

## *'I Could Be One of Them': Belgians Help Migrants Amid Coronavirus*

Under strict lockdown measures, asylum seekers and migrants on the streets of Brussels increasingly rely on residents for survival.

By **Monika Pronczuk**

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BRUSSELS — When Belgium went into lockdown in mid-March because of the coronavirus pandemic, the authorities emptied half of the country's migrant detention centers to help prevent the spread of the virus, leaving hundreds of people without a home.

The government also closed the reception center in Brussels that registers new asylum seekers, making it impossible for them to get state support. Since then, the application process was reopened this month — but only online and only in French and Dutch, making it nearly inaccessible to asylum seekers.

"This excludes the majority of people," said Mehdi Kassou, a founder of Citizens' Platform for the Support of Refugees, which offers services and emergency housing. "It is just a fig leaf for the government's inaction."

The migrants, most of whom are in transit and largely unregistered, hope to make it to Britain, often by smuggling themselves there. But these days, with border closures and travel restrictions, they are stuck in Belgium with little recourse.

So some Belgian residents have stepped in to help.

They help feed and house the migrants and keep them from sleeping on the streets, where they risk arrest by the police.

Gare du Nord, once the busiest train station in Brussels, the Belgian capital, has been nearly empty of regular travelers after the lockdown, since most trains have been canceled. But twice a day, a long line of migrants waits along a platform for food and hygienic supplies.

Nabil Moujahid, a 33-year-old schoolteacher, started a grass-roots initiative called

Citizens in Solidarity to distribute food to migrants who gather in the Parc Maximilien near the station.

“We have a rotating system with other volunteers in order to ensure that we give out meals twice a day,” he said. “These people really count on it.”

Each day, the volunteers distribute about 500 aid packages, and not just to migrants, said Mr. Moujahid, who comes out to help eight times a week.

“It used to be mainly for migrants from the park,” he said, “but since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, they have been joined by the homeless, Roma people and all those with no other option of getting something to eat.”



The Grand Place, a main plaza in central Brussels, last month. Francisco Seco/Associated Press

The lockdown has unleashed a potential health crisis among asylum seekers, making the volunteers' work not only more urgent, but also more complicated. The grass-roots organizations operate on donations from individuals and businesses, but as Belgians become increasingly worried about their own financial situation during the pandemic, they are giving less.

“We are operating on our reserves,” said Mr. Moujahid, the son of Moroccan immigrants who learned Arabic in order to communicate with those he is helping. “We also have to respect the social distancing measures and explain them to people who come to us for help, so nobody gets in trouble with the police.”

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“They are very confused,” he added. “Some of them do not speak French. But we have no more time to talk to them. They have to take their packages and stay out of sight.”

Jean-Marc Fobe, an activist who has been helping the homeless in Brussels for the past two years, said that for those living on the streets, “there are difficult weeks ahead.”

According to the most recent statistics from nongovernmental organizations, there are more than 4,000 homeless people in Brussels. “With so few people leaving their houses, there is no one to give them food or money,” Mr. Fobe said.

According to Mr. Kassou, there are around 600 to 800 migrants in transit on the streets of Brussels at the same time, in addition to 500 in other parts of the country. And in 2019, 27,742 people applied for refugee status.

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According to a government spokesperson, about 250 migrants were released from detention centers across the country in mid-March.

“The authorities effectively marginalized a whole section of the population, sending them to the streets in the middle of a lockdown,” Mr. Kassou said.

According to the government, those measures were necessary in order to halt the spread of the coronavirus. “The government has taken the decision to release foreign nationals from closed centers in order to comply with the rules of social distancing,” said Dominique Ernould from the Immigration Office.

Migrants on the streets are not the only ones who need help. The situation for 250 or so who remain in detention centers across the country has “deteriorated in every possible aspect,” said Ines Bahja, a law student who has been helping them.

“There is no way to respect the social distancing measures, even for those that get sick,” she said. “The sanitary conditions are deplorable. Since the lockdown, nobody is allowed to visit — not even their lawyers. We can bring them packages, but they cannot contain food. We stay in touch over the phone to give them some psychological support and information that they are not getting from the staff.”

Ms. Bahja, whose parents are Moroccan, said she felt an obligation to help: “I could be one of them.”

The government has urged aid groups not to send members into the field, since many volunteers are older and more vulnerable to not recovering from Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus. Belgium had more than 44,000 confirmed coronavirus cases as of Saturday morning, and nearly 6,700 deaths.

Mr. Fobe, 41, recently started a petition asking Brussels to open up empty buildings for the homeless. “The response has been extraordinary,” he said of the signers. “I got 352 signatures in one day. This has never happened before.”

The local government has rented two private hotels and transformed them into shelters. Mr. Kassou is running them in corporation with the government, but they are already overcrowded.

The solidarity network to help migrants and asylum seekers extends beyond Brussels. One volunteer collecting donations and preparing meals for migrants is Dolores Cerrato, a hospital caregiver in Montigny-le-Tilleul, a village 45 miles south. Ms. Cerrato, 40, who has been hosting underage migrants in her house for the past three years, recently set up a system to help older people in the village get groceries.

“This situation is horrible, but it has created a new sense of solidarity,” she said. “I am no some radical activist — I need my car, we have a TV, and my kids have smartphones. But this virus has shown us all that we are capable of living differently.”

In order to continue her volunteer work, Ms. Cerrato now works part-time at half the salary. “Solidarity is something I want to pass on to my kids,” she said, “even if it means we have to change our shopping habits.”

For Laurence De Donder, solidarity meant opening her house to two Eritrean migrants, Awet and Degol, just before the lockdown.

Ms. De Donder, who has two teenage sons, decided to host migrants in her empty mezzanine following the example of Ms. Cerrato, a friend and neighbor.

“I’m lucky,” she said. “I have a beautiful house with a garden. I have a job, working in a

local museum, and so does my husband. I must have hosted probably around 20 migrants in the past two years — but never in such circumstances.”

After consulting with family and friends, Ms. De Donder invited Awet and Degol, who declined to give their last names for their own security, to stay with her family.

“I explained to them the rules and told them they would not be able to leave the house,” she said. “We spend our evenings playing cards; the boys help out around the house. Of course, sometimes we get sick of each other — but then we give ourselves some space.”

Then one of her guests got a fever and a sore throat.

“Fortunately, it was nothing, just a cold,” she said. “But in any case, I could not throw them out.”

**The Coronavirus Outbreak** ■

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Updated April 11, 2020

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