**A Long, Hard Journey**

*Refugees from war-torn nations are risking everything, hoping to find a safe place to call home.*

By Heather Price-WrightSeptember 21, 2015

Imagine that overnight, your school was destroyed, your parents were no longer able to work, and it became too dangerous to walk down the street to a friend’s house. What would you and your family do? Where would you go?

The word *refugee* is related to the word *refuge.* Ask: What images does the word *refuge* bring to mind? How does the word *refugee* make you feel about the people fleeing into Europe? Does the word *migrant* have the same effect?

In some parts of the world, families must answer these hard questions every day. Often, they are forced to flee their home country and seek safety elsewhere. A person who must leave his or her home because of war or *persecution***persecution***noun:* the act of treating a person or group badly, usually because of race, religion, or political beliefs is called a refugee. A person who moves to another country in search of work or to improve his or her life is called a migrant.

In the past year, hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants have made their way to Europe. Some have traveled by boat, while others have walked hundreds of miles. They are arriving in Greece, Italy, Hungary, and elsewhere. From there, most try to travel further into Europe. They hope to get *asylum***asylum***noun:* protection given by a government to someone who has left another country in order to escape being harmed, and to begin rebuilding their lives, but every step on their journey is extremely risky. As more and more refugees gather in Europe, its leaders must make difficult decisions about how to help them.

**Unsafe to Stay**

For many refugees, leaving is the only option. “[Refugees] are fleeing because their countries are at war and they have no choice,” Jo Becker, the advocacy director of the children’s rights division at Human Rights Watch, told TIME Edge. Many of the refugees arriving in Europe are from Syria and Afghanistan, two countries experiencing drawn-out wars. Others are from African nations, including Eritrea and Somalia, where *repressive***repressive***adjective:* controlling people by force governments and terrorist groups reign.

The author reports that more than half of the children Becker spoke to were not with their families. What could have caused these children’s separation from their families?

A staggering number of the refugees are children, some traveling with their families and some alone. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHRC), 41% of the world’s refugees are children. Young people face unique threats in unstable or warring nations. Becker traveled to Greece in May to speak with newly arrived refugees. She interviewed 40 children, more than half of whom were not with their families. The young people she interviewed were from countries that are especially dangerous for kids and teens.

*SEBNEM COSKUN—ANADOLU AGENCY—GETTY IMAGES*

The large numbers of refugees surging into Europe include kids and teens traveling without their families. These boys are on their way to a bus terminal in Istanbul, Turkey, where they hope to catch a bus to Germany.

*I could be in the army forever.* Ask: What does this statement tell us about the way Syrians view their country’s war?

In Syria, for example, young men must serve in the military starting at the age of 18. Legally, they have to serve for only 18 months. But the government, which is engaged in a bloody civil war, has begun forcing men and boys to stay in the military for several years—even *indefinitely***indefinitely***adverb:* for an unspecified or unlimited amount of time. “[Teens] who are 16 or 17 see what’s happening and think, ‘If I turn 18, I could be in the army forever, and I don’t want to be part of this war,’” Becker says. In Afghanistan, even younger kids are forced to serve in the military.

Lack of access to education is another major factor causing children to leave their homes. In Syria alone, thousands of schools have been bombed or otherwise destroyed. A recent report by UNICEF, the United Nations’ children’s organization, found that violence and instability in North Africa and the Middle East have forced more than 13 million children to leave school in the last several years.

Becker told the story of one Syrian family that had to move to a new town when their 10-year-old son’s school was bombed. After his second school was also destroyed, “the family said, ‘We can’t live here,’” Becker says. “’We can’t walk safely in the streets, we fear for our lives. We can’t stay.’”

*MUHAMMED KHAIR—ANADOLU AGENCY—GETTY IMAGES*

Residents of Damascus, Syria, survey a damaged building. The civil war in Syria has left many buildings, including homes, schools, and mosques, destroyed.

**Perilous Passage**

Refugees travel to Europe by two main routes (see map). They are traveling from Middle Eastern countries to Turkey, then across the Mediterranean Sea to Greece, or across the Mediterranean from North Africa to Italy.

*MAPS BY JOE LEMONNIER FOR TIME FOR KIDS*

Ask: How do these details add to your understanding of the danger of the Mediterranean crossing?

Lately, the Mediterranean has become more dangerous. Refugees often pay *smugglers***smuggler***noun:* someone who brings people or goods into a place illegally to take them across the water. These smugglers pack 40 to 50 people on small, inflatable boats meant for just 20 people. The boats can be old and in poor condition. Although the journey from Turkey to Greece is not long, traveling in tiny, packed boats is terrifying. “Sometimes, the boats [get] into real trouble,” Becker says. Deaths during these boat journeys have become one of the most visible and upsetting parts of the refugee crisis. This year alone, more than 2,500 people have died trying to cross this small stretch of sea.

*THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN/AP*

About 50 refugees crowd a boat headed for the Greek island of Lesbos on September 10. More than 300,000 refugees and migrants making their way to Europe have crossed the Mediterranean Sea.

Those who make it to Europe still have obstacles ahead of them. Because of the large numbers of refugees arriving, nations like Greece and Hungary can’t provide basic services. People lack shelter, sanitation, and even adequate food and water. Some refugees stay in camps, where they receive some support but which are extremely overcrowded. Others sleep in parks, train stations, and on sidewalks. “Many of them find that it’s extremely difficult [once they have arrived],” Becker says. “Most *western countries***western countries:**countries in North America and western Europe are taking very few asylum seekers.” Leaders in the international community, such as European Union president Jean-Claude Juncker and U.N. secretary general Ban Ki-moon, have called on western nations to do more to help refugees. But countries are having a difficult time agreeing on the best way to divide up the responsibility of resettling so many people.

**How to Help**

The U.S. is one of the nations being called upon to help refugees. “[We have] a long-standing commitment to helping people who are being forcibly displaced,” says Ruben Chandrasekar, the executive director of the International Rescue Committee’s (IRC) Baltimore office. On September 10, President Barack Obama announced that the U.S. would accept at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in the next year, compared with fewer than 2,000 last year.

Focus on Chandrasekar’s words. What do his word choice and tone say about his feelings about the U.S.’s response to the refugees? Do you think Chandrasekar is hopeful? Why or why not?

But some humanitarian groups say that is not nearly enough. “In no way are we doing our fair share,” says Chandrasekar. He points out that Lebanon, Syria’s neighbor to the west, has a population of just 4 million people, and is hosting a million refugees. “That’s the equivalent of the U.S. hosting 75 million refugees,” Chandrasekar says. “[Comparatively], we just hope to offer a minuscule amount of help.” The IRC has called for the Obama administration to commit to welcoming 100,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016. (Amnesty International recently reported that no Syrian refugees have found shelter in the six Persian Gulf nations—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—and suggested that those countries need to do more.)

*CRISTOF STACHE—AFP/GETTY IMAGES*

Refugees wait to board a train in Freilassing, in southern Germany, on September 15.

Ask: What challenges do refugees face once they arrive here in the United States? What can kids and adults do to make the transition easier?

When refugees do arrive in the U.S., as tens of thousands from around the world do each year, their long journey ends, but a new host of challenges arise. Many do not speak English. They have trouble finding jobs. The transition can be especially hard for young people. “Sometimes, it’s a matter of ‘Let’s start this kid in ninth grade,’ but [we realize] he’s never gone to school his entire life,” says Judy Alvidrez, the coordinator of youth services for Catholic Charities’ unaccompanied-minor program, which resettles young refugees with foster families. She says young refugees might feel rejected by their peers. They might have different customs, such as eating food American kids aren’t used to. Alvidrez cautions kids against judging refugees based on these types of differences. “They want to be accepted,” she says.

Chandrasekar, too, emphasizes that young Americans should understand that refugees are like them in many ways. They want the same things: to be with their families, to live in a safe home, to go to a good school, to make friends, and to prepare for a bright future. Chandrasekar says it is also important not to take our opportunities for granted. “For some,” he says, “it’s a real fight to be able to live as a child.”

Point out that the video is about the same topic as the article. Ask: How does watching this video add to your understanding of the situation described in the story?