

'Europe or bust' migrants undeterred in Morocco

For scores of African migrants, it's a case of "Europe or bust", no matter what Moroccan authorities throw at them in the way of detentions and being bussed hundreds of kilometres away.

"I'll come back here even if they send me back 10 times!" insisted Achille, a 28-year-old from Cameroon determined to reach Spain across the sea from the city of Tangiers in northern Morocco.

In late September, together with his wife and two-year-old child, Achille was about to board an inflatable boat bound for Spain when they were caught in a police raid.

After four days detained in the basement of a Tangiers police station, the family was transported with other migrants by bus to Tiznit, 800 kilometres (about 500 miles) to the south.

Achille, who first made his way to Morocco in 2015 after a long and arduous journey, had previously been turned back to Casablanca.

The same has happened to thousands of migrants since Moroccan authorities last summer turned the screws and launched a relocation campaign to distance them from the north of the country or in some cases to fly them home.

The authorities, listing 54,000 foiled attempts to cross to Europe between January and end of August, say the north is where human trafficking networks operate.

Despite alleged rights violations in the campaign being waged by Moroccan authorities, hundreds of migrants just keep returning to Tangiers unless they are repatriated.

“Tangiers is my town, I will only leave it for Spain,” said Achille, circled by a dozen fellow Cameroonians squatting in an out-of-the-way lot dotted with trees, some of them killing time laying down on mattresses, others watching out for police.

“We’re living like animals here,” said 35-year-old Wilfred. “These people around me are like my brothers. Today they’re Africans, tomorrow they’ll be Europeans.”

– At mercy of ‘taxi mafia’ –

Wilfred had it better than most the last time he was arrested: he was bussed to Casablanca, 380 kilometres away, because “those who pay are sent less far off”.

He had already been deported to Tiznit and across the border to Algeria.

An anti-racist foreigners’ support group, GADEM, in mid-October condemned what it termed Morocco’s “discriminatory” policies towards migrants from sub-Saharan Africa.

Around 6,500 of them were deported between July and start of September, including 121 minors, 17 babies and 12 pregnant women, it said.

Sub-Saharan African migrants are being held at Tangiers police stations “outside any judicial framework”, GADEM said.

Authorities have launched an inquiry into the deaths of two young Malians, including a youth of 16, during a transfer operation in early March.

The relocations are defended by the authorities as aimed at distancing and protecting migrants from the gangs of smugglers in northern Morocco.

Ali, 20, knows full well that he can be caught any time but will keep trying to reach Europe.

“Only the weak give up,” he whispered. “I’m sure I will be able to reach Spain one day, and it’s that hope that gives me the strength to battle on.”

Even the return to Tangiers has its obstacles, such as bus firms in Casablanca refusing to sell tickets to migrants and leaving them at the mercy of a “taxi mafia”, according to migrants questioned by AFP.

The main point of return is the city’s Boukhalef district, which has a sizeable community of sub-Saharan Africans, many of them waiting to jump on a ramshackle boat for a perilous crossing to Europe.

Morocco, which nationals of many African states can visit without visas, has become a major gateway for sub-Saharan migrants into Europe.

More than 47,000 migrants have made it north to Spain since the start of 2018, including about 5,000 by land from two Spanish enclaves bordering Morocco, according to the International Organization for Migration.

It says 362 migrants have died out at sea or gone missing this year.