



(see https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/melilla-morocco-spain-schengen-refugees-golf-fence-876 for original Article)

At This EU Border, Some People Die and Others Play Golf

November 12, 2014

By Michael Bonvalot



Photo courtesy of José Palazón

Melilla is a port city in Morocco that has belonged to Spain since the 15th century. Not that Morocco recognises Spain's sovereignty. Predictably, this has led to a series of confusing situations that include Europe's immigration issue.

Three fences surround the city of Melilla – one belongs to Morocco, the other two to Spain. If a refugee manages to overcome all three, they are not yet in the [Schengen area](#) but more or less within European borders. And so, many try to climb the fences every day, often with tragicomic results – like the above photo above taken last month somewhere between Schengen and Africa, on a golf course.

Viennese artist Tanja Boukal recently returned from Melilla, where she spent time researching in refugee camps. I called her up and asked her to explain what exactly is going on in that photo and Melilla in general.

VICE: What exactly happened on the 15th of October, when that famous picture was taken?

Tanja Boukal: At 7:50 AM, a large group of migrants attempted to climb over the border fences. They chose that time because they knew that the changing of the guard takes place between 7:45 and 8:00. The place they decided to cross from was near the refugee camp in Melilla. And between the fence and the camp is a golf course. Absurdly, this golf course was built with EU money. It was created to improve quality of life in Melilla, while just outside the fence people perish.

There had been a successful escape just the day before, so the Spanish Civil Guard was prepared. About 200 refugees tried to run away and the majority of them were pushed back by the Moroccan security people, but 15 people did make it to the fence and so were already in Spain.

It's not visible in the photo, but there's a road between the golf course and the fence that was filled with soldiers of the Spanish Civil Guard armed with batons, pepper spray and dogs. On the other side, the Moroccan Security was waiting holding iron bars.

The refugees could neither move forward or backward, so the Spanish army just waited until they fell down. They had no water and no food. Around 10AM, people began to make their rounds on the golf course. The scene was completely surreal.

This went on all day until, in the evening, the refugees eventually gave up and literally fell off the fence. Although they fell on the Spanish side, they were illegally brought back to Morocco and immediately deported to Algeria from there.

Has anyone lost their life while trying to cross?

Making it into Fortress Europe is a dangerous thing in general. According to [estimates](#) by the International Organisation for Migration, over 22,000 people have died on the way to Europe since 2000. Most of them drowned in the Mediterranean.

But in Melilla there's another danger: the Spanish Civil Guard beats up people with no mercy and no regard for their lives. This year alone, it is suspected that five people were killed. There is the case of one man, who was beaten up and then thrown – lifeless – across the border. That terrible scene was captured on video.

How was it to do your research under these circumstances?

The whole area is under the military's jurisdiction, and it can only be photographed with their

permission. When I first got to Melilla, I slept in the same hotel as some soldiers from the Spanish Civil Guard and would sometimes even get rides with them. Then, I wrote on my blog about how some people tried to cross the Austrian border and were illegally sent back. My on-site photo license was revoked the next morning.

I started to lock my camera in a safe and made sure I transmitted all my data too. Raids are always possible there and sometimes the Guard even breaks your camera.

The people trying to cross the border in Melilla—where are they from and what are their motives?

Currently, about half of the people are from Syria, many of them from Kobane. The reason is obvious – there is a civil war going on there. Also, many come from sub-Saharan Africa – from Central Africa, Somalia, Kenya, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Lately, the number of people from Southeast Asia has started increasing too.

Often the people in Melilla are well educated. The escape to Europe via the tractor routes costs several thousand Euros, so most people come from more middle-class families. I actually believe that the refugee camp in Melilla has a higher percentage of university graduates than Spain.



Photo by Tanja Boukal

What's the living situation for refugees in Melilla?

There are approximately 10,000 to 30,000 refugees living here, depending on the season and the wars. The people live in forests and especially on the mountain Gurugu. If they build any tents or other kind of accommodation, the Moroccan military destroys them. In the winter, they also pour cold water on people and take their blankets and cooking pots away. These people are not allowed to work, so they rely on the kindness of the locals.

What happens once they've made it to Melilla?

A round 3,000 people make it to Melilla every year, which is not much. Legally, the situation is quite absurd. People are then technically in Spain, but not in the Schengen area. They are not allowed to file for visa or any applications for asylum from Melilla.

At some point, people are made a strange offer: If they do not apply for asylum, they are sent on to Spain earlier. Refugees are then working illegally as harvest workers in the so-called White Sea of Almeria where a large portion of vegetables in the EU are harvested.

The Spanish government is counting on the fact that those people will earn enough money quickly and then get out of Spain into another EU country. This is a cynical game, obviously. The people waive their right to seek asylum, but they do not have to live in the camp either.

More on immigration:

[*Fortress Italia*](#)

[*Life As an Illegal Immigrant in Greece*](#)

[*Mexico's Immigrant Oasis*](#)

Topics: [news](#), [immigration](#), [Melilla](#), [Morocco](#), [Spain](#), [Africa](#), [European union](#), [racism](#), [refugees](#), [Schengen](#)