

LAST STOP LEBANON

Syrian refugees in Lebanon tell of torture, executions and snipers. They have escaped from the terror in their homeland, but they are not welcomed in Lebanon.

When the last screw has been fastened into the foot, the shot wound has been bound up and the man with the compound fracture in his lower thigh has stopped screaming, Dr Ahmed stands exhausted on the linoleum floor of the hospital ward, flanked by cabins containing patients with severe injuries, wondering which patient he will treat next. In Room 532 lies 13 year old Ghafran Koukaz, whose first name means "pardon" or "mercy". The sniper whose bullet went through her upper thigh, severing the nerves so that her leg is now a feelingless mass of flesh, showed no mercy when he aimed at the girl from his hiding place and let fire. Next door, in Room 533, is 22 year old Hassan, who trod on a landmine while fleeing from Syria. The explosion ripped both his hands off, and there are still pieces of shrapnel lodged in his scab covered face. Dr Ahmed's eyes come to rest on the left hand room. The girl will be first.

A pink teddy bear sits on her bedside table, surrounded by packets of pills. Ghafran is asleep. Her mother is keeping a vigil next to her bed. Dr Ahmed strokes her hair; it is all he can do.

Dr Ahmed is in charge of the sufferings of 37 Syrian casualties in a hospital on the outskirts of the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, surrounded by half-built blocks of flats and potholed roads. He is a big, burly man in a diamond patterned pullover. The neon lights cast dark rings of shadow under his eyes and make his skin look livid, like dessicated cheese. The 40 year old has hardly slept in days. Just a couple of hours on the floor beside a patient's bed, or with friends in an overcrowded flat, a dozen refugees to a room. He always carries his wordly belongings with him - two plastic bags containing a change of clothing.

He too is a Syrian. He fled from Homs in early March. He had been one of thirty rebel doctors who had stayed behind in Homs. In secret locations, flats used as field hospitals, he and his colleagues used to try to provide emergency treatment to the collateral damage victims of the Syrian army: children with head wounds, women with their bellies ripped open, fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA). There were six mobile teams, each with five doctors, operating in various parts of the city. They would squeeze like moles from one building to the next, through holes knocked in the walls. Dr Ahmed sits on a scruffy bench provided for visitors, a cup containing golden brown tea in his trembling hands. In a quiet voice he tells of his experiences in Syria.

When people first came out in the streets to demonstrate against the Syrian regime Dr Ahmed was still working as a surgeon at a government hospital in Homs. "Every day more wounded people would come to the hospital," he says. "Many were arrested even as they lay on the operation table." He tells of colleagues who deliberately killed patients. On one occasion people from the secret service of the air force arrested a man, whose abdomen had been opened, while Dr Ahmed was still operating on him. "Don't worry, we'll sew up the wound for you," one of the agents had said. Next day the man's body was found lying outside his family home. That was the moment when Dr Ahmed decided to join the insurgents. He hid his family with friends and went underground.

Many people died as a result of shortages of electricity, medicines, anaesthetics, ventilation equipment and surgical tools. As the makeshift hospital in a flat in the Baba Amr district was constantly being hit by grenades, the doctors hid their patients in neighbouring apartments. Frequently there was nothing they could do except watch helplessly as the victims died of their wounds. "We were able to save some of them," says Dr Ahmed, a smile infiltrating his weary face.

At the end of February, when the attacks became too intense, he left Baba Amr with twelve wounded people of whom three were comatose. Their flight took two days. They could only move by night; by day they were under fire from grenades and had to hide in fields and ditches. Eight of the twelve wounded succumbed during the journey.

In the safety of Lebanon he is now helping where he can, changing dressings, setting fractures, operating, amputating limbs, up here on the fourth floor of the hospital. He needs distraction and he needs to feel useful. To be of use to the revolution, and to drown his helplessness in hard work. The Lebanese doctors tolerate his presence.

In this backwater of terror refugees keep trickling through the porous frontier, washed up like flotsam nobody wants. Once they are in the Lebanon, their suffering takes on a new form. Here there are none of the refugee camps found in Turkey. There are scarcely any organizations ready to provide the refugees with their basic requirements, blankets, warm clothing, milk for the children, medicines; there is a lack of all these. They are third class refugees. Their only hope for survival lies with sympathetic Lebanese people who are ready to share what little they have with them, or take them into their homes. The northern Lebanese city of Tripoli is the epicentre for Syrian refugees. In the town's hospitals lie the victims of the war. All of them tell of massacres of civilians, of snipers shooting indiscriminately at anyone who ventures out of doors, of bombardments of residential areas lasting for days, of demonstrators being executed in public, of dead bodies being left to rot in the streets as a deterrent. Most of the refugees ask to remain anonymous, as they fear the long arm of the Asad regime even in the Lebanon. It is said that on numerous occasions members of the opposition and other refugees have been picked up by Syrian or Lebanese secret agents and sent back to Syria.

Everyone has a version of the same story to tell. Men and women, pensioners and children, old and young, almost all of them Sunnis, who have been drawn into the maelstrom of the Arab Spring, now in its second year. In Syria it has mutated into a civil war. Many of the refugees come from the city of Homs, one of the centres of resistance against the Asad regime. For weeks the city has been under siege by the Syrian army, peppered with grenades, cut off from the outside world, with no electricity, water, medical care or phone network.

The Lebanese government finds itself in a dilemma. On the one hand it is bound to Syria by treaty, which is why it officially discourages Syrian absconders from staying in the Lebanon, but on the other hand it has no wish to alienate its other Arab neighbours by sending refugees back to Syria. Anyone who does manage to enter the Lebanon from Syria is regarded as a visitor rather than a refugee, and is allowed six months' leave to remain on that basis. In this way Lebanon manages to salvage its humanitarian reputation and at the same time avoid a diplomatic rebuke. Syrian activists in the Lebanon estimate that around 20,000 refugees have already slipped into the country. And the number is growing by the day. Despite this the Lebanese Red Cross fails to see the need for any action. Every day hundreds of people queue at official entry points for stay visas. Others are smuggled past the landmines, checkpoints and army patrols into Lebanon by activists or the Free Syrian Army. They know of only one direction to go: out.

Surviving on the borders of legality, these refugees are put up in private flats arranged by workers in the activist network, or in schools, commercial premises or slums on the city outskirts. Often there are as many as thirty of them in a small space, several families to a flat. Accommodation is scarce, rents are rising astronomically. Seats are in short supply in the rescue ship of the Lebanon. And life revolves around the latest news and rumours. Have there been fresh battles or onslaughts?

How are the family members getting on back in Syria, are they still alive at all? Life has turned into a timeless vacuum.

Meanwhile the fighting has spread to the capital Damascus. The rebel strongholds of Homs and Idlib are still being shattered by grenades and rocket fire. Saudi Arabia is keen to support the insurgents with arms. The human rights organization Human Rights Watch accuses both sides of torturing and executing prisoners. The revolution has lost its innocence. In the cedar state, which is tightly in league with Syria, the refugees are not at all welcome. They are proof of what can go wrong; of what could very well also happen to Lebanon, the sister state of Syria.

Feiras Abo Oday has ended up in a cul de sac in Tripoli, the last station on the line. His voice is not cooperating; hunched like a tortoise he is sitting at a rickety table, inhaling deeply the smoke of his cigarette. Tears run down his face, and he makes a gesture with his hand as if to flick away his memories like a speck of dirt. Since fleeing from Syria he has been working on Tripoli's corniche, in a teashop which belongs to a Syrian friend of his. Rain has washed all the strollers off the promenade into their houses. Only the Mediterranean Sea thunders against the coastal road like a metronome in step with the tides. He does not want to give his real name, for he is afraid: afraid of Syrian agents, informers, the Lebanese secret police. He is a shattered young man of 26, with scars on his body and burns on his soul. A cold wind from the sea whistles through the café, where the only customer to have strayed in is sucking on a hookah all on his own.

Oday served as a conscript in the Syrian army for 22 months. In the fifteenth months of his service his fellow countrymen started to stage demonstrations all over the country. Oday was ordered to guard a road barrier in Daraa, the town in southern Syria where the uprising began. "Our officers told us to shoot at the terrorists. But I didn't see any terrorists, I only saw people demonstrating peacefully." He was unable to get over what he witnessed then: his commanding officer shot an elderly man; one of his mates was shot for refusing to kill a demonstrator who had been detained; a deserter was executed by firing squad. Oday decided to leave his unit; he made a plan to desert the army and cross over to join the rebels, as many soldiers had already done. But he was unable to carry out his plan.

He said that, like many others in his unit, he had not shot any demonstrators, only firing into the air or at walls. In July of last year he was sent to the notorious Sydnaia military prison in Damascus for failing to obey orders. There were thirty prisoners to thirty square metres. They were blindfolded and made to lie on their stomachs with their wrists chained to their ankles. The youngest prisoner was said to be just 13 years old. He was there for seemingly endless hours and days, interrupted only by bouts of interrogation and torture. "I was forced naked into a car tyre, hung from the ceiling and beaten with sticks and cables until I could no longer feel anything in my arms and legs," he says, and his features harden like a scab on a wound. This method of torture is called "dulab", the tyre. Oday starts to cry again; he wipes his face and takes a deep breath. "I was no longer able to dress myself without help." After sixteen days of this Oday was asked to sign a document stating that he had not been ill-treated during his time in detention, and promising that he would report to his superior officers any colleague who refused to shoot demonstrators. Then he was released and he returned to his unit. In October his period of military service came to an end, and in November, fearing he might be called up again, he fled to Lebanon. He bribed a border guard to give him an exit visa in exchange for 400 dollars. Oday would now like to join the rebels in the Free Syrian Army. "I'm not afraid of death, only I haven't got enough money to buy myself a Kalashnikov."

Younis Abu Salimar, 27, and Muhammad Abu Uday, 19, are also prepared to die. These two fighters of the Free Syrian Army are recuperating from their wounds in a hiding place near the

Syrian frontier. They are not willing to give their real names, and they have concealed their faces behind shawls. Activists from the Syrian opposition movement are standing guard outside. Road access to the area has been blocked by two cars.

Muhammad lost his left hand during the fighting at Baba Amr in February. The stump of his left arm is sticking out from under his black pullover. His thigh still contains splinters of shrapnel from the grenade which exploded near him. Younis joined the rebels after he had been arrested by the military secret police following a demonstration against the Asad regime in July last year. He says he was imprisoned and tortured for six weeks: he pulls up the leg of his jogging pants to show poorly healed wounds on his calf and foot. "This is where they made a hole with a drill." He says the scars on his forearms and hands were caused by cigarettes and electric shocks. "And they cut one of my testicles off." Younis is hobbling, and has to be supported by his friend Muhammad in order to walk. The revolution is now being carried on without them and leaving them behind. Time has become their greatest enemy. Day and night they keep flicking through the TV channels, and they devour everything and anything which reaches them from Syria: news broadcasts, telephone calls, Facebook, wobbly video footage on Youtube. The war, their friends, their fellow soldiers, their families are far away. In their illegal haven these fighters have become mere onlookers of the uprising. For this reason they want to return to Syria as quickly as possible, to rejoin the rebels and their brigades, to fight and take revenge on the people they blame for the carnage: the religious militias of the Shabiha, and the Alouites, including Asad. Their experiences have bored deep into their heads, like a time capsule someone has buried only for it to be dug up again years later. A vicious circle is beginning.

Border controls on both sides of the frontier are being tightened. Soldiers are on patrol day and night. Land mines, tanks and night vision surveillance apparatus make it equally hard for refugees to leave Syria and for smugglers to get weapons, ammunition, foodstuffs, medicines and journalists into Syria. Nevertheless, more and more people are crossing the frontier every day. They assemble in Wadi Khalad, a green valley surrounded by mountains with snowcapped peaks like sugar-strewn Christmas pastries, right on the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. Lebanese army roadblocks prevent foreign visitors from approaching the refugees. "It's just a security measure. So that armed rebels don't leak into our country," says a border guard. An activist who is with us in the car has left his papers behind and is in fear of being arrested and sent back into Syria. "It's all happened before," he says. The frontier guards search the vehicle for 45 minutes, check visas, note down passport numbers, then send us back.

At the transit point of Kaa, in the Bekaa valley in northern Lebanon, a border official scrutinizes our passports suspiciously, makes copies, asks questions. But then he lets us through. "Just be careful," he says, smiling in a friendly way. "It's not safe here. At midday today there was fighting all along the frontier. The Syrian army were firing at villages on the border." Dozens of buses and trucks overloaded with people and baggage are queuing up, waiting to leave Syria.

In the no man's land between Syria and Lebanon about a hundred families have found refuge in the ruins of abandoned houses and stables. In Arsel, a small hill town close to the border, 256 Syrian families, about 1500 people, are living with Lebanese wellwishers. A lorry stops in front of a grim hovel whose three tiny rooms are being shared by 32 refugees. There are fourteen women and children on the back of the lorry, new arrivals. The driver, who is a farmer from Arsel, picked them up as they were crossing the border into Lebanon illegally. The women are weeping and the children are howling, their small bodies shivering uncontrollably. They stand there helplessly, like a herd of frightened sheep. "We fled from Homs in the afternoon. As we ran we had grenades thrown at us and we were fired at by snipers. Why do they want to kill us?" says a woman in a

headscarf, throwing her hands in the air. "God be praised!" Someone starts letting off fireworks nearby, whereupon some of the children throw themselves to the ground while others try to hide in their mothers' skirts, their eyes wide with terror, a stifled cry on their lips.

On the first anniversary of the Syrian revolution rain is drumming incessantly against the windows of the hospital in Tripoli, and running down the panes in little torrents. Dr Ahmed, the refugee Syrian doctor, sits on a folding chair beside a patient's bed, his eyes closed. He has fallen asleep with his head lolling on his chest. All around him there is excited activity. Men with arm stumps and leg stumps and limbs with steel rods sticking out of them are painting placards. They are bent on celebrating the anniversary. A TV team from Al Jazeera is expected; they are going to film the celebrations. It's a Friday. They are determined to put on a demonstration here just as their fellow countrymen are doing in Syria.

For eleven months Abu Jaman dreamed of a free Syria; then he woke up in the operation theatre of a Lebanese hospital. He is 36, has a gaunt face and a wild beard. He is following the goings on in the ward with glittering eyes. From his shoulder hangs a shawl bearing the colours of the revolution: green, white and black, with three stars. His left arm has been amputated above the elbow and is wrapped in a grimy bandage. Splinters of metal from a grenade are lodged in his chest and abdomen. In the bed next to his lies his mate Muhammad, 32, whose right leg has been amputated above the knee and whose left leg bears an ugly scar running from groin to calf. Abu Jaman has a cigarette between his lips, although the ward sister has prohibited smoking. Ward 5 is a liberated zone, a piece of the revolution, that at least is how the patients see it. A male nurse barges into the room, turns up his nose at the fog of cigarette smoke and announces that it's time to change people's dressings. Abu Jaman dismisses him. Get out, you can do that later. We're busy making stuff for the revolution. Then he tugs his shaggy beard with his remaining hand. "I wish I could take part in the revolution again, but sadly that's no longer an option," he says, grinning and wagging the stump of his arm.

Abu Jaman was a small pawn in a big chess game which has not yet produced a winner. He was dragging the dead and wounded to the rebel field hospital under a hail of grenades, and just as he was about to rescue a child a mortar exploded close by. A sliver of shrapnel ripped his arm off, and the little girl was killed. It wasn't losing his arm which was so bad, he says. That was his contribution to the revolution. Thus he convinces himself; it's the typical defence mechanism of a traumatised person who blanks out reality in order to endure the present and clings to the hope that his sacrifice was not in vain, although all that is certain is that life will never be the same again. "But I'm devastated that I couldn't save that little girl. I think about her every day," he says.

At seven o'clock the festivities to commemorate the uprising begin. A procession of cripples and mutilated men, holding up placards, waving Syrian flags and shouting slogans: "Down with Assad! Freedom for Syria! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!" Young men holding a catheter in one hand and a stand with a drip bag hanging from it in the other drift from room to room, orchestrating and gesturing. Others support the ones who can't walk unaided, push wheel chairs, lead blind patients. Some visitors bring a cake with an inscription in white icing sugar, "May God damn your soul, Assad". Clouds of tobacco smoke created by countless cigarettes hang motionless in midair. They sing and clap their hands until their voices are hoarse and their palms are burning. The blanket of sound is reflected from the walls of the ward. The crowd works itself up into euphoria and fury, while Al Jazeera films. At some stage even Dr Ahmed is woken up by the noise. He is too tired and exhausted to clap, but a smile plays on his lips. Then he cries, "Freedom for Syria!" and makes a victory sign.