

Working in the eye of the refugee hurricane: a volunteer's account

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Malakasa refugee camp in Greece. PETER NIX

By Peter Nix

Atmospheric hurricanes have devastated many lives recently, their ferocity enhanced by warm seas and moist air associated with climate change. That same historic environmental crisis, coupled with huge social and political stresses in the Mideast and North Africa, is creating human migrations on this planet so malevolent and turbulent that they can best be described as refugee hurricanes.

This story originates from the composite voices of young Afghan men hurled onto the shores of Greece by such a refugee hurricane, where I met them while volunteering in refugee camps in 2016 and 2017. Tragically, this hurricane blows them from Afghanistan all the way to Europe, then—after years of desperate swirling—deposits them back home, where a peaceful life is even less likely than when they first fled.

Many young Afghans desert the army due to the corruption and extreme violence that pervades that tribal society. I saw photos of their dead comrades, blown to bits. And I witnessed the kind of vengeful behaviour of Afghan elders—always men—that diminishes hope for a tolerant and peaceful society. So they flee.



Thousands of refugees' lifejackets are piled in a makeshift dump on the island of Lesbos.

MARGARET WOODFALL

But this refugee hurricane is devilish, whirling these young men back and forth between impoverished countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran. They take buses, ride donkeys and taxis, and work part-time to survive; routinely cheated by employers, robbed by criminals, and deported by hostile governments.

Incredibly, some bear children and struggle to feed families while swirling within this social and physical tempest.

Years travelling to places they are not wanted

Many travel for years, looking for a normal life in these countries, but are not wanted. Eventually, they pay smugglers to escape by boat to Greece—again, where they are not wanted. Near the Greek refugee camps where I worked, formerly thriving rivers are now empty gravel ditches due to climate change, and jobs also have dried up. So they smuggle themselves to Germany, hoping for a job and a better life. But, still, they are not wanted.

In Greece, international charities and the government provide basic services of food and shelter in the camps, paid for by the European Union. But these services are minimal and are offered carelessly, due to indifference, corruption, and bureaucratic stupidity. In one case, continuous thefts were occurring due to a hole in the cement wall of a warehouse, but a Spanish charity did nothing as its only task was to provide the food.

I buy cement and pay an elderly Afghan to repair the hole, and the next day he uses the money to flee to Italy in a toolbox underneath a truck. He is an old man: no home, no family, no teeth, nothing—riding the hurricane. But I did not deliberately finance his trip, as some volunteers who have aided refugees have been prosecuted in Europe for, ironically, participating in human-smuggling.



After getting money to repair a hole in a warehouse wall, a refugee used it to pay smugglers to get him to Italy.

MARGARET WOODFALL

International volunteers are disheartened by the uncaring bureaucracy of some charities and governments.

Elders exposed to gender equality

And, unfortunately, blown into the camps with the young men are less inspiring members of Afghan's tribal society. My wife confronts a group of Afghan elders who want money for doing nothing and who angrily disrupt the work of younger men in our carpentry shop. Exasperated by their shouting and bullying, she raises her hands up to the elders' faces and tells them: "Either help with the work or

shut up and go away.”

These unelected and unhelpful men do not understand the meaning of her blunt words, but their startled eyes certainly understand the message in her unveiled face. Confused, they depart. The presence of western women volunteers blows winds of gender equality into these camps.

Our young army-deserter friends want a more positive and promising life and so are desperate to get out of the camp. From Greece, it costs about C\$300 to get smuggled by truck into Italy, and about \$4,000 for a fake passport and airplane ticket to Germany. To pay the smugglers, they work illegally for companies who pay little or cheat them completely. Or they steal camp equipment—anything not tied down. A refurbished warehouse in the camp has even its light fixtures ripped out and sold in Athens.

If a refugee is detected trying to board a truck or plane, they make a run for it and try again another day. No guards chase them because they are already in a kind of jail—a refugee camp. And security is lax as the Greek government is happy to donate its refugees to Germany. Even if rejected, their payment is secured. Because only on arrival in Europe will they tell their broker to transfer payment to the smuggler. Yes, human smuggling is like any other shipping business—in this case controlled by an international organization that refugees call “the mafia”.

Army deserters face disaster

But even after reaching Germany, the refugee hurricane’s eye does not blink. It sees them yet again, in the form of the German immigration police. About 60,000 illegal Afghan refugees are caught each year and returned, not to Greece but back to Afghanistan—a disastrous outcome for an army deserter.

These men are dropped by the hurricane’s winds right back where they started after years of hard scrabbling in unwelcoming and unstable countries, a miserable life in Greek refugee camps, and a fugitive’s life in Germany. Their quest for a better life has failed and now they are even worse off. They cannot live with friends or family, as this would expose loved ones to reprisals from the Taliban, which they had fought. And they cannot get a job and live a normal life, as this will expose them to arrest by the army, which they had deserted.

So there is no refuge in their own country: instead, they are worse off than refugees in their own country. Home, but homeless.

Their government will jail them for deserting the army; the Taliban will kill them for joining the army. This refugee hurricane picked them up and destroyed them as surely as atmospheric hurricanes and climate change have destroyed people's lives in Texas or Puerto Rico.

One young friend lingers, alone

As for this privileged Canadian, I can leave Greece and drink coffee on my porch on Vancouver Island's beautiful and calm Cowichan Valley. But my peaceful and solitude is interrupted by the voice of one young Afghan friend still trapped in the refugee camp.

His family has been scattered and shattered by the refugee hurricane: a dead Taliban father who worshipped a brutal God; a mother, both arms broken by her husband but miraculously set down in Germany by forgiving winds; a sister, lost forever in its vortex; and a brother, luckily swept to its fringes and adopted by Danish parents. Chaos.



Young men at Moria, a Greek refugee camp on the island of Lesbos.

PETER NIX

My young friend is alone, in a refugee camp consisting of dusty gravel, rotting trailers, and a few old warehouses. He has stopped working in the carpentry workshop and smokes away the 150 euros given to him each month. He plays video games all night and sleeps all day. He is depressed.

Canadian refugee-immigrant regulations do not permit me to sponsor him into Canada. I could send money to smuggle him to Germany, exposing me to charges of human-smuggling and exposing him to an uncertain future where, at any time, he could be snatched up by the refugee hurricane. I could encourage him to ask for asylum in a bankrupt Greece, where there are no jobs and where he is not welcomed. Or I could sip my coffee, send him a few more euros, and give him my heartfelt best wishes.

In my head, I know that If we do not stop burning fossil fuels we will accelerate the ferocity of both refugee and atmospheric hurricanes. And we should all ask

ourselves: “How many desperate and alienated young Afghan men do we want on this planet?”

But in my heart, as I listen to his fractured English, I ask: “How can I help my friend?”

Peter Nix and Margaret Woodfall worked as volunteers in Greek refugee camps for nine months in 2016 and 2017. The one young man who phoned for help has asked for asylum in Greece and so now can be helped to get a job and an education. He has a chance.

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