

Brexit Britain Is Still the Promised Land for Desperate Migrants



Kurdish-speaking migrants line up for food in Dunkirk, on Dec. 19. Photographer: Geert Vanden Wijngaert/Bloomberg , Bloomberg

(Bloomberg) — Night is falling on the small Belgian town of Gembloux and with the darkness comes another shot at completing an epic journey.

They are already more than 3,000 miles (4,800 kilometers) from their African home, but for a group of young Eritreans the final hop across the sea to the U.K. is what they covet most.

After sleeping during the day, some prepare to trek to a parking lot on the outskirts of the town. There, they hope to slip into the back of a truck or find a driver willing to smuggle them across the Channel for a couple of hundred euros. A few might get lucky. Fewer still will make it even as far as a port, instead being picked up by police and dumped back in town or jailed. That doesn't deter them.

"I don't care if it's raining or snowing, I try every single night," says 23-year-old Abraham, as winter took hold in December. He's been caught and detained four times over six months, though he will "never stop trying," he says.

Abraham and his compatriots have already reached the heart of the European Union, with its single currency, seamless transport network and open borders stretching from the Belgian coast to Belarus. Yet they remain driven by raw determination to reach British shores and the island haven they've dreamed about, even if it's one that just gave the government the power to complete Brexit and fortify against immigration.

Language, family and the mix of cultures help explain their zeal. Many speak at least some English and have relatives in the U.K. They are certain they'll be able to get jobs there.

Indeed, the U.K. looks set to remain the destination of choice regardless of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's emphatic election victory on Dec. 12. Britain's trucking association tells drivers not to stop anywhere within 150 miles of a French or Belgian port or risk being targeted by would-be stowaways.

"They're always going to try, so taking a harder position is just going to fill the pockets of criminals and make them take more risks," says Xavier Gabriel, 51, who works with an aid organization in Gembloux and also shelters migrants at his home. "Getting in a refrigerated lorry used to be rare. Now it's banal. They're even climbing inside tankers without knowing what kind of liquid is inside."

The plight, and persistence, of migrants, has been back in the spotlight since 39 Vietnamese were found likely suffocated to death in a refrigerated container in October that had been shipped to the port of Purfleet in southeast England from Zeebrugge in Belgium.

More and more migrants are also using dinghies. On a single day in September, a record 86 people crossed the Channel that way. In October, the bodies of two young Iraqi migrants washed up on a beach near Calais. They had been trying to cross in a small wooden boat.

During the summer, one man even donned flippers to traverse the 21 miles across the narrowest part of the Channel, the world's busiest shipping area. He was picked up just off the French coast, suffering from mild hypothermia.

British authorities say there's no reason to take such risks because safe and legal routes exist. Migrants in northern France and Belgium disagree. Speaking in interviews at their camps this month, they said they are left with little choice but to seek more dangerous alternatives.

Having escaped Eritrea and crossed Sudan, Libya, the Mediterranean and large swathes of Europe, an uncomfortable, potentially deadly 200-mile journey in the back of a truck or clinging to an axle doesn't seem like such a big deal to Abraham and his cohort.

Amir, who is also 23, says he's been in Belgium for six months, having arrived in Europe via Greece. "Everyone has their own reasons for wanting to go the U.K.," he says in English, sitting in a tent in a camp along a stretch of highway outside Gembloux and wrapped in a blanket to keep warm. "But we all just want to have a

better life.”

Eritreans make up the largest migrant community currently in Belgium taking that gamble, or 55%, according to Mehdi Kassou, the spokesperson for Brussels-based aid agency Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés, or Citizen’s Platform for Refugee Support.

Many are escaping being conscripted into the army. The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia may have ended, but the government is still drafting citizens for as long as 18 years. Human Rights Watch says the threat of abuse for conscripts and low pay have helped drive 15% of the population away since the 1998 war. Others escaping hardship include Ethiopians, Libyans, Afghans, and Syrians fleeing civil war.

In the first nine months of this year, 1,501 migrants tried to cross the Channel, almost three times the figure for all of last year, according to the French body that monitors that part of the sea. The U.K. says it has returned 100 people who entered the U.K. illegally on boats since January, but overall numbers aren’t publicly available. Authorities in Belgium, which has been trying to form a government for over a year, isn’t publishing updated numbers until next month.

“The arrival of Brexit is a new pressure, a new factor, that makes them want to go quicker and take more risks,” says Kassou. “The increase in people trying to cross by boat or swimming is linked. Boris Johnson arriving was one of the main conversations we had. What does it mean? I really need to arrive before Brexit, even if nobody knows what it means.”

The deployment of more sophisticated techniques by the British aimed at trying to stop them appears to be making little difference. In January, British and French authorities agreed to a joint action plan that includes spending more than 6 million pounds (\$7.8 million) for additional measures to deter migrants. They are said to include machines to detect carbon-dioxide levels inside trucks and long-range thermal imaging cameras that could scour the French coast from Dover.

Under current regulations, people arriving on European shores seeking refuge must have their fingerprints taken in the first safe country they arrive in, typically Greece, Italy or Malta and increasingly Spain. It’s there where they’re meant to apply for asylum. But if they leave and go under the radar, the process can start again wherever they re-emerge six months later. Those vying to cross the Channel

are betting that they can apply for asylum in Britain if they succeed. Some will also try to disappear.

In absolute figures, the U.K. currently receives below the EU average number of asylum claims per capita and fewer asylum seekers than several other EU member states. While there are no recent, reliable estimates on the number of illegal migrants in the U.K., the Oxford-based Migration Observatory says asylum seekers made up around 5% of immigrants to the U.K. in 2018.

Across the sea in France and Belgium, the camps are smaller than at the height of the refugee crisis in 2015. But when one is cleared by the authorities, another appears soon after and the crackdowns have only made them more dispersed and impossible to handle, according to Kassou. There are parking lots like the one in Gembloux dotted from Normandy right up to Belgium border with Holland.

“Any truck that is stopped is a sitting duck for migrants,” says Kate Gibbs, head of media relations at the Road Haulage Association based in Peterborough, England. “These people have traveled thousands of miles. They will do all they can to get in the back of HGVs. Hundreds of drivers have the same problems every single day.”

At some point, long-haul drivers have to take a break by law. EU regulations incentivize them not to work between midnight and 4:00 a.m., prime time for groups usually of about two dozen migrants. A couple of them will act as scouts to alert the others to police; others will clean up after they’ve left, all organized so as not to attract attention.

“They travel light, maybe they’ll take a small bottle of water, a blanket, a condom to urinate in,” says Gabriel, the aid worker in Gembloux. “And always a mobile phone because sometimes they have to call for help.”

The Eritreans began appearing about two years ago after authorities in Brussels 25 miles to the north clamped down on migrant camps in the capital.

The town of 22,000 is served by direct transport links to Calais as well as ports in Belgium and the Netherlands. Part of the allure is also its status as a “Commune Hospitalier,” meaning it’s tougher for migrants to be removed by police and their camps destroyed. There are about 80 migrants, down from a peak of 160 a year ago, though more are now arriving.

Gabriel's charity *Paroles aux Actes*, or "From Words to Deeds" in English, aims to keep migrants healthy and safe and also dissuade them from attempting the sea crossing to the U.K.

Gembloux's mayor's office gave the organization use of a large house with tiled flooring and high ceilings. One day this month, about three dozen Eritreans sat in a circle eating oranges and sipping sodas. Music from their homeland played in the background and candles burned in front of an image of the Virgin Mary with baby Jesus.

"I had to leave," Despbal, 27, who was a deacon in Eritrea, says in English. "How can I hold in one hand a cross and in the other a gun?" After a year of trying to enter the U.K. and a three-month stint in a French jail, he's one of the few who've decided to give up and ask for asylum in Belgium.

In a clearing in a forest outside the French port of Dunkirk, hundreds of migrants, these ones Kurdish-speaking, emerge from the trees as an aid agency food truck pulls up. They form a line to get bowls of stew, bread, and fruit. Their reasons for wanting to go to the U.K. aren't much different to the Eritreans.

Saman, 37, who also speaks German and fluent English, says he's managed to get into a truck twice in the past six months.

"There was a traffic jam and me, another guy and this kid all jumped in the back of a truck," he says, recalling the last time. "It was heaven, but 20 minutes later the police came." He rules out swimming, though he didn't rule out using some sort of boat. "There's no other way," he says. A small group of men that's gathered around him, nod their heads in agreement as it begins to snow.

An aid worker at Salam, an organization that provides the migrants with home-cooked meals, says they found accommodation for a family of Kurds with young children. They spent a night there but were gone the next day so they could go back to the forest and be closer to a parking lot.

"People got around the Berlin Wall," say Claire Millot, who's been working with Salam for about a decade. "Ten years ago, or even five, it might have taken three weeks to cross. Now it might take a few months. But they manage. They will always manage."

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