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La valla española y las relaciones hispano-marroquíes

Storming Spain's Razor-Wire Fence: Europe Or Die

More than 50 million people are displaced around the world because of conflict, poverty, persecution, and climate change.

“We came because things weren’t good. We couldn’t support our families.”

Three of the biggest gateways for migrants and refugees into Europe are through the western, central, and east Mediterranean. To tackle the unprecedented numbers of people risking their lives to enter its borders, Europe is spending hundreds of millions of euros to fortify its frontiers.

We don't know how many people are buried here. There are no names, no nothing. It's like these people never even existed.

“If 1,000 set out, maybe 50 get to touch the barrier, and only two get through.”

“I left my country for a better life, for a new life, for freedom.”

One of the biggest entryways into Europe for migrants and refugees is into Spain from Morocco. Most migrants attempt to cross into the small Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. These two remnants of Spain’s colonial empire effectively make Spain the only European country with land borders with Africa. The migrants and refugees stormed the border fence in Melilla in their thousands to overwhelm the border guards.

“There is no time to help each other. One minute, and it was over.”

Most won’t make it and will be beaten back by border guards.

“Not everybody makes it. Only the fastest do. The strongest and the fastest.”

But the few who do make it, once in Melilla, will have possibility to be transferred to mainland Europe.

So, we're in Melilla. Behind me is the border, and all I had to do to go from Morocco into what is technically Spain, was to stroll past the border guards. But for migrants it's so much more dangerous. Melilla may look like a tourist town, but it's primarily a strategic military and trading port. We had arranged to meet with the head of the Guardia Civil’s border unit in Melilla. For fear of his own safety, he asked for his face not to be shown.

“My division deals with the fence. We get support in the summer when more people attempt to jump. That’s when police back us up. One of our battles here is against immigration. There’s three ways to get into Melilla. Those with money use cars with fake undercarriages. Another way is by boat: it’s costly but not as expensive. And the third is jumping the fence.”

The Guardia Civil showed us their footage of how people hide inside vehicles. It's more expensive than jumping the fence but can be fatal as the cars can queue for hours in the heat.

“Whenever they see a suspicious vehicle, they make people get out, and then turn off the engine. They place two ECG stickers on the car connected to a computer that detects heartbeats.”

It is basically like a doctor's stethoscope. It will detect heartbeats in the car if somebody's hidden there.

“Negative. If it comes up positive, logically, there is a person inside hiding. In that case, we need to speed up the process because there could be a sub-Saharan in there struggling.”

What's the most common way for migrants to enter illegally into Melilla?

“I would say 75% to 80% jump the fence. It’s 12.5 kilometers long. Around the year 2000, it was just a normal fence.”

Melilla now has three fences that cost around 33 million euros. They are up to six meters high and equipped with anti-climb grids, razor wire, and cameras and sensors to detect any movement before people reach the fence.

“There are 42 cameras and 3-night vision ones that check for any possible movement. There is not a single centimeter that isn’t covered by cameras.”

We crossed back into Morocco and headed into the forest of Mount Gurugu, which overlooks the Spanish enclave of Melilla. This is where hundreds of migrants set up camp in preparation for jumping the fence. Many had already tried but failed several times. A young boy led us to their forest hideout.

How old are you actually? “I’m 16 years old.” How did you end up here at Mount Gurugu? “I came here because my parents didn’t have enough money. It’s my dream to get into Europe and become a big football (soccer) player.”

The migrant camp was organized into communities according to nationality. Most were from Cameroon, Mali, Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Guinea.

“Do you see that tent there? That was the Moroccan military. They came around 2 or 3 a.m. and woke us up.”

That day there were only a few hundred people in the forest since many had been chased away by the Moroccan police during one of their frequent raids.

We were shown around the Ivorian camp by a guy called Ashavy.

“Many people who were injured left. He was beaten by the Moroccan police.” So, the police came here? “They come here and set the tents on fire. We spread out; we look for each other. If you fall off the fence while climbing, you will mostly be ok. But the Moroccan police will come with batons and hit you and hit you and yell, ’will you ever come back?’ No, I won’t. But they still hit you, hard, on the feet and break them.”

The Moroccan police tend to target their hands and feet so that they can no longer climb the fence. But how is it in Morocco’s interest to keep you from entering Europe?

“We have no idea what the agreement is between Morocco and Spain. That’s Melilla right there.” So, this is the last steppingstone to Europe.

“None of us came here to the forest because we had lost everything in life. We came because things weren’t good. We couldn’t support our families. It’s not like Europe is paradise, it’s not. But human rights exist there.”

“Once both of us managed to get into Spain.” Did you just say you climbed all the fences and reached Spanish soil? “Yes. And they took us back.”

If true, this means the Guardia Civil is acting in direct contravention of EU law which states that once a migrant reaches European soil, they have the right to legal assistance and an interpreter. Which makes handing them over to Moroccan forces an illegal pushback.

“Pushbacks are simply not allowed. They are not in line with EU or international obligations, so member states should not carry out any pushbacks.”

That evening we heard sirens, there had been a jump. The jump is happening right now, and you can see both the Moroccan army and police and the Spanish Guardia Civil. Right in that direction. So, we are going to see if we can see anything… but you know it may even be the guys that we met in forest today… oh take it down… We had to be careful with the camera as the area was full of police and military and if they caught us filming, we would be arrested. Ambulance, yeah there's another ambulance now. More and more ambulances rushed past us. They all stopped at a roundabout. We discreetly drove past to try to see what was going on. We didn't manage to see much but there were a lot more ambulances there, military trucks, and soldiers on the street. And I could see at least four migrants on the ground badly beaten. One of them was bleeding from the head. Then the ambulances drove off and we followed them to the hospital in the Moroccan town of Nador. We can't go in with our car so we are going try to see if we can walk in. We couldn't bring our camera we had to use a cell phone. Injured migrants had been dumped on the ground outside the hospital.

You’re very badly injured. What happened? “I have broken ribs.” He has broken ribs.

The screams came from inside the surgery rooms. A woman was bleeding from the head and her arm was broken. The man next to her had a bump on his head the size of a fist. There were about a dozen injured people scattered around the hospital, bleeding and with broken limbs, some unconscious. A doctor asked why we had bothered to bring them water. We came and saw injured people, so we got them water and biscuits. “They don’t deserve it,” he said. “They are a pain in the ass. They always do this. At 7:30 p.m. they go straight for the fence.”

Once they've received basic treatment, they often get bundled onto buses and driven to cities far from the fence where they're left to fend for themselves.

The guys in the forest told us about another Ivorian community in Tanger in a suburb called Boukhalef. Many go there to recover after failing to get into Melilla. Boukhalef often makes the headlines in Morocco because of the many violent attacks on migrants. We are going to meet a guy called Korre, he's one of the people who attempted to swim into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. In February 2014, the Guardia Civil fired rubber bullets at Korre and his friends while they were trying to swim to Spain. At least a dozen died.

How long have you been in Morocco? “I have been here for a year. I am trying to cross to Europe but it’s difficult.” Korre, I heard you were one of the people who tried to swim to Ceuta in February. “You’re going to make me cry, Miss. It was bad. It’s not something to talk about, it will bring me to tears. A lot of people died. A huge number, many, many people were massacred by the Guardia. By the Guardia. I was hit with three rubber bullets, one of them in the eye. But thank God, I’m okay.”

Up to 30 people shared the small flat. It was the same situation all over the area. They had all tried but failed to reach Europe.

How is the Moroccan society treating you? “I work for a Moroccan woman as a housekeeper. She calls me ‘slave.’ Me, a slave. I am not a slave.”

“Us women are humiliated day and night. The Moroccan police break down the door and barge in on us. They see us naked. They make us get out and throw out our luggage. We are confronted with many problems. Racism. There is no work. But what can Morocco offer us? Nothing. They have nothing to offer us, except death.”

“We are always searching for Europe. Because in our heads, with think Europe is El Dorado. It’s insanity. That’s why we put up with it all.”

We had heard the stories of illegal pushbacks and we had seen the injuries. We had also learned that Morocco had begun building its own fence around Melilla, which was confusing as Morocco wants this piece of land back. So, to find out more, we returned to Melilla to speak again with the Guardia Civil. “There is a razor wire on that Moroccan side. The Moroccan police are over there. It’s a sovereign state and they control their borders.” Have all these efforts managed to get the numbers of migration down? “With Morocco’s collaboration, it looks like it has stopped for a bit.” Does Spain start here or is it that the border? “I’m not authorized to know exactly where Spain is. This is like any other border. You should ask this question to a government representative of Melilla.”

Where the Spanish border begins is a sensitive issue. However, a Melilla judge has stated that the border starts outside the first fence. Meaning that once someone's climbed it, sending him or her back to Morocco constitutes an illegal pushback under EU law. The illegal pushbacks in Melilla have mainly been documented by an activist called José Palazón. He has patrolled the fence for years. In October 2014, he filmed the Guardia Civil beating a 23-year-old Cameroonian unconscious and then sending him back to Morocco through the doors in the fence without processing him or providing medical attention.

“Spain began building a razor wire fence around four months ago, which led to massive civil protests. The Spanish government then dropped plans to put razor wire on the fences. They obviously then made an agreement with Morocco so that Morocco would put them up instead.” As far as I understand it, Morocco wants this city Melilla back. They don't want Spain to have it so why would they build a border around the area when they want it back? “That’s a question for Morocco to answer. It’s one of those things I have never understood. And the policy of the border over there, guarded with a paid, hired gun, a criminal hired gun or a foreign Moroccan army.”

For the past decade Morocco has received more than 100 million dollars in financial and technical aid in return for helping Europe tackle migration. Human rights organizations warn that with these types of third country collaborations, it's hard to safeguard that the fundamental rights of migrants are respected as is required under the European convention on human rights.

“Up until March, the Guardia Civil were allowed to use as much force as the Moroccan army. After 15 people died in Ceuta at the hands of Guardia Civil, the government prohibited certain behaviors, such as firing rubber bullets through the fences, because they now wanted to lessen the reputation the Guardia Civil had for violence. They send them back through this tiny door, see the fence. It has one door, and another, and another that leads to Morocco. Then a Moroccan boat comes out and the migrant is handed over. Any civil servant or the Guardia Civil has the key to the international border. He opens the door, and boom, out, completely illegal.”

We wanted to speak to people, who despite all the obstacles, had made it into Melilla. So, we went to the migrant reception center called CETI. It is built for 400 people but usually operates at three or four times its capacity. There had recently been an influx of Syrian refugees and because the center was full, many were camping outside next to a luxurious golf course. So, we are in the CETI which is where all migrants go once they cross and they get to Melilla. We weren't allowed in, but we spoke to some of the residents outside.

“15178, Elvis.” That’s a good name. “Our numbers are 15,000 and something, there are 14,000 migrants. We are many.” How long were on Mount Gurugu? “Several months, I was there for several months.” How come you stayed there for so long? “Because it is not easy to bend the fence. There are many obstacles. Barbed wire, three fences. If you are afraid and lack energy you can overcome the first barrier, but after the second one, you will be tired, and you won’t make it. If 1,000 set out, maybe 50 get to touch the barrier, and only two get through.” How many times did you try to cross the barrier? “Four times.”

What’s happening today? I have heard that tomorrow a ship will be leaving for Spain. “We call it ‘The Salida,’ the exit.” “I’m going away, I’m leaving. God willing. Tomorrow at 1 p.m. there is the boat for the Salida.” Are you happy? “I am, how could I not be? I’m heading towards a new life.”

The authorities eventually move people to mainland Spain, that is where the pre-expulsion centers are, or simply when the CETI is overcrowded to free up space. When that happens, it's cause for celebration because mainland Europe is where they all want to go. Why do you risk your life to enter Europe? “If your father is nothing, you will die with nothing, that’s how it is in Africa. You need to be part of the royal family, or even the king himself.” “I left my country for a better life, for a new life, for freedom.”

One of the Cameroonians seemed to have had an okay life back home. He was a former professional basketball player and a politics graduate. We wanted to know why he had left it all behind. “I could see the dreams, the dreams that were being taken away from young Cameroonians. A lot of us are intellectuals to whom Cameroon has promised nothing. When I crossed Cameroon’s border with another country, that was great. But now you’re seriously on your own, and you need to be extremely cautious. It’s very hard. You go through forests, though water, to mislead the military and the guards.”

What did you see in Niger? “I’ve seen children suffering, they couldn’t manage to eat. To see an adult is still bearable, but a child that’s not even six. He walks around with a plate around his neck like a piece of jewelry, like an ID card, doing nothing other than searching for food.” And if one of your friends back in Cameroon were to ask you, ‘Should I try to come over?’ “No. I would tell him. No brother, no. It’s all down to luck. I have seen people die in the desert. Why do we have borders? Now there’s even borders in the water, in the sea. You look at the sky and they tell you there are borders in the air too. But why should we forbid a human being from crossing a border? But hey, that’s the way it is. Some of my friends I left Cameroon with are leaving today. I’m awaiting my turn. I don’t get discouraged. I let the procedure take its course.”

Nelly went to say bye to his friends who were leaving for mainland Spain. “They will be surprised to see me here.”

“Thanks for seeing us off, my brother.” “We came to see you before you left.” “That’s not nice, I’m leaving right now.”

“Kerry James (a French rapper) says, ‘We come by water, and we go back by plane.’ We too are going by water, and we’ll go back by plane, you can bet on that. Bye bye.”

Tens of thousands of migrants and refugees make the journey through west Africa to Morocco. In 2014, 7,285 officially made it through to Europe. In December 2014, Spain passed a heavily criticized amendment to its public security bill effectively legalizing pushbacks. This breaches both European and international human rights laws. So far, Spain’s many previous allegations of violating EU law have only amounted to verbal reprimands from the European commission.

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