deeply involved in the trade. Many of them earn exponentially more in bribes from smugglers and migrants than they do from their salaries, according to a 2013 report from the Niger government's anti-corruption agency, HALCIA.

Perhaps the most glaring sign of the complicity comes each Monday, when the smugglers and their migrant cargoes leave Agadez in a loose convoy led by a military escort.

"The diplomats come and talk about stopping migration, but it's just talk," Anacko said. "The smuggling networks are strong, and the migrants are desperate."

The Niger government has made sporadic attempts to shut down the smugglers. After the bodies of 92 migrants were found in the desert outside Agadez in 2013, officers raided a number of the city's stash houses, arresting their owners. Musa was caught smuggling migrants and spent one month in jail. He resumed his business nearly immediately after being released, shifting his route to more remote stretches of desert.

Earlier this year, Niger's government passed a law that would allow judges to sentence smugglers to prison for up to 30 years, but experts say it hasn't yet been enforced.

"If you pay the police, it's no problem getting to Libya, even a truck full of migrants without papers," said Maliki Amadou Hamadane, the head of the Agadez office for the International Organization for Migration, or IOM.

While the images of boats capsized in the Mediterranean have come to symbolize the dangers of illegal migration to Europe, the trip through the Sahara is no less risky. In June, the bodies of 48 migrants were found in two locations a few hundred miles outside Agadez, according to the IOM.

Musa shrugs off the risks of the journeys.

"If God writes that you will die in the desert, then that is how you will die," he said.

He regularly stumbles upon the remains of those who didn't make it, sometimes taking a shovel from his truck to dig graves.

"We bury the bodies because that's what our religion tells us," Musa said. "We do not say anything to the authorities."

On this Monday afternoon, when the migrants staying with Musa went to purchase water containers for the three-day journey, most returned with one $2 gallon jug. It was all they could afford. They took turns filling them from a spigot.

Konissa carried a jug and a small loaf of bread. He had raced through the market to buy them.

"I am scared to be caught," he said.

Musa didn't ask questions when the migrants arrived. When the 11-year-old girl from Burkina Faso named Saly showed up, wearing a long skirt with red birds on it, he looked at her but said nothing.

He knew, like other smugglers in Agadez, that not everyone he transported was choosing to make the journey. But he saw himself as a man providing a service. To a visitor, he emphasized his professionalism, pointing out that his truck had just been serviced and was unlikely to break down. He carried a satellite phone in case of emergency, unlike some of his competitors.

"They call me and ask for a trip to Libya, and I do it for them," he said. "I don't force them to travel anywhere."

Just two days before Musa's truck departed, a station wagon full of 12 Nigerian girls had entered Agadez, driven by a short, bald man named Jagondi, who even Musa described as a "big smuggler."

The girls had been sold by their parents into a trafficking network, Jagondi said. It wasn't an unusual event. He had been driving girls, mostly from Nigeria, on the route to Libya for years, taking extra care to hide his passengers.

"They will become prostitutes in Europe," he said matter-of-factly, claiming that he is not involved in that part of the business, only the driving.

According to the United Nations, thousands of Nigerian girls and women have been trafficked to prostitution rings in Europe.

After dropping the girls at a stash house, Jagondi parked his station wagon in front of his own house, next to a large mosque. He sat outside and ate a bowl of rice and porridge. He recalled how, one night, he was driving around Agadez when he spotted a 14-year-old girl whom he had shuttled here. He remembered her fondly; she had called him "Daddy." But that night, she was standing in a poorly lit back alley, working as a prostitute.

She saw him in the car and screamed "Daddy, Daddy!" he recounted. He kept driving.

"I was very, very sad," he said.

For his part, Musa appeared less concerned about his human cargo. After he walked away from 11-year-old Saly, her uncle, who had accompanied her on the 1,000-mile journey from Burkina Faso, explained to a reporter that she had been sent by her parents to make money in Libya.

"She will wash clothes or do other work in the house," said the uncle, Aziz Napon. "Back home, some women said 'Don't bring the girl,' but she wants to have a job to help her parents."

When she was asked why she was leaving home, Saly stared ahead and said nothing.

"She's very quiet," Napon said.

"Where is the little girl?" asked Musa's brother Abdul Karim, standing next to the truck on Monday night.

Saly was sitting on a backpack on the ground. Three men lifted her onto the bed of the pickup, seven feet above the ground.

Then, one by one, the men climbed aboard. Musa and his brothers had stuck tree limbs between the bags and supplies so that the men sitting on the edge of the vehicle could hold on, their legs hanging just above the ground. It was the only way they could fit so many people.

"Do we need money to pay the police?" one migrant asked.

"Whatever I give you, they will take," said a short, thin man named Mohammed, who works for Musa. "We will pay for everyone together."

"Will there be bandits on the way?" asked another.

"You will be fine," said Mohammed.

Konissa watched the others find their places on the truck.

"God willing, we will make it," he said.

"Musa is the best. He's a professional. He never loses the road," Mohammed assured him.

Konissa's uncle was living somewhere in Italy. The plan was to call him once the truck arrived in the Libyan city of Sabha, the next staging ground for migrants. Konissa already had the phone number of a smuggler there.

Musa had returned to his convenience store while the last migrants boarded the truck. He ate a quick dinner of porridge and goat under a shelf with board games and hairbrushes. Then he manned the cash register for a few minutes, selling milk and energy drinks. He emphasized his lack of concern.

"Sometimes I forget that we're even leaving tonight," he said.

Musa decided he would drive a separate truck this night, behind his brother, who would transport the migrants. Musa wanted to see his family in Libya and bring some supplies back.

When the first truck was full, two of Musa's employees opened the metal gates that separated the stash house from a main road. The truck shot onto the street and past a mosque where women were praying outside.

"Libya!" one woman cheered.

The vehicle flew by the last mud-baked houses of Agadez and within minutes it was in the desert, in almost total darkness. When it drove into a ditch, the passengers groaned in unison, but everyone managed to keep their grip. The truck powered on toward the dunes ahead. The only lights came from other trucks, also overcrowded with migrants, their faces covered in scarves to shield themselves from sand. Dozens of vehicles would depart for Libya in a single night.

After a few miles, the driver made room for Saly in the front seat, and the girl was helped down from the load. Then the truck continued through the darkness, the Libyan border 350 miles ahead.

The next morning, the police in Agadez announced at a news conference that they had arrested about a dozen smugglers and 40 migrants.

Back at Musa's store, his employees scanned photos of the detained. Neither Musa nor his brother was among them. Behind the counter, another of his brothers, Abdul Salam, laughed. "Even when he was young, we called Musa 'The Warrior,'" he said. "He wasn't scared of anyone."

Then Abdul Salam went back to work. The next migrants were due to arrive soon.

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Closing down 'the Backway'

A Libyan city's crackdown on the deadly smuggling of migrants has its own human toll

Amadou, above, traveled 3,000 miles from Gambia to Zuwarah, Libya, on what his countrymen call "the Backway" to Europe. Migrants had been leaving Zuwarah all summer on flimsy vessels, such as the wreck at top. But a crackdown has left Amadou stuck.

BY KEVIN SIEFF
IN ZUWARAH, LIBYA

The dead were laid in rows on the beach so they could be counted. A dozen bodies soon became a hundred. Somewhere off the coast, the dilapidated fishing boat was still bobbing, half-submerged. There would be more victims.

Even in one of the world's most notorious smuggling capitals, the Aug. 27 migrant disaster was a shock. The people

Migrants' options dwindling in Libya

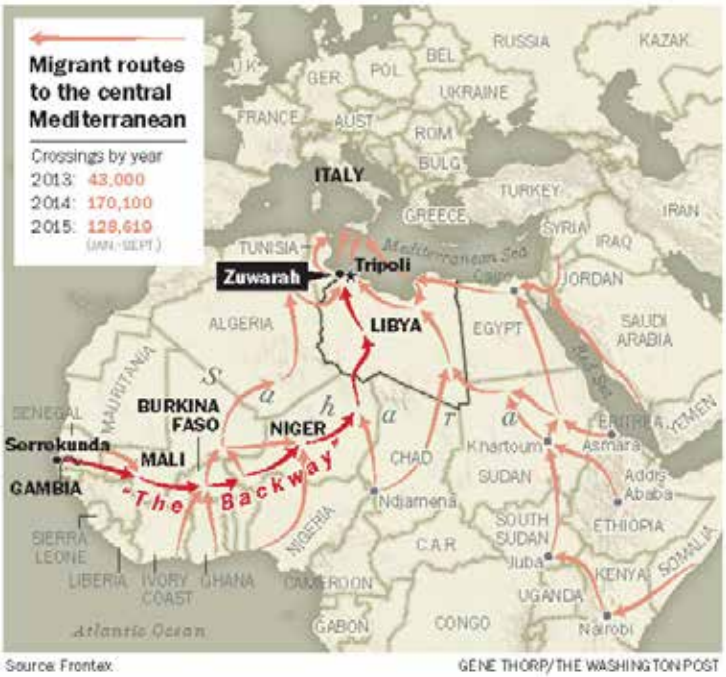
of Zuwarah borrowed shovels to dig a mass grave. They found the tiny drenched clothes of infants strewn on the shores.

For years, Zuwarah had looked the other way while local smugglers got rich. Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Syria flooded into Libya's northernmost city, boarding boats to flee their countries' extreme poverty and war. But now, the city had enabled a major humanitarian disaster, one its residents could see close up.

"We need to do something," Sadiq Nanees, the top security official here, said to a group of local leaders.

And so Zuwarah's citizens decided to do the unthinkable: close down a major North African smuggling route to Italy.

Never has it been more difficult to stop the cascade of migrants and refugees trying to cross the sea to Europe. Over 600,000 people have made the journey this year, more than twice the number in all of 2014. In Greece and the Balkans, borders have crumbled before the onslaught from the east. In Libya, the jumping-off point for a smaller but still immense stream of northbound migrants, hundreds of people climbed aboard flimsy ships nearly every night this summer, taking advantage of a state that has virtually collapsed since the 2011 overthrow of Moammar Gaddafi.



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Clockwise from top, stranded migrants sit and chat during a work break in Zuwarah, where many are paid about $10 a day by the city to sweep streets or paint curbs. Clothes belonging to migrants who have attempted the sea crossing litter the shore in Zuwarah. A volunteer militia, the Black Masks, hunts down smugglers, part of the city's crackdown that began after the deadly wreck of a migrant boat in August.

European officials have held meeting after meeting, trying to slow the ceaseless flow of people. They have discussed targeting smugglers' boats from helicopter gunships, adding naval vessels in the Mediterranean and hiring intelligence experts. So far, nothing has worked.

The crackdown in Zuwarah looked like it might. Thousands of residents filled the streets to demonstrate against human smuggling. A militia pursued smugglers. For the first time in years, rescue boats reported that the seas north of this crucial city were empty.

But could it hold?

Throughout Zuwarah, in crumbling stash houses and spare concrete rooms, the migrants waited for their chance.

Amadou heard the protesters from the abandoned house where the smuggler had taken him. He had traveled 3,000 miles from Gambia in 20 days, riding a bus through Mali and Burkina Faso, a truck through Niger and a van across Libya.

Now he could hear the sound of Zuwarah's crackdown, a chorus of voices chanting in Arabic.

"No more murdering for money," he later learned the crowd was saying.

He had arrived here just as the bodies from the shipwreck were being collected. His boat was supposed to leave the following day. But his smuggler fled, hoping to avoid arrest.

"Just give me a few days," the man told Amadou over the phone. "We need to wait for this thing to calm down."

Then Amadou was on his own, roaming around a city that was being transformed. On a main street, residents posted a large banner with pictures of the dead from the shipwreck. Amadou walked past cafes and restaurants and the harbor, where people had hung a white sheet proclaiming: "A thousand times no to smuggling."

Amadou is 26. He is short and thin with a big toothy smile, boylike except for the goatee he is trying to grow. He knows about the danger in crossing the Mediterranean illegally, how the journey has killed about 3,000 people this year. When friends asked if he could swim, Amadou replied: "I sink like a stone in the river." Everyone would laugh, but it was also true, and it scared him. He spoke on the condition that his last name not be used, because of his precarious legal situation.

But he was tired of earning around five dollars a day in Gambia, tired of an authoritarian government that seemed to jail anyone it didn't like. Amadou had dreams: a car, a television, a little piece of land. He wanted a wife who was kind and smart and tall, so that his children wouldn't be as short as he was.

He had left Gambia after selling his market stall in the city of Serrekunda for $250, and begging his uncles and cousins for more.

Eventually, Amadou had the $2,300 he needed to travel "the Backway," as Gam-

bians call the illegal journey to Europe. He spoke on the condition that his last name not be used, because of his precarious legal situation.

Libya had been an abstraction, less a country than a springboard to something better. Two weeks after arriving, though, Amadou wandered into a dimly lighted Internet cafe and slumped over a keyboard.

"I'm still here, man," he wrote on Facebook to a friend back home in Gambia.

"We stuck in Libya," he wrote to another who had migrated to Austria.

He scrolled down his feed, clicking on photos of his friends who had already made it to Europe. They posed in front of fancy cars and shopping malls. They wore new sneakers and baseball caps.

Amadou was a half-mile from the sea and 187 miles from Italy.

"I gotta get out of here," he wrote.

The men who hunted Zuwarah's smugglers wore black ski masks. Underneath, they were schoolteachers, graying bureaucrats and engineers. They had to improvise an anti-migration effort out of the chaos of a failed state.

There is no effective police presence in this port community, where homes and apartment buildings are still pockmarked by the war that toppled Gaddafi, and covered with posters of the men who died fighting.

In a country so dysfunctional that it has two rival federal governments, there are no military operations, either. Instead there are the Black Masks, a volunteer militia that drives through town in pickups with tinted windows, combating everything from burglars to militant groups from outside the city.

"It fell on us to end this," said Adam Abza, the militia's spokesman.

It's not that residents had been unaware of the tragedies occurring off Zuwarah's coast. Boats had capsized before, killing dozens and even hundreds of people at a time. But those disasters happened in international waters, and the bodies were taken to Italy or Malta. Few here saw the carnage.

And Zuwarah's 60,000 residents were consumed with more immediate problems than human smuggling, such as attacks by tribal and political rivals. Militant groups, including followers of the Islamic State, had seized power 15 miles away. In December, warplanes belonging to another faction bombed Zuwarah, killing at least eight people.

Amid the chaos, local smugglers had thrived, driving through the streets in Mercedes-Benzes and Hummers. Some of them had day jobs as government officials. Some were unemployed young men looking for a quick profit.

"Everyone knew who the smugglers were," said Nanees, the security official. "But we only had so many resources, and we had other priorities."

Then the Aug. 27 catastrophe happened, leaving nearly 200 of the roughly 400 passengers on the old wooden boat dead. Within hours, the Black Masks were

in their pickups, with jerry-built holding cells in the back.

After 10 days, the militia had arrested about a dozen smugglers and their affiliates, locking them up in a makeshift prison.

As the militia members crisscrossed the city, they saw migrants from sub-Saharan Africa walking down side roads or sitting on curbs. The migrants spoke quietly in English or Wolof or Hausa, their eyes darting around nervously. But the Black Masks weren't pursuing them. The militiamen believed that if they could remove the smugglers, the migrants would go home, or find jobs in Libya, where foreign workers had long done manual labor.

"I don't know what will happen to them," Abza said.

In the center of the city, next to a row of buildings that had been pulverized in an airstrike, Amadou held a paintbrush in one hand and a cigarette in the other. It had been just more than two weeks since he arrived here.

He wore a yellow construction worker's vest and a ski cap, even though the temperature was close to 100 degrees.

He shuffled down the road, bending to paint the curb in black and yellow stripes. He was surrounded by 16 men wearing identical vests, all of them migrants.

Now, they were paid about $10 a day by the city to sweep the streets or paint the curbs.

The men quietly discussed their plans during a lunch break, eating chicken sandwiches, the sea breeze casting a layer of sand over everything.

"Man, I'm tired of this. I'm thinking about going to Tripoli," said one man. "The boats are still leaving from there."

"I'm ready to go back to Nigeria," said another.

Amadou wasn't thinking about going home. If he returned to Gambia, he risked being jailed by a government that banned its citizens from taking "the Backway" to Europe. He would be an insult to his family, having wasted the extraordinary amount of money they had lent him.

During the lunch break, while the others talked, Amadou stared at the ground. The previous night, he had spoken to his mother for the first time in weeks. She had heard a radio segment about boats capsizing in the Mediterranean.

I think you should come back to Gambia, she told him.

He had talked to her from the cinderblock room he shared with six Gambians and Nigerians, a cramped home where they listened to West African love songs and cooked rice with tomatoes in the evenings.

"I told her I would, that I would come back," he said. "But I was lying."

Amadou had grown up on the beach in Gambia, staring at the sea. There's no way, he thought, that men could defend something so vast. Libya had a 1,100-mile coastline, the longest in North Africa. It couldn't be sealed.

From the hull of Lt. Col. Assam Tor's patrol boat, the Mediterranean looked wide open, the sunlight flat against the sea. Nearly three weeks after the crackdown began, Tor was conducting a morning patrol for the Libyan coast guard, whose Zuwarah force consisted of two small skiffs with no lights and hardly any fuel.

"Even the migrants have bigger boats," he said, shaking his head as a wave crested over the rim of his 30-foot skiff. For the past few years, his force had been virtually useless as a parade of smuggler ships sailed from the Zuwarah coast.

This morning, though, the horizon was a clean line. There were no other vessels to be seen. The crackdown was working.

A week later, the city's blockade was still in effect.

"There's been nothing," said Foued Gamoudi, the Tunisia country director for Doctors Without Borders, which operates rescue ships off the coast.

"When the families of Zuwarah say smuggling should stop, it stops."

But back in his office, Tor received reports of the boats leaving from the surrounding cities. Thirty-nine people died off Khoms one day. Twelve died off Tripoli another. About 4,500 were saved by the Italian coast guard on another.

"If you can get out of Zuwarah, you can still leave," Tor said.

Amadou knew that, too. By mid-October, some of his roommates had paid a driver to take them to Tripoli, where the boats were still departing. It cost $400 for the 80-mile drive. Amadou had only $250, and was struggling to find work.

The weather was turning colder, the waves were choppier, the risk of capsizing was increasing. There were rumors that Zuwarah would soon target the drivers shuttling people to Tripoli.

"Man I need your help," Amadou wrote to friends and relatives on Facebook, appealing for the extra money.

Zuwarah had shut down the smugglers, but that didn't mean Amadou's journey was over. He would find the money, he declared in a Facebook message. He would find the driver. He had learned that you could will yourself across any border if you were ready to risk enough.

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