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Afghan Youths Seek a New Life in Europe

By [CAROLINE BROTHERS](#)

PARIS — On the edges of a [Salvation Army](#) soup line in Paris, a soft-spoken Afghan boy told the story recently of how he ended up in Europe, alone.

The boy, who said he was 15 but looked younger, recounted how his family left [Afghanistan](#) after his mother lost her leg in an explosion in 2004. They spent three years in Iran, where he went to school for the first time, learning English and discovering the Internet. After his father suffered a back injury that made working difficult, the boy, who declined to give his name, headed west.

He spent two months working 11-hour days in a clothing sweatshop in Istanbul, he said. He was then smuggled into Greece, where he was forced to work on a potato and onion farm near Agros for nine months, finally escaping in the back of a truck. He reached Paris by train after nearly a year on the road.

“I want to go to school,” he said in English. “I would like it if I could be — it sounds like a lot to ask — an engineer of computing.”

Thousands of lone Afghan boys are making their way across Europe, a trend that has accelerated in the past two years as conditions for Afghan refugees become more difficult in countries like Iran and Pakistan. Although some are as young as 12, most are teenagers seeking an education and a future that is not possible in their own country, which is still struggling with poverty and violence eight years after the end of [Taliban](#) rule.

The boys pose a challenge for European countries, many of which have sent troops to fight in Afghanistan but whose publics question the rationale for the war. Though each country has an obligation under national and international law to provide for them, the cost of doing so is yet another problem for a continent already grappling with tens of thousands of migrants.

In Italy, 24 Afghan teenagers were discovered sleeping in a sewer in Rome this spring, and last year two adolescents died in Italian ports — one under a semitrailer in Venice and another inside a shipping container in Ancona. In Greece, which says it is overwhelmed by asylum seekers from many countries, there is no foster system for foreign minors; only 300 can be accommodated in the whole country, officials say.

And in Paris this year, Afghans for the first time outnumber sub-Saharan Africans as the biggest group of unaccompanied foreign minors to request admission to child protection services, said Charlotte Aveline, a senior adviser on child protection at City Hall.

“Some arrive very beaten, very tired, but if they stay put for just one week they very quickly become

adolescents again,” said Jean-Michel Centres of [Exilés10](#), a citizens’ organization that works with the mainly Afghan migrants who gather around Villemin Square, close to the Gare de l’Est.

“First they ask where they can go to have papers, then where they can go to school, and where after that they can get a job,” Mr. Centres said.

The [European Union](#) does not keep statistics on the number of foreign children who are wandering Europe without their families, and the records of aid groups and government agencies vary greatly. But requests for asylum by unaccompanied Afghan minors suggest that there are thousands across Europe. The requests provide a baseline, experts say, because many more youths do not seek refugee status.

Blanche Tax, a senior policy officer at the office of the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) in Brussels, said that last year 3,090 Afghan minors requested asylum in Austria, Britain, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany — the European Union countries where their numbers rose the most sharply — more than double the 1,489 requests in those countries in 2007.

“Afghanistan is hemorrhaging its youth into Europe,” said Pierre Henry, director of France Terre d’Asile, [an organization](#) that works with the European Union, the [United Nations](#) refugee agency and the French government on asylum affairs.

The five Afghan boys interviewed for this article told of being exploited as under-age labor in Greece and Turkey and dodging beatings by the police. None would give his name in order to speak more freely.

A 17-year-old from the Afghan city of Ghazni said the police repeatedly tried to remove him and another boy from trucks in the port of Patras, Greece, where the [authorities destroyed an Afghan squatter camp](#) on July 12.

Once in France, the boys face more hardship. The Paris police have started conducting nightly searches to prevent Afghan migrants from sleeping in Villemin Square. The 15-year-old was placed in a cheap hotel, while others were put in temporary shelter in an unused subway station. Others find their own shelter under bridges and beside a canal.

The housing, financed by the state, is administered by France Terre d’Asile. The group helps guide the boys through the process of requesting assistance from the French child protection agency, registers their names and gives them French lessons.

“We have had some very good success stories,” said Ms. Aveline, the adviser at City Hall.

The boys interviewed for this article said they were in limbo, dreaming of going to school and having a normal life.

One teenager who has been in Paris for two months was deeply worried about what lie ahead. “How should I make a future?” he asked. “I’m 15 already. I’m on my own. What can I do?”

Yet a few days later, he was full of excitement because France Terre d’Asile had taken him to a swimming pool, the first time he had ever been to one. He was also taking French classes. From his pocket he produced a pencil and paper with pictures of fruits. “I like bananas,” he said in French. “I like apples.”

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