

Refugee Voices

Dedicated to the Views and Voices of Refugees Living in Turkey

A Quarterly Newsletter

Spring 2009

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'I want to express my best regards and greetings to the greatest of all refugees worldwide. Keep your courage! Tomorrow belongs to you, between you and me, there is still so much to live for.'

-Enzo singing at Vertigo, pages 4-7

A Letter Back

Mahad is a refugee from Somalia who was resettled to San Jose, California last year. In 2007, Refugee Voices published a story about Mahad and the difficulty that he had getting married to his wife, Zehra, because they lacked the documentation they needed from Somalia. Now, Mahad reports back to the refugee community he left in Istanbul about the new life he has started in the US. He is waiting for his wife and their new baby to join him there after they finish their paperwork with the UNHCR.

What was your trip like to the United States?

I enjoyed my trip to US. It was very comfortable, but very tedious, and I went through a long process of security checking. But once I got on the plane, I felt relaxed, and I enjoyed the good hospitality and service of the air hostess.

I'm very happy and proud to mention that I could communicate and read the signs in English during my trip to US. The flight was not going directly to my final destination, so I had to make a connection in Atlanta, Georgia. Because I had learned English, I could talk to people and ask the gate and the time of my third departure to my final destination. I could visualize how hard it would be to make the trip if I couldn't speak English, because I know the obstacles and hardships of lacking communication when you're travelling and are in need for desperate help. But I'm blessed that I could speak English and I was travelling to an English-speaking country.

How is your life in the US different from what you expected?

I could imagine the life in the US before my resettlement, as I also learned from friends living in the US that the life in America has more challenges, especially when you first get there.

But my life here is very enjoyable with many opportunities. And when I arrived at my new home, I found what I expected before my arrival to United States of America: I enjoyed part of my life; I got more freedom; I left behind the fear about my future, the fear of being called illegal. As undocumented aliens, people live – as I used to live – without these

kinds of protections. Now, no one, from normal citizens to the government, stops or asks my identity and where I came from. The only thing required is to abide by the rules and the law of the country, no matter if you just moved in, whether you are a resident, or a citizen.

I arrived in a country where no one claims superiority or more rights than the other. No one says, I'm American and you are an alien or a refugee. I'm more prestigious than you. You just come, as a refugee, and no one distinguishes you from the rest of the society.

You share the same rights and equality of opportunity with the rest of Americans.

When it comes to the hardest part of my life, it is the common challenges I share with every new refugee immigrating to the US. It's the long process of getting adjusted to a new life. It's literally a new life, a new culture, and a different lifestyle. I worked in a store that sells Halloween supplies to make extra money, and I didn't know what Halloween is about, so I was searching, and I got some information. It's amazing when you see people – especially the teens and

the young people – shopping for Halloween. Scary stuff is hung on the houses and working places: masks, animals, and skeletons. It is all very interesting.

Since most of the US cities are large and metropolitan, there is always a long distance between working places and your living area. Going to work on time and following your schedule is important, and you may risk losing your job if you can't keep your working hours. Using your own transportation for going to work and for your daily activities keeps you

If my friends from Istanbul could see me on my bike from my job back to home that night, waving my American flag, they would say, "Oh, Mahad has gone crazy."

on time and not late for your work. Public transportation is available, for instance, coaches and rail trains, but you need to know their schedule, and try to catch them two or three hours before your assigned working hours. Most of the working places are a couple of hours drive because public transportation is slow, with more stops. Missing your rail train or your coach will make you late, and you have to wait for the next one. I can say that depending on public transportation for going to work was one of the hardest parts of my life.

Working hours are long, and sometimes I finish my work late at night. I use two coaches, transferring from one to another. Coaches running in my city stop their services in late hours, so instead I ride my bike for half an hour back to my house.

What is it like to be a refugee in the US? Do you feel like you are able to participate in American society?

I feel like America is really the home and the land of opportunity for refugees and immigrants. Despite the barriers I have faced and the things that have made me lose hope, despite the desperations I lived with and all of the ways that I was stressed out about as a refugee in the past, now I have gained a feeling that I will not be labeled as a refugee any more, and I am not excluded from the many social activities. Now, I can participate in every aspect of my life like any American. I got my legal papers, I have my own bank account, and I can own property. I can pursue my education.

However, the only interesting thing I would like to point out is that I wasn't fortunate enough to vote in this historic presidential election, where Obama was elected as the first African-American president, because citizenship is a condition for voting.

When Obama won, I was like "UHOOOOOO, UHOOOOOO," like any one else. It's very exciting really. It's a huge move forward: A New America. I'm very glad and proud to be in the USA and especially at this time when we get this tremendous change of history.

If my friends from Istanbul could see me on my bike from my job back to home that night, waving my

American flag, they would say, "Oh, Mahad has gone crazy." I know you guys are surprised, too, and I'm really curious to know how this election is viewed in Turkey. I know that everybody was crazy in other parts of the world, and I'm interested to know how Turkish people reacted to these elections. I am hopeful that we will be a good example for the rest of the world and show them how our principles of democracy and equality of opportunity are ideal and worth accepting. What we showed and displayed in the election is really a good thing.

Since you left Istanbul, have you gained any new insights that you'd like to share with the refugee community here – things that you didn't know until you left?

Motivation, courage, and self-confidence are essential for being successful in a new home like the US. The more you are energetic, well informed, and patient in a competitive society, the more likely it is that you'll get your goal.

Getting enough income to meet your regular costs and make your living is the first thing you need to think about. Knowing the fundamentals – especially speaking, reading, and writing in the English language – enables you to get hired for a job. Higher education, certification and experience is also a privilege and a key for getting a well-paid job.

I know that many refugee community members have different skills, but I would like to emphasize and remind them (especially the members of my Somali community, most of whom don't speak English) to improve their English language skills.

Smiling, self esteem, good communication and making a little conversation (like "Hi, how are you doing today," etc.) is vital in American culture. America is a big nation with many different ideas, perspectives, and cultures. Don't compare your culture with other cultures, which might be a way that can lead you to consider yours much better than others. Be open-minded and equipped to evaluate and carefully discern thoughts.

-Mahad, from Somalia

No Home

Enzo is a writer and a poet, but has been making his living as a professional musician for several years. He left his country of origin, the DRC, due to the lack of freedom of expression. He lived through 9 days of hell that he now calls 'the most memorable days of my life' that are to remain etched in his memory forever. He was tortured and suffered from the extreme cruelty of some soldiers who acted as if they were participating in a pork butcher party. They even tore away his two golden teeth with a clamp...

I was arrested on the basis of two motives, linked with two different events. The first event occurred a few days before the fighting that opposed the militia of Jean Pierre Bemba Gombo and the police forces of the DRC, on the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd of March, 2007. I rented my car for four days (a Honda Civic registered BC600306BC, for \$100 a day) to a high executive of the MLC party, which is the liberation movement of the Congo, without knowing that he was about to use my car for the distribution of red tracts, on which was written with black ink : 'Kabila must leave.'

The second event took place on the 21st of March, when many massacres of civilians were committed by the

presidential guard (called at that time Moura Bana). Those massacres gave me the idea to write a song that I called *Soldat Voyou* (Rogue Soldier). The problematic sentence was this one:

'Sometimes it is useful to a soldier to disobey any order that makes you a criminal.'

Even though 'Discipline is the mother of the army/soldier'

Two weeks before my arrest, my recording studio was ransacked at night by soldiers dressed as civilians. I was arrested on Wednesday the 15th of August 2007, and was put into a temporary jail on the night of the 24th of this month. One day, while I was about to be transferred to a larger prison in Katanga, my pastor was able to bribe some soldiers with a sum that ranged around 4000 dollars and they helped me to escape. I left the DRC for Turkey on the 31st of August, 2007, after having passed through Kenya. I ended up having troubles on the Turkish border and they transferred me to Yabancılar Şube (the Foreigners' Police Office) and I was released after 78 days of detention, with a notice warning me that I had to leave the country within 15 days.

It was a succession of really hard times for me. Like we

say, misfortune is always followed a other misfortunes. Two weeks later, I went to Ankara to register my case with the UNHCR. I had my 1st interview, and until now, I've been waiting for nine months without any satisfactory response from the UNHCR, except a refusal of financial aid I had applied for. Yet, I moved in my "satellite-city", Karaman, for three weeks without any money and without any housing. In Karaman I wrote my song *No Home*.

I finally returned to Istanbul with some friends with whom I share the profession that is definitely mine: music. God never forgets his fellows. Today, I have started to play in a band with some friends. At this moment I also have already started my work on my 1st reggae-style solo album.



What will be will be!

'ENZO!' they say.

'YES,' he replies.

No Home

I thought I had an origin country

A place to call home

I thought I was just like you all

Could be free to touch my land

Step on what could belong to me

Never to know myself,

Until the told me

No home

No home for me

No home

No home for us

We know there's war in that place

*We know that there's the hand of
genocide*

Informed about the killings

Informed about the situation

*But who are you, and what is
proven?*

It proves not, no place

No documents mentioned, Nothing

No family for you

But ...

'Rainbow' is an album in which I basically read what is going on throughout this world. I say, 'One God, One Love for All'. That means that we might be from different races or from different countries, but you cannot love people if you do not respect them. I protest against social injustice, against poor governance, against war, against discrimination between races and between religions. And I am determined to fight for freedom of expression, for a true democracy.

But charity begins at home. With the greatest courtesy, in the name of love and human dignity, I ask the authorities of the UNHCR to treat African asylum seekers on the same equal footing as the others. Because we all have the same body cells, the same blood color. How can one speed up the cases of some and slow down those of the others? Don't let us live apart, our hearts are broken by torture, our bodies are aching, in the world of horror, we must become human, at last, please! Because of the slowness of the procedures, many from a large number of asylum seekers are waiting impatiently or are abandoning the process of the UNHCR. A man has never been satisfied with his own condition, and we all desire the condition of our neighbors, believing there is something better elsewhere. But are we going to perish in a risky adventure, attempting to cross the Black Sea? A suicidal and impossible wager, since there is only a two percent chance of survival. It's suicide! They say it is better to die now than waiting forever for the answers

of the UNHCR. 'Enough!', they say! We are tired of dying alone, without the witness of the Judge, without substance, without any hope for tomorrow.

But if I could have a modest piece of advice to give to my brothers and sisters that flee and hide, it would be «Stop!». Hiding in Paris is not Paradise. Life has no draft and we live only once. I've already lost twenty friends who sunk in the Black Sea, on a canoe.

I want to express my best regards and greetings to the greatest of all refugees worldwide. Keep your courage! Tomorrow belongs to you, between you and me, there is still so much to live for than what has already been experienced! We all want to have a better future, but remember that everything in our future is nothing but the present fed by the lessons of the past. It's never over, hope will help us. And always be positive; believe in God and in yourself. You can change your destiny; you must want it, despite the mountains and the deserts. Do not stop, tough it out! Insults, humiliation, they are only banana skins on the road to your success. Although it is still night, you have to know that one day the sun will appear only for your new day. 'Je crois en toi', I believe in you, the refugee.

My sincere thanks to my lawyer Isabelle, to Clémence, to the RLAP, and to the IIMP for their moral, financial and material assistance.

-Enzo Ikah, DRC

Sans Maison

Enzo est un écrivain-poète mais, exerçant la musique comme profession de puis plusieurs années. Quitté son pays d'origine qui est la RDC suite au manque de la liberté d'expression. Après avoir vécu l'enfer dans son intégrité pendant 9 jours qu'il signale comme les jours mémorial de sa vie qu'il restera gravé dans son mémoire. Torturé comme si ses soldats participé dans une balle de cochons, jusqu'à arraché ses 2 dents en or au moyen d'un pince qu'elle douleur atroce?

J'étais arrêté pour 2 motifs; le premier était quelques jours avant les affrontements de milices de JEAN PIERRE BEMBA GOMBO et celle de force de l'ordre de la RDC du 21, 22, 23 mars 2007. J'avais donné en location ma voiture (Honda Civic immatriculé BC600306BC pendant 4 jours à 400 dollars) à un haut cadre de la partie de MLC qui est le mouvement de libération du Congo, sans savoir que ce dernier avait utilisé ma voiture pour la distribution de tracs rouge écrit en noir « Kabila doit partir ». Le second motif est lors de ces événements de 21 mars où il y a eu beaucoup de massacres civils par les gardes présidentielles (nommait

à l'époque Bana Moura). C'est pour cette raison que j'ai eu l'idée de l'écriture d'une chanson que j'ai intitulé « SOLDAT VOYOU ». La citation problématique était;

QUELQUE FOIS, IL EST BON A UN MILITAIRE DE DESOBEIR A TOUT ORDRE QUI TE REND CRIMINEL en dépit que LA DICIPLINE EST LA MERE DES ARMEES (SOLDAT).

Deux semaines avant mon arrestation mon studio d'enregistrement a été saccagé par les militaires en tenu civil dans la nuit. Moi-même, j'étais arrêté un mercredi 15 aout 2007 et on m'a mis dans un cachot provisoire dans la nuit du 24 de ce même mois. Le jour que je devrais être transférer dans une grande prison a Katanga, mon pasteur a réussi de corrompre les militaire avec une somme qui nage aux environs de 4000 dollars et ces derniers mon aidé à m'évader. Quitté la RDC pour la Turquie 31 aout 2007 après avoir transité a Kenya. J'ai fini par avoir des embrouilles à la frontière turque qui m'ont transféré à Yabancılar Şube (l'Office Policier des Etrangers) et on m'a libéré après 78 jours détention avec un avis de quitter de 15 jours. C'était une succession de galère pour moi comme un malheur a était toujours accompagné par d'autres événements de malheur. Deux semaines plus tard, je suis parti a Ankara pour m'enregistré avec UNHCR. J'ai eu mon 1er interview neuf mois après et j'attends jusqu'au présent sans aucune réponse satisfaisante delà part de UNHCR sauf un rejet financier. Pourtant j'étais parti dans ma ville



Enzo avec ses amis à Tarlabası.



Enzo à Beyoğlu.

satellitaire Karaman pendant 3 semaines sans argent et sans logement. Ce depuis Karaman que j'ai écrit ma chanson « NO HOME » (Voir page 4).

Et j'ai fini par regagné Istanbul ayant trouvé des amis du même métier que moi qui est belle et bien la musique. Comme Dieu n'oublie jamais à perpétuités les siens.

Aujourd'hui j'ai commencé à jouer quelques concert avec les amis en groupe et en ce moment dont je vous écris j'ai déjà commencé

les travaux de mon 1^{er} album en solo en style reggae. RAINBOW, c'est un album dont en général je fais la lecture de ceux qui se passe à travers le monde entiers. Je parle ONE GOD, ONE LOVE FOR ALL. C'est-à-dire, nous sommes de différent race venons de différent pays; tu ne peux pas aimer un peuple si tu les respectes pas. Je proteste contre l'injustice sociale, contre les mauvaises

gouvernances, contre la guerre, contre la discrimination de races et de religions. Et je me suis décidé de combattre pour la liberté d'expression, une véritable démocratie. Mais la charité bien ordonnée commence par soi-même.

Avec beaucoup de courtoisie, je demande aux autorités de l'UNHCR au nom de l'amour et de la dignité humaine, de traiter les demandeurs d'asile africains au même pied d'égalité que les autres. Car nous avons tous les mêmes cellules corporelles, même couleur de sang. Comment accélérer les cas des uns et ralentir celles des autres? Vous nous faites vivre aux cœurs détachés, après avoir torturé, meurtri dans le siècle de l'horreur, on doit devenir humain s'il vous plaît! A cause de cette lenteur, beaucoup parmi un grand nombre de demandeur d'asile s'impatientent. Abandonnent le processus de l'UNHCR. Comme l'homme n'est jamais été satisfaite de sa propre condition. Envie toujours depuis la nuit de

temps la condition de son prochain. Croyant trouver mieux ailleurs, mais périssent dans une aventure à haut risque pour tenté de traverser LA MER NOIRE dans des conditions suicidaire qui n'a que deux pourcent de chance sur cent. C'est du kamikaze! Ils disent mieux vaut mourir aujourd'hui que d'attendre dans des délais indéterminés la réponse de l'UNHCR assez disent ils! On en marre de mourir en solo, sans témoin du juge, sans substance, sans l'espoir de lendemain. Si j'aurai, un

conseil facultatif à prodiguer aussi aux frères et sœurs réfugiés ou non réfugiés. D'arrêtez! La clandestinité à Paris n'est pas le paradis. La vie n'a pas de brouillon et on vit qu'une seule fois. J'ai déjà perdu une vingtaine des amis là-bas engloutis dans la mer noire à bord d'un canoë.

Mes salutations le plus vif à tous les réfugiés du monde. Prenez courage! Demain t'appartient, entre toi et moi, on en encore tant de choses à vivre que celles qui est déjà vécu. Nous voulons tous

avoir un avenir meilleurs mais, n'oubliez sur tout pas que: notre futur est née du présent fécondé du passée. L'espoir fait vivre; soyez toujours positif, croyez en Dieu et en soi même. Tu peux changer ton destin mais il faut le vouloir, malgré les montagnes et les déserts mais tien bon surtout ne t'arrêtez pas! Les injures, les humiliations, ce ne sont que des peaux des bananes sur le chemin de ta réussite. En dépit qu'il fait encore nuit, sache qu'un jour, le soleil apparaîtra uniquement pour ton nouveau jour, peu importe le temps que tu crois, la vie t'appartient, I believe in you, je crois en toi le réfugié.

Mes sincères remerciements en particulier à mon avocat Isabelle, Clémence et RLAP, IIMP pour leurs assistances morales et matérielles et financières.

-Enzo Ikah, du RDC

'Je proteste contre l'injustice sociale, contre les mauvaises gouvernances, contre la guerre, contre la discrimination de races et de religions. Et je me suis décidé de combattre pour la liberté d'expression, une véritable démocratie.'

An Anonymous Traveler from Sudan

I came to Istanbul from Khartoum, where I worked as a roofer. I have a degree in Engineering but there are no jobs in Sudan and now it's too dangerous for me, too.

It took me almost two months to get from Khartoum to Istanbul, and now I'm resting. I've been here for two days, and I'm trying to get up my strength so I can continue on my trip.

I want to get to Greece, because it's in the E.U.

Of course, I know that the trip is dangerous, and I keep hearing stories about people who die on the boats. Sometimes the boats sink, and sometimes people get sick. Sometimes there's violence, too, because of course nobody wants to let more refugees into their country. Some people die, but what can you do?

We have to keep going if we have any ambition. Most of the people are like me – we all want to go to Greece. It's the only way if you want to start your life, to live a real life, with a chance for things to get better.

But you have to have people – your friends, your family, your community. Otherwise it's too hard.

Now, I'm on the street during the day, asking, when can I take a boat?

It costs \$1500 to go this way, by sea. By car, €4000. If you go by car, you have a lot of expenses on the way and you have to hide all the time.

Either way, it's so much money. There's no way that I can make that kind of money, because of course I don't have legal status to work. When I was in Khartoum, I saved all my money, and it's still not enough.

So I have to ask for money from my friends, from my relatives who live outside who made the trip. If you have real friends, they can help you.

The people who take us in the boat, they're Turkish. Sudanese people bring the people here then Turkish people take us away. It's hard to know who to trust and everybody is trying to make money this way.

You have to know people. You hear about it on the street, that a boat is going to go, and you hope for the best. Wish me bon voyage.

I crossed several times. **Border Stories** *I crossed to Greece.*

They deported me each time I tried. They deported me illegally, they made sure that there was nobody on the Turkish side and then they sent me. It is always the same way. I could never reach Athens. But I do not care; I will try again, because I have no other choice. I cannot go back to Sudan. I cannot stay here either. You saw the life of the people here. And if they send me back again I will try again. I have no other choice. You know, we are talking about that as if it was a joke or a big game. But there is no joke here. People are dying on the sea; they lose their feet on the mountains. It costs a lot of money; you lose all your money, all your faith, all your hope. Every time I try again, I suffer more. I have lost all my faith concerning Europe. But what else can I do?

-Sudanese Asylum Seeker

We tried from the sea.

We were on a small boat, a plastic boat. It was during the night. There were too many people on the boat. Then the Greek Coastguard came. I thought they were going to take us. But they started to make circles around us with their big boats. They have motor boats. They were doing that to make big waves to make our boat sink. Then we were in the water and the police left us like this. The water was very cold; it was winter, in February. We had life jackets but we stayed too long in the water. The waves were so big. My boyfriend took care of me in the water, but I was pregnant and I lost my baby. The Turkish police rescued us the day after. I think we stayed more than 12 hours in the water. Some people died. But nobody knows about it. I will try again but I have to find money. It is so hard to live here, when I find small jobs all my money goes with the rent, the bills and the food. I do not know what I can do. This is my life you know.

-Eritrean Refugee

And then the police arrested me. They took me to a detention center near the border. But this place ... you cannot imagine this place. You don't have the right to speak, everybody has to remain silent. If people speak they beat them. If you ask for help because you are sick and you need medicine, they beat you. There was an old man, from Iran I think, or may be Afghanistan, I don't know. He was very sick, he was going to die. We made some noise to call the police. They came and they saw him. So they took a bottle of water and they throw the water on him. We are not animals, we are human beings. After that, they deport you to Turkey, where there is no police or soldiers on the Turkish side. You have to hurry, to run and to be silent. If you speak, they beat you so badly. They don't ask for your name, your age or your nationality or if you want to ask for asylum. They just don't care. They put you on small boats, ten people, and they send you to Turkish soil.

-Sudanese Refugee

We tried to cross from Çanakkale.

The smugglers told us to hide in the forest and to wait for the boat. We stayed in this forest for three weeks. We did not move. They were bringing us food every two days. But it was not enough, we were so hungry. But we could not go somewhere else to find food, because maybe we would have go or maybe the police would have arrested us. We were sharing the food. There were women and girls with us and we were giving them the food. And then the smugglers did not come for four days. So we gave up. I had no more energy to wait and to cross. We left the forest and the police arrested us.

-Mauritanian Asylum Seeker

Contributors

Mahad Mahmoud Mahad is a refugee from Somalia who was resettled to the United States. He is waiting for his wife and their new baby to join him in the US after they finish their paperwork with the UNHCR.

Enzo Came to Turkey from DRC in 2007. He is a poet and songwriter and is a professional musician. Look out for his album 'Rainbow'.



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Editorial Disclaimer

Refugee Voices is a forum for different refugee writers and artists to share their opinions and perspectives. The opinions, beliefs and viewpoints expressed by the various authors and artists in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the opinions, beliefs and viewpoints of Helsinki Citizens' Assembly and the European Commission.

Submissions

Refugee Voices aims to be a quarterly newsletter. We invite you to share your knowledge, experiences and art. If you're thinking about submitting in your native language, we will make every attempt possible to publish the original and a translation. If you're interested in submitting, please contact us at refugeeaid@hyd.org.tr or call at 0212-292 48 30

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Dedicated to the Views and Voices of Refugees Living in Turkey

Helsinki Citizens' Assembly

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