**Drowning in despair**

Noor Shahzad

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When people illegally migrate through precarious routes to Europe, which is colloquially referred to as ‘dunki’, the discourse surrounding these journeys and the migrants is: why put everything that is familiar at risk and pay exorbitant amounts of money to ‘agents’ to leave?

Even though the precise number of Pakistanis leaving the country through illegal migration methods, such as ‘dunki’, remains elusive, a significant number still do. This is evidenced by the fact that the influx of illegal migrants to Europe, which includes Pakistanis, has shown a consistent upward trend.

For instance, in 2023 almost 3.5 million asylum seekers migrated to Europe - Spain witnessed a notable surge, receiving 163,000 asylum seekers, marking the highest number in the last three decades.

Perhaps that is why one of the major challenges Europe wishes to tackle this year is that of a 21.2 per cent spike in asylum applications. In this regard, the solution that the EU has come up with and has implemented quite successfully since 2015 is asylum offshoring.

While officials in Europe portray it as an efficient migration management strategy, it is anything but. The only real achievement of asylum offshoring, as evidenced by data, is that it makes it harder and potentially more dangerous for migrants to cross over from different parts of the world into Europe.

Case in point: illegal migration from the Mediterranean region to Europe. It is an open secret that Europe supports coastal guards in countries such as Libya, and it does so because creating militia outfits results in better border control, which can act as buffers and deter migrants from coming into Europe. The reason Europe has to take this route of funding coastguards in other countries is that as per international law, it cannot send back refugees to war-torn countries where their lives are in danger.

Facilitating the coastal guards in countries like Libya means that Europe is actively making the journey for illegal migrants exorbitantly precarious. While this may seem clever, it results in migrants being trapped and eventually succumbing to their deaths.

In 2017 Italy signed a memorandum of understanding with Libya agreeing to work with the Libyan coastguard “to stem the influx of illegal migrants”. The European Union pledged a sum of almost 100 million euros towards training and equipping the coastguard over the next few years.

Be that as it may, those who have travelled from Libya to Italy describe it as “the journey of death”. The number of people intercepted by the Libyan coastguard over the years has consistently seen an upward trend as has the death toll of those attempting to make the Mediterranean journey, where in 2020 there was a 5.0 per cent spike which is said to be a conservative estimate at best.

In 2020, Pope Francis compared Libyan migrant detention centres to Nazi concentration camps. Due to the heavy policing of the Greece route, in recent years the Libyan route has become increasingly popular with Pakistani illegal migrants and agents who they recruit. Such was the case with 34-year-old Abdullah, who was lured by a fellow Pakistani acting as an agent, who made YouTube videos of life in Europe. The promises made by the agent and the life that he showcased in his vlogs piqued Abdullah’s interest, and he got in touch with the agent through a phone number given in one of the vlogs.

Within a week Abdullah’s visa was ready. His family was sceptical at best, but he had already taken a loan of Rs1 million and paid an advance to the agent. Abdullah travelled from Mandi Bahauddin to Islamabad then to Dubai, from Dubai to Cairo and Cairo to Tripoli. Upon reaching Tripoli he was told he was going to stay in an accommodation with others for a few days.

The few days turned into nine months, and Abdullah was placed in a migrant detention centre in Ain Zara. In this centre, between 500 people they shared one phone that they had hidden. Some days they could have one piece of bread, khubz, and on others nothing. His health deteriorated. He got ticks. There was no light in the room, and they were not allowed to go outside – except for the ones who died and their bodies got thrown out into the sea.

Every day Abdullah felt was the last. His skin had become mouldy from lack of hygiene and access to food and water. Days were painful and slow until one night, he was awakened by a boot on his neck. Fearing being thrown into the sea he was hesitant to go, however, he was put on a ship instead.

When the ‘ship’ that is supposed to cap at 30 carries more than 100 migrants, everyone prays for a miracle: one can hear the Kalma loud, as per Abdullah. “It was dark and cold. Everyone, the Arabs, Pakistanis, and Bengalis were reciting the Kalma. There were three pregnant women with us also.” According to Abdullah, at one point, the Algerian man who was navigating their boat told him and his companions that they had lost their way.

Upon hearing this, Abdullah felt that their death sentence had just been pronounced. “We hadn’t eaten for three days and were extremely unmotivated, cold, and hungry.” However, as dawn broke a shore was visible. “As we got closer, people started jumping from the boat and swimming towards the shore. I didn’t know how to swim but I also jumped. Seeing death so up close one doesn’t fear water”. It turned out that the Algerian man was wrong. They had reached Trieste and were taken to a refugee centre. Abdullah, now a painter in Spain, sends back money to his wife and children in Mandi Bahauddin. They have recently gotten a new air conditioner installed.

Nevertheless, the question remains: why leave a stable home for an unstable future abroad? Precarity is not only a precondition of life abroad but also of life at home. Life at home is precarious, filled with potholes and missteps, and chaotic at best.

The chance that illegal migrants take is not between a stable home and a stable future at home rather it is between drowning at home – in debt, responsibilities of younger siblings and children, the financial upkeep of ageing parents, family feuds that one inherits – and drowning abroad in volatile waters.

Men and young boys who leave face structural poverty and systemic oppression at home, the cycle is so pernicious that it seems impossible to get out of it unless one physically leaves.

In terms of possible outcomes of the journey, there is the plausibility of death but also the possibility of opportunity. Abdullah feels that the chance that he took was between death and change. “I knew the odds. Death being the worst. Detention, abduction, forced labour, injuries, and drowning being others.”

For many the dream of becoming a ‘someone’ really helps shape the contours of the journey and navigate all the uncertainties abroad. The definition of what it means to become ‘set’ is ambiguous but comes with affluence for those back at home in Pakistan than necessarily for oneself, like Abdullah, who was proud of the new air conditioner at his home in Mandi Bahauddin.

People like him cross the bigger oceans to escape drowning at home but also to fend for those who stay put at home so they too can swim and reach a shore.

The writer is a researcher at the Mahbub Ul Haq Center at LUMS.