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Migrants race through Italy to dodge EU asylum rules

BOLZANO, ITALY | BY STEVE SCHERER



Last month, Dejen Asefaw was rescued with hundreds of other migrants in the Mediterranean Sea and brought to Sicily. The 24-year-old graduate from Eritrea, who endured forced military service and prison at home, hopes to be granted asylum in Europe. But instead of applying for refugee status in the country where he landed, as European law dictates, Asefaw made his way to just south of the Austrian border. He hoped to cross into Austria and travel through Germany to Sweden, where his brother lives. There, he planned to identify himself to authorities and request asylum. (Routes to a better life: See graphic [here](#).)

Waiting on a train platform a few days ago, the South Tyrol's snowcapped peaks shining in the distance, Asefaw said it was easy to avoid being registered in Italy. "No one forces

you to give your fingerprints," he said, before explaining how he paid people smugglers more than \$5,000 for his journey to Europe. "Surviving the journey was a miracle." Asefaw's journey north exposes one of the biggest flaws in Europe's approach to migrants. A shipwreck that killed some 800 migrants in April prompted European Union countries to triple funding for rescue missions in the Mediterranean to help Greek and Italian authorities cope with thousands of arrivals each month. To further ease the burden on southern countries, the 28-nation EU has proposed redistributing tens of thousands of migrants among its member states. But while most of Europe agrees more needs to be done to rescue people at sea, the EU is deeply at odds over how to cope with them once they are ashore – a divide that reflects both the difficulties of European policy making and the rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment sweeping the continent. EU asylum rules, known as the Dublin Regulation, were first drafted in the early 1990s and require people seeking refuge to do so in the European country where they first set foot. Northern European countries defend the policy as a way to prevent multiple applications across the continent. Some are upset with what they see as Italy's lax attitude to registering asylum seekers. Earlier this year, French police stopped about 1,000 migrants near the border and returned them to Italy. Smaller round-ups happen daily in Austria, with migrants returned to the Italian side of the Brennero pass. "Some countries do not work very well in registering asylum seekers and refugees," Stephan Mayer, a conservative German lawmaker who is part of Germany's parliamentary committee on migrant legislation, told Reuters. But Italy, which receives the bulk of seaborne migrants, says the law is unfair and logistically impossible. It wants a major rethink. "These rules are not rules that help us tackle the problem, because they leave Italy isolated," Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said of the EU asylum regulations on Sunday. Italian officials say they are stepping up efforts to fingerprint all migrants and potential asylum seekers, but estimate that between a quarter and half of all those who land in Italy dodge the rules.

Part of the problem, says Fulvio Coslovi, secretary for the Coisp police union in Bolzano, is that it is not a crime in Italy for migrants to refuse fingerprinting, which is how the EU keeps track of where someone enters the bloc. Police, therefore, do not typically force people to register.

Coslovi said that the failure to identify migrants helps Italy. "Italy would like to rescue the migrants, but not take care of them," Coslovi said. "In other words, we want them to disappear."

DETENTION, FORCE

In 2014, some 625,000 people sought asylum in the EU, according to the Eurostat agency. Just under a third, or 200,000, applied in Germany alone, while Sweden received 81,000 applications, the highest number as

a proportion of population. Sweden has 9.5 million people, Germany more than 80 million. Of the more than 170,000 migrants who reached Italy by boat last year, according to Eurostat, only a third sought asylum there. Most migrants give their fingerprints only where they want asylum. In recent years, Syrians and Eritreans – the most likely to be recognized as refugees in Europe – have either refused to be fingerprinted in Italy or even burned their fingertips to avoid identification, according to an Italian police memorandum sent to local offices last year. To try to address the issue, the European Commission recently proposed that the EU set up and help manage identification centers in countries such as Italy and Greece, where the bulk of migrants arrive. The EU plan recommends allowing detention, the use of force, and ultimately deportation of those who refuse to be fingerprinted - a sharp contrast to the open immigration centers that currently shelter almost 80,000 in Italy. EU states are due to discuss the plan later this month. Should the EU adopt stricter registration procedures, the number of people applying for asylum in southern countries would likely rise, while those applying in northern states should fall. To help balance the burden, the commission wants to redistribute 40,000 Eritrean and Syrian asylum seekers in Italy and Greece across the EU over the next two years. Some EU members oppose the move. Britain says it will not participate, while Poland is pushing for a voluntary system. Italy criticizes the redistribution proposal for being too limited and temporary. "The quotas must be only a first step, or it will become only a stopgap measure," says Italy's undersecretary for immigration, Domenico Manzione. "Migrants know the rules, and the rules are no longer viable." There appears to be little will among northern countries to change the rules, though the Commission has promised to "evaluate" them next year.

WELCOME

Every morning, dozens, and sometimes even hundreds of migrants arrive from Rome and spill out onto the platforms of the Bolzano train station, in the Adige River valley near the Brennero pass into Austria. Bleary-eyed and disheveled, men, women and children are greeted by volunteers in several languages, including English, Tigrinya and Arabic. "Good morning. Welcome," said an Italian volunteer as she directed migrants one recent morning towards an area with water, sandwiches, fruit and basic hygienic products like hand wipes provided by a local non-profit group. Later that day, Asefaw and his 19-year-old fiancée Nebyat Mengstu jumped on a tightly packed train to the pass, where they planned to catch an international service bound for Munich. Migrants filled an entire carriage and talked in hushed voices as they rattled past the medieval castles that dot the valley. Asefaw said he had tried to leave Eritrea once before, in 2010. When he was caught at the border, he was jailed for six months. He has a university degree in aquatic agriculture, he said, but was ordered to teach at school for about \$5 per month. "It's not enough to survive," said Asefaw, who wore a baseball cap and carried a small backpack. In Sweden, he hoped to find a job and help his family at home. He also hoped to marry his fiancée. On the train, the two held hands. "We have shared a lot of miracles," Asefaw said. (Edited by Alessandra Galloni and Simon Robinson)