

Refugee Stories

Instructions: The following are stories published online by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Read the story that your teacher assigned to you. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates.

Ahmet: Syria to Cyprus

The fear of a grinding war that had already scattered his family across Europe left 55 year-old Ahmet with no other choice but to also flee Syria. Italy was the promised destination. From there, it would have been easy to move on to Germany to unify with their brothers and two eldest sons—at least this is what Ahmet, his wife, daughter, and son were led to believe.

“I was born in Homs and I wanted to live there until the end, but this vicious war left us no other choice but to leave all behind... For the sake of my children’s future we had to take the risk. I had to pay the smuggler eight thousand US dollars for each member of my family. I’ve never done anything illegal in my whole life, but there was no other solution.”

With 339 others, they sailed on a flimsy fishing boat, which the smugglers abandoned during the journey. They were rescued from the rough seas, off the coast of Cyprus. Ahmet is now staying with his family in a tent at a refugee camp near Nicosia, which was set up to temporarily host the 339 survivors; children, women and men.

The relief they initially felt when they were saved was substituted by disappointment and anxiety for their future. So far only six survivors have applied for asylum. Most of them are reluctant to do so out of fear that their application for asylum in Cyprus will remove their prospects of being reunited with their families in other EU member states. Ahmet says:

“I will think about my options, but I’m certainly not going at sea again. I left for the future of my kids; I’m not going to die with them in the sea. Life is not over.”

Awad: Sudan to South Sudan

When fighting erupted in Kormaganza, Blue Nile state [Sudan], in September last year, 80-year-old Dawa Musa’s family decided to flee to the neighbouring village of Mafot. Dawa was too frail to make the two-day journey by foot, so her son, Awad Kutuk Tungud, hid her in the bush for three days while he moved his wife, Alahia, and nine children to safety. Awad returned for his mother and carried her to Mafot where the family remained in relative safety for several months—until artillery began shelling the village.

Awad again fled with his family—this time across the border to South Sudan. For 15 gruelling days, he carried both his elderly mother and his daughter Zainab on his back, until they reached the border crossing [into South Sudan] at Al Fudj in February. UNHCR transported the family to Jamam refugee camp in South Sudan’s Upper Nile state. They lived in safety for seven months until heavy rains caused flooding, making it difficult for UNHCR to bring clean water to the camp and bringing the threat of highly contagious waterborne diseases.

UNHCR set up a new camp in Gendrassa, located 55 kilometers from Jamam and on higher ground, and began the relocation of 56,000 people to the new camp. Among them were Awad and his family. Awad carried his mother once again, but this time it was to their new tent in Gendrassa camp. Awad has plans to begin farming. “Come back in three months,” he said, “and there will be maize growing.”

Hosein: Iran to France

“I am sure my mother and sister are alive.”

Hosein is an Afghan Civil Engineer student. He was born in Iran and along with his mother and sister, they sailed off from the Turkish coast heading for Samos Island in Greece. Their boat sunk at high seas on 11 July 2014, and his mother and sister are missing. Hosein and his three other sisters, two in France and one in Germany, have left no stone unturned in trying desperately to find a clue that would lead them to their beloved ones:

“The past ten days were the most agonizing days of my life. On 10 July, along with with my mother Fatme and my sister Shokoufeh, we sailed off in a 12 meter boat after having paid 9,000 Euro for the three of us. It was overcrowded as the smugglers had crammed around 40 men, women and children on that little boat.

After several hours at sea, the captain informed us that he was no longer in command of the boat which suddenly started taking in water.

Among terrified screams, I tried to elbow myself to reach the small cabin where my mother and sister were, but I was hurled overboard by panicking passengers. I was very desperate. In the sea, the currents were so strong that I could hardly swim. It was only until several hours later, namely on Friday 11 July at noon, that I along with another, almost unconscious passenger, were spotted by an Italian sailing boat and were transferred to Chios Island [Greece]. Other survivors were brought to Samos. Fifteen Syrians and Afghans have been rescued. The shipwreck so far claims the lives of six persons who were found by the Greek and Turkish Coast Guards while the rest are still missing.

Other family members of missing people with whom we were in the same boat, are in Germany and in Denmark while I am currently in France with my two sisters and their families. I traveled legally on a travel document issued by the French Embassy in Athens. All the families of missing people are appealing that the search and rescue operations of the authorities continue unabated. We urge the Greek authorities to bring up the boat as there were women and small children in the cabin who may have been trapped.

As for my missing mother and sister, another passenger who left the boat after me told me that they were not trapped in the cabin. Since they had very good life jackets, they must have survived. I am sure they are alive. I will not abandon the search. I expect and hope for good news. But even if the news were bad I still want to know!”

Shahad: Syria to Lebanon

Four-year-old Shahad, whose name means “the sweetest part of the honey,” was born in a village near the city of Hama in western Syria. Her father, Yehia, is a farmer who raised wheat and barley. Before the war, the family had, he recalls, “the best life.”

But last September, fighting levelled their three-story family home. Shahad’s 10-year-old brother, Jasim, and baby sister, Aya, who was not yet two, were killed, along with five other family members. Rescuers pulled Shahad from the rubble, her face lacerated and silky curls torn from her skull.

The family rushed her to a local clinic, where an overworked medic put in stitches and hastily sent the family on their way. There was no time to properly clean the wound. The whole family fled for the border. On the way, they were stopped at dozens of checkpoints, where they feared being detained and imprisoned. Seventeen hours later, after midnight, they arrived in Lebanon with nothing but a suitcase.

The family registered with UNHCR and received basic supplies such as mattresses, blankets, cooking utensils and hygiene items. Aid agencies have provided electricity to the building, installed outdoor latrines and ensured drinking water. Refugees are receiving food vouchers as well. Yehia, like many fathers, is doing what he can to keep the surviving members of his family alive.

Shookrullah Alizadah: Afghanistan to Sweden

"I want to tell you about when I fled from Afghanistan to Sweden. The trip took almost four months, and it is three years ago now. I came to Sweden with the help of smugglers that my parents paid. I fled illegally over the mountains and traveled by trucks, cars and boats.

First, I came to Iran. It took 20 days and a lot of walking. Then Turkey, but that trip was easier since we took buses and cars and only walked for five hours across Turkey's border. Next, we arrived in Istanbul. The three weeks I spent in that big, modern and beautiful city were the best, but the smugglers decided we'd go to Greece. This time it was a dangerous trip; we had to cross the border to Greece in a rubber boat.

We got to the sea at midnight but the police tried to catch us. We ran because we didn't want them to send us back to Afghanistan. Finally we got to Greece; exhausted, hungry and thirsty.

In Greece, the police took us to a refugee camp where we got checked, registered and sent to Athens. They dropped us on a big square and we called the smuggler, who would help us, get to Italy by boat.

We tried to reach the sea several times the next month. On the third try we were put in jail for over a week. On the fourth try, we managed! We were so happy! But there was a huge problem awaiting us. We did not have any food and water and the trip from Greece to Italy took three days and two nights. We drank sea water to survive. Then, in the middle of the sea the boat's GPS broke down. We were sad and worried but an Iraqi boy who knew how to navigate a boat became captain and steered the boat to Sorano in Italy.

But my journey wasn't over. After several more car trips and train rides, I got off the train in Malmö. It was so cold! I didn't have any warm clothes, Italy was warm and I had no idea that it was so cold in Sweden..."

Yasser: Syria to Bulgaria

"When the problems started in Damascus our neighborhood was among the first to see fighting. One night during a protest, bombs killed 400 people. By six in the morning our whole street was gone and we left our family home in ruins after it was struck by an explosion.

Initially we found shelter in Quneitra province. But even if we were away from the worst fighting, I could no longer go to college where I studied tourism. My options were to join one of the armies or leave the country. I left for Lebanon with only 180 USD in my pocket and from there to Istanbul. Those first weeks were very difficult and lonely.

In Turkey, I joined five of my friends and started working in a factory making cardboard boxes. It was enough to eat, but nothing more. I was working over twelve hours each day. So, the six of us decided that we have to seek asylum in the European Union. We had no money so we tried on our own without a smuggler.

On December 2, 2013, we left with printed maps, a GPS, food and flashlights. We walked along the Rezovo river until we crossed into Bulgaria. It took us three days on foot.

In Bulgaria we were taken to a dilapidated building for single men in the rundown Harmanli camp. It was horrible. There were no proper bathrooms or showers, people were heating themselves with bonfires, and there was very little food. Then day by day things got better and now it is actually decent. After the first few weeks the six of us formed a volunteer group to help out around the camp. Soon after, we started a daytime school for the children in the camp, so we all have something to do.

If the war stops I will immediately go back to Syria. But I can see it's not going to stop. I can see that it will not end even in ten years."

Sahara: Somalia to Slovakia

"I told it many times, do not worry, I am settled with my past and trying to look only into the future. I am not afraid, maybe I do not realize how difficult it will be to start my new life in different place but I know that it will definitely be the best that I could have ever done for my beloved daughters.

I was born in 1972 in Somalia. I lived in a city together with my parents and brother until my parents died a violent death that I witnessed at the age of 16. I remained alone with my grandmother who decided to leave Somalia in order to protect me. Our journey took two months, me and my grandmother walked all the way to the shores of Djibouti where we took a boat through the Arabian Sea to Yemen. I almost lost hope after the engine of the boat had broken down. Fortunately, our overcrowded boat was found by a ship and its crew helped us to reach the coast of Yemen safely.

Our lives depended on the help of others, who provided us food and temporary shelter. We slept and begged in the streets until we were sheltered in one of the refugee camps in Yemen. My life went normal, I found a job as a servant and was happy to be able to take care of myself and the only relative, who was close to me, my grandmother. But the journey exhausted my grandmother, whose health condition deteriorated rapidly. After her death, I remained alone and met a man who wanted to marry me. Being a single woman and a refugee in a foreign country is not that easy, trust me. I liked him too. After our wedding, we found a decent house in the capital of Yemen, which offered much more job opportunities. Our three daughters visited school and I was pregnant with our fourth child when my husband filed a divorce and I remained alone again.

I knew that without any support, I would not be able to survive and decided to ask UNHCR for help. I applied for resettlement and found myself to be chosen out of hundreds of refugees waiting with me in harsh living conditions.

People say it must have been a really hard decision to leave everything behind and move to another country [Slovakia] with different culture. I made the decision very easily, grabbed the hands of my children, like my grandmother grabbed mine 27 years ago and now, we are on a way towards a new, better life."