

Meet a boy who survived ‘The Crossing’



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Jul 6, 2017

The boy’s 3,000-mile journey to safety shows human rights abuses continue even on the other side of the Spain-Morocco border.

Measured, at first, he walked across the parking lot toward me. Then breaking into a run, a familiar smile broke the stoic look on his face, as he fell into me. His face buried in my shoulder, his body shook with tears.



Bambino, the youngest in his “brotherhood,” is one of the lucky few who succeeded in crossing the border between Morocco and the Spanish enclave of Melilla. (Isabella Alexander/GlobalPost Investigation)

Melilla’s detention center for undocumented and unaccompanied minors is heavily patrolled.

The building, a fading yellow color, is surrounded on all sides by a high fence. At the entrance is a guard in full uniform, gun at his side, who lifts and lowers an automatic door, controlling the passage of cars onto the property.

I approached the guard and was told many variations of “No” — “No, you cannot enter the property,” “No, you cannot speak with a detainee through the fence,” “No, you cannot speak to the superintendent” — before finally being passed off to another who directed me to the *Consejeria de Bienestar Social y Sanidad* office in downtown Melilla.

I spent the next six days speaking to various officials, all unwilling to let me enter the detention center under any circumstances, until the last day, when one finally agreed to a brief visitation between Bambino and I on the other side of the fence, under the supervision of a guard.

I hardly recognized his silhouette as he approached—his longer hair adding inches to his already taller frame, but his body shrunken, bones protruding under tattered clothes.

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The author and Bambino meet again outside of Melilla’s detention center for unaccompanied minors.

I hadn’t seen Bambino since my last visit to his camp on the other side of the EU-Morocco border—and now he’d become one of the success stories—one of the few who had actually survived the grueling feat they call “The Crossing.”

[*Read the first story: The Crossing*](#)

THE PROMISE OF SOMETHING BETTER

When I get a phone call from the brotherhood in their early morning hours, I’ve come to expect only one thing—someone has died. Sometimes, the death comes quickly at the hands of a border guard, but more often, it festers for weeks back in the hidden forest camps they call home. A wound from the blunt force of a wooden baton to the head or a hand lacerated by razor wire. Back on the mountainside with little food and no medical care, even a scraped knee from tumbling down a rocky path at night can quickly turn critical.

I can still hear the chief of the Congolese brotherhood— Dikembe, a soft-spoken man of 25 and the eldest among them—instructing his younger “brothers” as they prepared for the final leg of their journey.



Dikembe, 25, is the leader in his “brotherhood” of younger boys, all having arrived to Morocco after making long and treacherous journeys from the DRC. (Isabella Alexander/GlobalPost Investigation)

Huddled around the fire, not a grain left in the pot of rice they’d shared for their one daily meal, he told them they must band together, if any one of them wants to stand a fighting chance. Using ladders built from tree limbs and shredded T-shirts, they assemble into groups 100, 200, sometimes as many as 300 strong, with the hope that a few among them will be successful in evading the Spanish guards waiting for them on the other side.

Morocco is still home to two colonial-era Spanish enclaves— small patches of land, 7 and 4 square miles in size—making it the only African nation to share a land border with an internally borderless European Union.



Melilla is one of two Spanish enclaves in northern Morocco—the only two land borders to Europe on the African continent. (Howcheng/[Wikimedia Commons](#))

Morocco doesn't have any official refugee camps, but it does have a rapidly growing population of refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers who travel thousands of miles from across the African continent every year, in order to reach this final border crossing. Subsisting on what little they can scavenge, they live hidden in the mountains surrounding Ceuta and Melilla. Like Bambino and Dikembe, many have fled their war-torn home countries after losing their parents to war or facing a future of conscription into the local militias that have long terrorized them. Others have fled economic destitution, their long journeys north sustained by the dream of providing a better life for the families they've left behind. If successful in making it

into one of Morocco's Spanish enclaves, most plan to apply for asylum, pleading their cases for the right to legally remain in Europe. Yet within the hundreds of hidden camps now scattered throughout the mountains, there is little understanding of how the asylum process works or just how few of them will ever be given the chance to rebuild their lives on European soil, even if they are among the lucky few to survive *The Crossing*.

Ceuta and Melilla represent the front lines of the EU's fight against African migration, but the Moroccan government's control over foreign media has meant little attention paid to the growing humanitarian crisis there in recent years. Since 2005, the EU has funded the construction of not one, not two, but *three* 20-foot-high razor-wire fences completely encircling the enclaves, and every inch of them is now under surveillance. Spain's oldest military force, the Guardia Civil, is the one tasked with stopping those attempting to reach Europe. Applying what Spain calls a "push back strategy," international human rights law is eschewed as even documented refugees and asylum-seekers are brutally beaten off the fences. While the injured are often left to return to their camps, others are illicitly dropped in desolate stretches of desert along the Morocco-Algeria border, rather than being properly repatriated to their home countries, as the law demands. More than 25 percent of those "pushed back" are unaccompanied minors.

But the guards are not the only ones who come to the border prepared for their mission. Dikembe and his brothers spend weeks, sometimes months, training for each attempted crossing.

LIFE IN THE CAMP

In the time I spent living in Dikembe's camp last summer, I noticed his special attention to one boy who they all called Bambino—the youngest in their brotherhood. Dikembe often

seemed to be speaking directly to him, as he reminded his brothers to focus on their hands and feet when conserving the few strips of duct tape they had left to use as their sole protection against the razor wire. “Wrap the soles of your feet, but not so much that you can’t use them!”



Spanish border guards from the Guardia Civil stand ready to “push back” all who attempt to cross from Morocco into Europe. (Isabella Alexander/GlobalPost Investigations)

The oldest and strongest always cross first, absorbing the guards’ beatings, so the younger and weaker among them and the occasional woman in their group will stand a greater chance of making it to safety. “The pain will be great,” Dikembe warned, “but don’t let it distract you! Hold the ladder for the one behind you, and don’t drop it until everyone has reached the top.”

One brother who wore the scars of his last attempt told the others to cover their heads with one hand when descending. “A broken hand is better than a missing eye,” he said, gesturing to his own left eye, still swollen shut.

“When the beating is really bad, I tell them to play dead,” Dikembe explained. “If you’re lucky, the guards might think they’re done with you and drop you on the other side of the fence.”

“But it’s hard to do!” Another said knowingly, “it’s hard to remain silent when they drag you with broken ribs.”

Dikembe had many failed attempts under his belt, and he understood the risks that lay ahead, but Bambino, always placed in the back of the group, had never made it far. After nearly two years in the camp, Dikembe thought that Bambino, now 14, was finally ready to move up. “He’s bigger now, and he has a lot motivation.” Dikembe wasn’t the only one who’d been struck by the strong character of the smallest one. Bambino’s drive was palpable.

Like many of the other boys, he was driven by his obligation to care for the younger siblings he’d left behind. When he lost both of his parents at the age of 12, this responsibility had fallen to him but, as he explained, his community left no way for him to do that. He now carried a small photograph of his brother and sister with him around the camp. It was one of the few belongings he’d packed in his backpack on the day he left home, and because it held no value to others, it was one of the few belongings he’d been able to hold on to after being hustled by a long line of smugglers, guards, and gangs on his journey north. “I promised them I would help them escape the war that took our home,” he said. “I’m going to make it to Europe, or I’m going to die trying.”

Only this time, Bambino wasn’t going to play by the rules.

MAKING A BREAK

Bambino had just arrived to the camp when I first met him. Having survived the treacherous journey—traveling over 3,000 miles on his own from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Morocco—he still had the blistered feet and eager optimism of a newcomer. Among their small brotherhood, he was one of more than 50 under the age of 16. His two closest friends—Bronx and France—had taken the names of the places where they envisioned their own journeys finally ending, as is a common practice among those trapped in Morocco.



Bambino, center, stands with his two “brothers,” Bronx, right, and France, left. (Isabella Alexander/GlobalPost Investigations)

“My older brother,” one boy explained, “he lives in New York City now. He lives in a place called the Bronx, and he says it’s the most beautiful place in the world.” Bronx is one year older than Bambino, but his voice is a high-pitched squeak. Standing just a hair over 5 feet tall, he’s built as strong as he is short—solid muscle. His skin is a deep brown, almost black under the heavy Moroccan sun, and his speech is interrupted with an easy, full-mouthed smile. I noticed his one shirt—black and white

polka-dotted with pink flowers—is one of those with pearl-colored snaps down the front that some hipster in Manhattan could very well be wearing.

The other boy's one shirt had three faded stripes—red, black, and blue—and the word “France” printed in large block letters across the front. It was this old sweatshirt—not his love of France—that had given him his name. But he's since decided, being called France and all, that he would try to end up there. “I always wanted to go to America,” he told me over the fire one night, “but I've been thinking they'll really like me in France. Maybe I should try to find a new life there first.” France is tall and gangly, his skin light, his eyes always on alert. He moves with a tentativeness unlike the others, but he, too, quickly took to following Bambino's lead.

A PLAN IN THE MAKING

Dikembe assigns the day's work every morning, jostling the boys awake for “water duty,” “food duty” and “guard duty.” Guard duty is preferred over the more labor-intensive tasks, as it means staying attuned to the sounds of encroaching police raids and the freedom to sleep on the ground a while longer, until the sun grows so hot it forces you to seek out the shade. Bambino had been put on water duty the morning he first told his friends about his plan.



The “brothers” sleep on the ground in their hidden forest camp overlooking the Spanish enclave of Melilla. (Isabella Alexander/GlobalPost Investigations)

Bambino was the only one among them who had attempted a crossing before, and he knew the places in the bush where Dikembe stashed the ladders. He was convinced that if their group was small enough, if they were stealth enough, and if the sacrifices they’d made to get to this final border crossing had truly put them in God’s favor, then their best chance at evading the guards was in breaking with the brotherhood. “I thought, ‘I’ve been good, so God will reward me.’” He thought he could make it over Europe’s border without ever being seen.

The three boys waited until the others had fallen asleep. Scattered about the ground, everyone slept three and four each under the few tattered blankets that hadn’t yet been burned in the routine raids on their camp. The desert air chills you to the bone at night, but the brothers slept hard, making it possible for the trio to steal away in the darkness. Bambino knew the forest, and he moved with confidence through the sparse trees dotting the rocky mountainside down to the fence. Quietly, Bronx and France followed behind.

Bambino, and then Bronx, scrambled bloodied hand over foot across the first row of razor wire. Bronx steadied the ladder for France, waiting to feel his weight on it, waiting to harness all of his strength to ease his brother up to the top of the fence beside him. But he never felt that weight. France had disappeared into the shadows, already tracing his own footsteps back to their hidden home, and Bambino knew that any words spoken between them could hinder their plan. He gestured to Bronx to keep moving forward.

Like Dikembe had told them, if you're one of the lucky few, "Don't turn around. Don't look for your brothers. Keep your eyes in front of you and run. You'll see the lights when you're getting close."



Inside this facility, unaccompanied minors are housed in cells until they reach the age of 18 and their asylum cases can be heard. (Isabella Alexander/GlobalPost Investigations)

The lights represent the cement building serving as one of two detention centers for refugees, migrants, and asylum-seekers in Melilla. Any individual who sets foot in one of the enclaves is firmly within the borders of the EU—a group of nations

foundational in writing our international human rights laws. That individual is entitled to certain basic rights, including the right to seek asylum. Yet, in Spanish Morocco, even unaccompanied minors with legal claims to protection like Bambino are routinely “pushed back” into the hell they’ve just risked their lives escaping. The brothers have been taught to believe that only once they’ve set foot in that cement building will they be safe.

THE REUNION

I’d called the detention center several times before arriving, finally reaching a guard who was willing to speak.

“I’d like to visit one of the unaccompanied minors who’s been detained in your center since 2016.”

“Visitation is only granted to the legal parents of minors,” I was told.

“But your center houses unaccompanied minors—most of them have fled home after losing their parents?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“So, most of them have no parents who could visit [economic barriers to this visit, aside]?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“So, your center does not grant visitation?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

I decided I might have better luck standing face-to-face with the same questions, hopeful that my journey from the US would grant me a second thought on the guard’s part, but certain that I would have no luck gaining a visitor’s permit over the phone.

And it was that decision that led to my reunion with Bambino.

The detainees from the sub-Saharan region numbered only 10 at the time, including Bambino, at the time of my arrival. Boys ranging in age from 10 to 16, coming from Sierra Leone, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and the DRC. They were far outnumbered by the more than 100 minors detained from Morocco and other North African countries, and Bambino explained how in their cells, they'd grown accustomed to abuse at the hands of their neighbors. "The guards are Moroccan, so they have no concern for us. They even laugh at us, encouraging the beatings and placing bets on our slim chances." The 10 boys from sub-Saharan Africa aren't only victims of routine physical beatings at the hands of the North African detainees, but they have their daily food rations and even their clothing stolen, leaving them to make do with scraps. In previous interviews, I'd heard similar stories, some even more graphically addressing the abuse that detainees had experienced at the hands of the guards tasked with protecting them.



**Migrants stand inside the larger detention facility for adults in Melilla.
(Isabella Alexander/GlobalPost Investigations)**

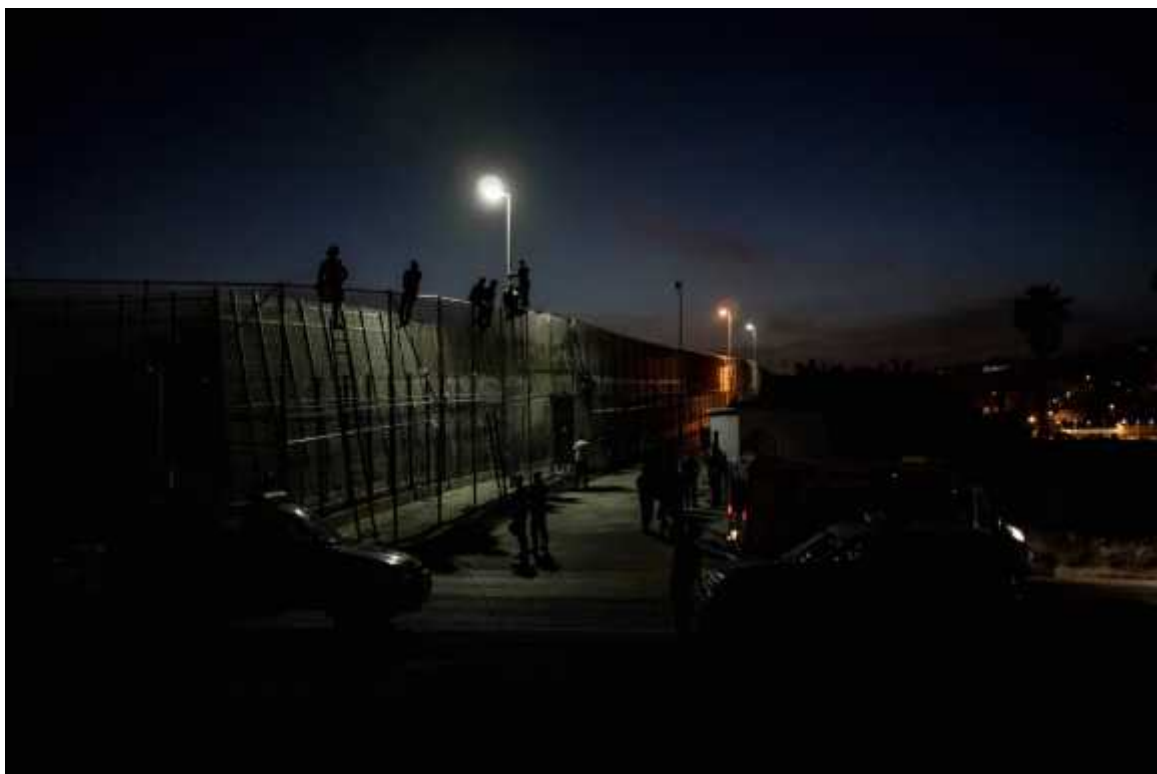
Most arriving in Morocco from other parts of the African continent have already been instructed by their smugglers to burn any documentation for fear of future repatriation. They are arriving at Europe's southernmost border without any papers in hand, and so their fates are left to the subjective interactions that follow. The lucky few who aren't beaten off the fences and "pushed back" into Morocco—those who are found nursing the wounds of a successful crossing in the bush or those who, like Bambino, run toward the lights—are met by a Spanish police officer who will first assess their age. That determination, made in a matter of seconds, can make all the difference in determining their futures.

Bambino, with his scrawny frame and smooth face, looks like he should be in a middle school classroom, and he was quickly placed in the minor category. Yet Bronx, only 15, was taken to the adult detention center, where men and women are immediately entered into the system for asylum processing.

Those who end up in the detention center for unaccompanied minors are detained until they reach the age of 18, at which point their asylum cases can begin. When asked how this is determined, one worker shrugged and said, "We get crowded." For the boys detained there, it can mean years spent behind bars with no certainty about when it will end. After the waiting period has ended, those whose cases are denied—as over 80 percent of the asylum cases from sub-Saharan African will be—are sent back to Morocco, where they have little choice but to continue the cycle of attempted crossings. The UNHCR's rejection rate for asylum-seekers from Africa is significantly higher than from any other world region.

In the small cell that Bambino shares with 11 others, many mark the passing time with scratches on the wall. “Otherwise, you’ll forget how long you’ve been in here,” he told me. “There aren’t any windows, so sometimes I don’t know if it’s day or night outside. They let some of the boys outside every day. But not all of us. If you’ve been bad, they keep you inside.” In the cell, there are metal bunk beds for some and blankets on the floor for the others. “The black boys are always on the floor.” One boy from Sierra Leone told me he’d been living behind bars for six years now.

By giving sub-Saharan Africans little chance of being granted legal status, officials are able to dismiss them as a population of “undocumented” or “economic” migrants. And by keeping even those who are granted a review of their cases for asylum outside of mainland Europe, European-funded detention centers in Morocco are operating further from the attention of foreign media and outside of the mandates of international law.



The Guardia Civil stands on guard at all hours of the day and night as migrants attempt to reach Melilla, where they can apply for asylum. (Isabella Alexander/GlobalPost Investigations)

LETTING HOPE ENDURE

Back at the camp, I told the brothers about my brief reunion with Bambino. “Is he learning English?” they asked me. “Do they have a big soccer field?” “Is he fat off of all the food?”

I struggled to answer—to tell them about the prison that awaits them on the other side.

I remembered Bambino’s last words to me, as the guards signaled to us that our time was up. “Sometimes,” he said, “I wish I was back in Morocco with my brothers. This isn’t the Europe I thought I would find.” His statements had become whispers, as the guards, one on either side, lifted him up from the rock we’d been sitting on and led him back through the fence to his cell. “Tell them I’m doing well,” was the last thing I heard him say.

“He is courageous that one,” Dikembe said, turning towards me with a knowing smile. “He’s always had God on his side. He just has to keep running.”



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