

Migrants Under Open Skies in Brussels

Punjabi and Sikh migrants do not bother risking their lives in search of their El Dorado. Tejinder Singh interviews some who have still not given up hope. The stark reality of economic migrants is as chilly as the European weather this season.

—Editor



Tejinder Singh

The media frenzy generated in Belgium with major media outlets carrying the story of a dawn raid on a Gurdwara obscured the real cause of “human smuggling,” behind the police action in Brussels.

In the October 19 raid, the police found in different houses nearly 200 people who are in Belgium illegally and living in inhuman conditions. In one house in Brussels 24 people were packed into a room of 12 meters-squares, according to information provided by government sources.

Culminating an investigation of almost a year, the Belgian authorities had found that a network of traffickers in humans have been operating in Belgium for the past year and a half. Hundreds of illegal immigrants from India and Pakistan have allegedly been smuggled through Belgium into the UK. The investigation into the network started after a couple of human traffickers operating from India were arrested.

Belgium authorities in keeping with usual practice released all the detained migrants except marked human smugglers, who were arrested after raids last month by the Belgian federal police on 19 houses in Brussels's Vilvoorde regions including one Gurdwara, near Tubize, just outside Brussels.

After taking their finger-prints and delivering a written order to leave the country, the illegal immigrants, who were without any legal documents, were released within eight to twelve hours of their initial arrests. With the safe houses raided and agents behind bars, the illegal immigrants were left to fend for themselves.

Green Parks and Open Skies

Catching up with them in many green local parks on the benches under the open skies, this correspondent interviewed dozens of them. Out came the stories of tears, desperation and clinging to survive with still hope to move onto greener pastures in United Kingdom. With his hands in his jeans pockets and wearing all the clothes that he owns, Bittu

from Indian northern state of Haryana says in Haryanavi Hindi, “Now I regret leaving home. There was food and shelter there and love of parents.”

The open environs of Brussels parks have equated all and the sad expressions in the eyes say it all, as Sukha from neighbouring state of Punjab nods in agreement adding in Punjabi, “These agents are to be blamed. They go and spread all these stories of how the legalisation papers have opened and how it's very easy to get legal once one lands in England.” Contrary to earlier press reports, some of the migrants have been arrested more than once but released within a few hours after the usual procedure of finger-printing and issuance of written orders to leave the country.

Elusive Route to UK

There are two ways the migrants are trying to cross into the UK. First and more costly one is when the agents on main land Europe talk to a few drivers who take the risk and take one or two boys ready to pay up to 6000 Euro to cross the English Channel by hiding them in specially designed cabins around the driver's cabin.

The other cheaper method is run by Albanian and Kurdish gangs who scout the highway rest places for trucks and are experts in opening the back of trucks to put migrants in without the knowledge of the resting drivers. These gangs charge anything between 1000 Euro to 2000 Euro on arrival at destination and the illegal migrants talked of the ruthlessness of smugglers in extracting money and professionalism in operating the hide and seek game with the drivers.

After the raids and arrests, Brussels assistant prosecutor Tim de Wolf had told journalists that two of those arrested were “the brains behind the trafficking operations ... They controlled a whole series of little groups. We hope we have broken up the core of the network.”

Kaka from Punjab told this journalist, “The main kingpin called Pahlwan, was arrested a week before the raids and he along with another person named Baja are the master-



minds of these operations.” Pahlwan came to Belgium more than a year ago and is still illegal but operated this clandestine smuggling ring, successfully ferrying thousands across to England,” Kaka added in his Punjabi punctuated with English words.

Asia to Europe

The migrants, mostly from Punjab, had been brought to Belgium through Moscow, De Wolf said. “We found 24 people crammed inside one windowless room, measuring around 12 sq m,” he said. Most of the migrants, I spoke to have come through the route Delhi (India) - Moscow (Russia) - Kiev (Ukraine) - Slovakia - Italy - Belgium. After arriving in Moscow on visas - about which they hardly want to talk, the migrants were moved by trucks most of the time in connivance of the drivers and agents, they disclosed. For this purpose, the well-organised smuggling rings provide seaman's book for around Indian Rs 60,000 (about 900 Euro) and the person flies to a port city to join the ship as “crew.”

Sometimes there is no ship and the person is routed along the land routes. And if there is a ship, it is usually the ones operating with not much of sea-worthiness left in them

and which transport illegal aliens to somewhere along the thousands of kilometres of unmanned Greek and Italian coastline. In all cases, the passports which have the airport stamps of departure from India and arrival at some transit destination are destroyed by the human smugglers as soon as the person finishes legal part of the journey.

No Documents, No Nationality

The documents are destroyed to make sure that the authorities cannot tie a person down to the country of his origin and in that case the authorities cannot immediately deport him. They need to establish his nationality, which is a time-consuming process.

Indian embassy in Brussels refused to comment on the fate of the migrants as embassy official R K Goel (First Secretary, Education and Culture with the responsibility to handle media) had told this journalist over the phone, “The ministry (Indian Foreign ministry) is looking into the matter so we cannot comment on the subject.”

Resham Singh, President of Gurdwara Guru Nanak Sahib, Vilvorde said, “There should be cooperation and programmes to educate people in Punjab about the futility to take these risks,” adding, “May be European Union and the European governments can cooperate with Punjab and Indian governments to take the message to the masses there.”

Sunil Prasad, President of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin said, “One of the main reasons why economic migrants from India want to migrate to UK is because UK is friendlier than many countries in Europe with respect to giving asylum.”

“Also, because of a large Indian community in UK, it is natural that these immigrants want to come to UK and seek better life,” Prasad, who is also the Secretary General of the Brussels Europe India Chamber of Commerce (EICC) added.

The dream lives on as is evident when speaking to Sucha, who was one of the few lucky ones to survive the clutches of law and order authorities. He shares an unhygienic dwelling with seven more. His eyes sparkle when questioned if he would make a dash to more promising lands. He replies, “I am looking for a good opportunity to go to England or may be Canada.”

(Names changed to hide identities)

Tejinder Singh is the editor of *New Europe-the European Weekly* and member of the *International Press Association*. *World Sikh News* is pleased to announce that Tejinder Singh's reportage from Brussels will regularly appear in the *World Sikh News*. He may be contacted at ottitos@gmail.com

It has to be Sarbat da Bhalla all the way

I read with immense interest the WSN Editor's intervention in the Barack Obama and Sikhs debate. I totally agree that making the larger agenda egalitarian and a return to the core Sikh values is the one big lesson that we must draw from Obama's unprecedented victory.

It is important, in this cynical world, that hope should stay alive, if not

always float on the wings of soaring rhetoric, such as Obama's. I think the Sikhs must now start thinking of how to produce their own Obama. And such an Obama has to be someone who is wedded to the core Sikh value of Sarbat Da Bhalla.

It is important to fight against Indian brahmanical system but at the same time it is important to fight

for India's poor, India's dalits just as it is important to fight against the atrocities being committed on some of the struggling people in the name of Naxalism or in India's North East. The Sikhs must speak up for wrongs of the brahmanical forces everywhere, and must learn to make the essential distinction between brahman and brahminism.

I also find the near comical comparisons between Obama and Mayawati somewhat funny. They are similar, Obama and Mayawati, in that both bear the identity of the subaltern, of the oppressed, in their respective societies. And Mayawati also has a reasonable chance of becoming India's prime minister, even if only for a truncated term. But there the similarity ends.

Mayawati started from humble origins, struggled to rise in life, to

Inder Preet Singh from Fremont writes back, endorsing the point made by WSN in its front page editorial last week

become the chief minister of India's largest state, where social development remains stunted and caste prejudice does not have to clothe itself in thick layers of hypocrisy but is free to strut around, bristling with naked aggression. Obama, by contrast, had a life of privilege, going to elite schools and receiving the finest education possible. In this contrast, Mayawati's rise is the more striking.

However, Obama's electoral victory inspires hope in a way Mayawati's rise does not. And this is because of the promise of change and redemption that Obama stands for, a promise that most Americans have bought into, as have the majority of Europeans, too, it would appear. Mayawati does not hold out any such promise. Hers is the grudging victory of realpolitik in a fractured polity.



Americans have chosen Obama in an act of positive endorsement; Mayawati's rise to office rests on assorted groups' negative preference for the lesser evil and opportunistic coalition building in the pursuit of power and pelf.

It is here that the Sikhs must learn whom to emulate: should we push ahead the Sikh agenda along the lines of identity politics or should Sikhs in any party and with any level of engagement with society must push the larger agenda of the subaltern and keep underlining incessantly the core Sikh values.

It is here that the WSN Editor's wonderful note struck deep in my heart, and my congratulations for coming out with such a piece at a time when most writers have stopped short of appealing to our higher value system.