

Greece: A Sudanese refugee's 13-year wait for asylum

One man's long, winding tale from the civil war and torture in Sudan to legal limbo in Greece.

by [Lauren Zanolli](#)

9 Dec 2016



Barely escaping death and torture at the hands of soldiers in Sudan, Idris Roban made his way to safety in Europe, but has been in Greece's asylum limbo for 13 years. [Lauren Zanolli/Al Jazeera]

MORE ON [EUROPE](#)

[UK Labour Party meets to discuss stance on Brexit](#) yesterday

[Italian government adopts hardline anti-migrant decree](#) today

[NGOs: Refugee rescue ship loses license after pressure from Italy](#) today

[Russia says Israeli role in Syria plane downing was premeditated](#) today

Athens, Greece - When Idris Roban was forced to flee the civil war in Sudan in 2000, he didn't have a chance to gather any keepsakes, let alone basic essentials for the long journey to a smuggling point in Libya. "I didn't have time and there is no way because sometimes you are going in the jungle you cannot carry in your bag anything," he said in his steady, accented English at a cafe in Athens.

Roban is now 35. He grew up working on his father's farm in the Sudan's South Kordofan state, an area dominated by the [lush Nuba Mountains](#). The second Sudanese civil war - which began in 1983 with the founding of Sudan's People Liberation Movement (SPLM), a rebel separatist group - quickly bled into the region, ultimately killing two million people across the country and displacing four million more. After a break in fighting after the 2005 ceasefire agreement, tensions between the northern outpost of the SPLM (SPLM-N) and the Sudanese army were revived in the region in 2011, leading up to the creation of neighbouring [South Sudan](#).

But Roban still remembers the more bucolic aspects of Sudan, where he lived with his parents and three sisters in a village near Habilia.

"I remember the voice of the birds in the morning," he said. "Every time before the rain, you see a rainbow. And since I left Sudan I have never seen a rainbow, not even a picture." He would often hunt birds with his father, barbecuing the extra meat for others in the village.

[INTERACTIVE: A journey into Sudan's forsaken Blue Nile](#)

He was made a refugee one night in his early 20s, after the army attacked the area, killing his father and leading to his capture as a suspected rebel supporter. After 16 years, a dangerous journey along multiple smuggling routes, Roban is still seeking international protection, stuck in legal purgatory in Greece's broken asylum system for over a decade.

"You are looking for the best future. You are looking for the safest places to stay," he said of his trek out of Sudan. "But unfortunately when we entered here, this is not our dream."

[WATCH: The War the World Forgot](#)

One night that changed it all - A narrow escape

In the year 2000, Sudan was already [nearly 20 years into its second civil war.](#) Roban was not much older and hoping to add a poultry farming operation to his father's sorghum and sesame fields.

One night, Roban, his father and their driver were working in the fields when they heard an explosion.

"There was some airplane bombing. Then we heard a lot of fire," he remembered. His father went alone to investigate. After he heard more gunfire, Roban followed and found his father dead, shot in the face by government militia men who then seized Roban and the driver.

Both were immediately accused of collaborating with the SPLA rebels and taken into custody, along with other men from the area. "[We were] added to two lorries full of people. Some [were] wounded, some were dead," he recalled.

They were driven to an empty school, where Roban waited for three days until he was summoned for what he terms "an interview".

Army officers took him to an empty room with a large barrel full of water and a rope rigged to the ceiling. "They asked me, how long have you been supporting the rebels? For any questions, unless you answer the answer that they need, you are going to be punished."

If there is some boat that [sinks] and many people die, the people are afraid and so the [smuggler] price comes down.

Idris Roban

His interrogators were trying to force false confessions so they would have reason to kill alleged rebel supporters.

"But we are citizens, we are not soldiers, we are not rebels," said Roban.

He soon learned the purpose of the rope and the barrel. They tied his legs and arms together and suspended him by his feet. "They will put your head inside this barrel. If you say no, they put you again until you say yes."

Then, he got "lucky", suffering a fall that would eventually lead to his escape. While he was suspended, the soldier holding the rope released his grip and Roban dropped to the ground, splitting his knee wide open. He was transferred from the school to a secluded hospital along with several other injured men. Government guards stood guard at his bed for two months, waiting for him to be released.

At the hospital, he got lucky once more - one of the nurses was the daughter of a family friend. Knowing that a return to the interrogation room would likely mean death, the nurse and her father arranged for his escape. One night she helped him jump over the hospital's perimeter wall where a man - another local farmer and family friend - was waiting on the other side. The two rode by donkey for hours in the dark, through narrow trails and thick forest.

The farmer hid Roban in his home for several months while he regained the use of his leg, and eventually smuggled him to Khartoum, hidden in a truck full of sesame crops. From there another friend helped him arrange passage to Lebanon with smugglers for \$4,500.

It would be almost a year after the night his father died before he was able to actually leave the country.

He later learned that army officers repeatedly visited sisters and mothers at their home, seeking information on Roban. He wasn't able to speak to his family directly for more than two years.

[OPINION: The global heart of darkness](#)

Out of Sudan

The journey to Lebanon is something Roban wishes he could forget.

"I want to throw away the coming," he said. "I cannot put it in my memory."

Moving on foot or in vehicles, he spent days crossing a vast desert expanse to Libya in a small group, shifting between properties owned by the smugglers. He had to contend with extreme heat, cramped, awful conditions and frequent fighting among the others.

"Anyhow, this let me get more experience about life," he says.

He is not sure exactly how long he was in Libya - it was less than a year - but he ultimately arrived in Siirte, where he joined other small trafficking groups to make the dangerous sea crossing to Saida, Lebanon, in 2001.

"It was my first time on the sea," he recalls with a small laugh. He was packed into a large boat with at least 75 people, hidden among supplies and shipping goods until they crept out of the harbour. While he was extremely fearful, he was acutely aware that this was his only option to move forward.

WATCH: [People & Power - Sudan: War and independence \(24:26\)](#)

"You don't have a choice. Just to wait your chance and see if you can pass." He heard that the next smuggler boat that left Siirte sank, killing those on board. "It's a matter of luck," he says.

Lebanon and beyond

In Lebanon, Roban applied for asylum through the local United Nations office, but was swiftly rejected.

A Sudanese friend there helped him find work, and he worked odd jobs in restaurants and construction.

Lacking any papers, he was always looking out for police identity checks that would have caused him to be sent home. He earned about \$400 a month, half of which he saved for the next smuggler fee out of Lebanon.

Following the progress of other refugees out of the country, he decided to follow a well-worn path to Greece through Turkey.

He paid \$500 to get from Lebanon to southwestern Turkey, where he stayed for several months, and another \$2,400 to cross the narrow strait separating mainland Turkey from Lesvos, Greece, in 2003 - a relatively high price at the time.

Smugglers running the operation regularly adjusted the cost, accounting for the drop in demand following particularly deadly spells at sea.

"If there is some boat that [sinks] and many people die, the people are afraid and so the price comes down," explained Roban.

After six hours on the water, their wooden fishing vessel crashed on to the rocky shallows off Lesbos and, while no one was hurt, all aboard were collected by Greek police officers.

Roban spent three months in a refugee camp on the island, where he says officials would communicate only in Greek, despite the fact that no refugees understood the language. No lawyers or translators were made available.

"We don't know what they said ... Sometimes they come and give us some papers, we don't know, it's written in Greek only and nobody can explain [it]."

Today there are effectively two asylum systems in Greece that operate in parallel.

Unlike many other nations, Greece lacked a dedicated asylum authority until 2013, when its new asylum service began operating. Before that, the Hellenic Police oversaw all asylum matters, from operating refugee camps to issuing asylum decisions and appeals.

Rights organisations such as Amnesty International and local NGOs issued regular reports of asylum seekers being held in deplorable conditions or turned away by police officers, unable to file applications.

Since 2008, the UNHCR has advised against the return of asylum seekers to Greece under the Dublin Regulation - an EU agreement that allows countries to transfer asylum seekers to their first country of entry - citing concerns that "a substantial number of asylum-seekers continue to face serious challenges in accessing and enjoying effective protection in line with international and European standards."

[WATCH: Two Syrian refugees pay smugglers to embark on clandestine journeys fraught with danger](#)

The new Greek Asylum Service, which handles the cases of anyone that arrived in Greece from June 2013 onwards, expanded this year to try to cope with the approximately 56,000 refugees currently trapped in Greece after northern border closures. But not only will earlier arrivals, such as Roban, see no benefit from the expansion, resources dedicated to their appeals under the old system have been stretched further.

A spokesperson for the Hellenic Police said that members of the Appeals Authority Committees (AAC) - responsible for appeals under the old system - were called to help assist the asylum service in handling 2,000 new appeal cases beginning in April this year. Of those cases, 280 decisions were issued by the end of August.

The Hellenic Police also claims that about 8,600 appeal cases remain backlogged as of June this year, which is a sharp decline from more than [23,000](#) in September 2015. It is unclear what percentage of those appeals processed over the past year were accepted or dismissed, but data from 2015 shows an overall rejection rate of 62 percent.

The evolving Greek asylum system

Roban has seen at first hand the shifts in the Greek asylum system. "The problem is that the law is always changing," he said.

WATCH: Athens square becomes temporary camp for stranded refugees (2:06)

The asylum seekers' visa (known as a "pink card") that he received in Lesvos in 2003 allowed him to apply for a work permit, but when he tried to renew it several months later it was revoked by the police.

He filed an appeal through the Greek Council of Refugees (GCR), a prominent NGO, but was still left with a different visa with which he could not legally work or even rent an apartment from 2004 to 2011.

"After seven years, I'm struggling," he recalled. During that time he worked illegally doing cleaning work in restaurants and found other odd jobs in Athens and Crete through a Greek friend.

In 2011 - the same year the Greek parliament voted to create new Appeals Authority Committees (AAC), responsible for appeals under the old system - Roban's pink card was reinstated without explanation from the police. Finally, in September 2014, ten years after filing for an appeal, he was called for an interview with AAC.

The committee told him he would receive a decision within three months. Two years later, he is still waiting, bouncing between different buildings, doors, and state and NGO representatives in the convoluted corridors of the old Greek asylum system

I became brave enough to face everything. But I'm afraid of the memory... My heart [does] not accept these things [happened]. What I saw were incidents that I cannot forget...

Idris Roban

"If you go to the police they say go, we will call you. GCR, or any other organisation ... they are following what the police say. The same answer. You cannot find the question, you cannot find the answer, even you cannot find the help," he said. "Now the system is changed. We don't know what we can do, just we are waiting."

Roban has been reluctant to try his luck in another European nation, because of the repercussions on his asylum request here if he is caught. He says he has several friends who have been sent back to Greece several times after failed attempts to enter other EU countries.

"I don't have another choice. Only to wait to see finally what [the decision] will be," he said. "When you don't have choice, you must have patience to wait for another chance. If you hurry, maybe you lose everything."

Every three days he visits the same police station where he had his appeal interview more than two years ago, hoping to find someone that can clarify the status of his application.

"I am trying to correct my situation," he said. "I'm not angry ... I'll say, maybe this is not my place. How can I push myself to a new place, to find my rights and find my place?"

No future in Greece

"Until today I'm struggling ... and now there is no work even," said Roban. "Every time, when I [fall asleep], I ask, what wrong I did? I cannot find the answer. I don't have any bad thing in my heart [toward] others."

The unrelenting economic crisis of the past decade has made life even more difficult for Roban, like most others in the country. He has not worked steadily in more than three years and depends on informal painting work, which is occasional at best. Today he lives in a shared house with other asylum seekers arranged by a local NGO - a luxury he knows many other refugees do not have.



Idris Roban [Lauren Zanolli/Al Jazeera]

He follows a set schedule to give shape to the long days of waiting. At 5am every day he wakes to pray, then checks the news online on his laptop and spends a few hours at a nearby square where there is a Sudanese-run cafe. He reads widely, in both English and his native Arabic, and his small room is lined with shelves of used books. His dream is to study veterinary science and run a poultry and cattle-farming operation.

Still, he is keenly aware of the limitations of Greece as its own citizens have struggled through years of economic crisis with little hope for change.

"I tell you the truth," said Roban. "I hope to live here but here, if I [do], I cannot find my future."

A broken heart and a journey back home

While he wants to return to Sudan, going back home remains a remote possibility. Not only does he fear for his own safety and that of his family, he is also haunted by the memories of what happened to his family and friends there.

"Even if they push me back, I cannot go," he said.

"I became brave enough to face everything. But I'm afraid of the memory ... My heart [does] not accept these things [happened]. What I saw were incidents that I cannot forget ... Maybe one day, it is easy for me I lose my control [and] fight. Because of this, I'm going to be a killer. It's better for me to stay away," he says.

"If I don't have this kind of problem, tomorrow I will go back because here I am sitting without work. And there I am sitting without work but it's my land, my people, my area."

Still, if forced to return, he says he would go to war-torn South Sudan before returning to his home, if only to get a fresh start. "It's a different place," said Roban. "There, I am a foreigner."

For now, he continues to wait in Greece for a decision that will at least set him free from this 13-year-long era of insecurity and ambiguity.

"We know this is their country, and we are knocking [on] the door. Until now we are waiting who is inside the door to say 'enter' or 'go back'."

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA

