



Living in Limbo

By Caitlan Carroll

BRUSSELS—Only a few blocks away from the seat of the European Commission in Brussels an Algerian teacher bags groceries. Kamel came to Belgium years ago because of a civil war that left thousands dead in Algeria.

“I couldn’t live in Algeria anymore because I couldn’t bear to see heads cut off everyday,” Kamel says. “Here I have a normal life.”

Kamel is awaiting a decision from the Belgian government on whether he will be granted permanent refugee status. Although he dreams of returning to his country one day, he says it’s still too dangerous and would like to stay in Brussels longer.

“My dream is to live in Algeria and to have children in Algeria,” he says. “But every generation must choose its destiny.”

Permanent status would give him more access to services in Belgium and greater mobility. These are two elements of a plan sponsored by the European Commission to attract qualified immigrants to Europe.

Officials want to design a common immigration policy for all 25 EU member states because of declining birthrates. Officials say they will need an influx of more than 40 million workers by 2020 to keep the economy stable. More immigrants and more mobility within the EU would help offset the looming labor shortage.

But this has proved a hard sell to many Europeans.

“A lot of people today see Europe as an economical union and that’s it,” says Delphine Neuprez, a friend of Kamel and a native Belgian. “I don’t think they communicate enough about ideas.”

Many natives see the face of Europe changing and resist any efforts to accelerate the growth of the immigrant population.

“There is racism,” Delphine says. “I guess take for example this area. I don’t think that all Belgian people are that open, unfortunately”

Officials will need citizen support of the proposed immigration plan to give it needed traction through the commission. Kamel is comfortable waiting. He likes living in Belgium and

teaching people about his culture. But he says having permanent status would help him plan for the future and invest in his life here.

“If I get my papers, it would be like the cherry on the cake,” he says.

In the meantime, he uses his teaching skills to educate Belgians about Algeria from behind the cash register.

“Algeria’s past is not part of Belgian people’s priorities,” Kamel says. “But it’s my job to make them interested.”

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