

## TURKEY

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# Africans suffer discrimination in Turkey despite contributions, scholar says

Wednesday, April 13, 2011

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ISTANBUL – Hürriyet Daily News



DAILY NEWS photo, Emrah GÜREL

African immigrants in Turkey feel excluded and discriminated by both public authorities and the general public despite the contributions they are making to society, according to a Turkish academic conducting research on the subject.

"It is so strange this country is not welcoming Africans," Mahir Şaul, a Turkish anthropologist and professor at the University of Illinois in the United States, told the Hürriyet Daily News & Economic Review in an interview Tuesday.

"Many praise the fact that trade between Turkey and African countries have increased significantly in recent years, but we must be aware that the Africans living in Turkey have been the main catalyst for this," he said.

Şaul said most African immigrants living in Turkey felt excluded by Turkish society and discriminated in terms of their race and skin color.

"They have a hard time finding a place to rent, most of them are cheated by locals, and they face social exclusion even on the streets."

The scholar also said North Africans and Sub-Saharan Africans were subjected to differing degrees of discrimination in Turkey.

"There are substantial differences among the two groups: North Africans are Arab in culture and mostly Muslim, whereas Sub-Saharanans are not Arab in culture and are mostly Christian," he said, adding that the first group was subject to less discrimination from Turkish society.

Islam is an important "bridge" Africans use to penetrate Turkish society, although it does not completely negate the race factor, Şaul said. "Black skin marks people out, and it socially affects their lives very negatively."

It is thought that there are more than 50,000 African migrants living in Turkey, mostly in Istanbul, although their exact number is not clear due to undocumented immigration, Şaul said. Among these, there are about 15,000 immigrants from Sub-Saharan countries, on which Şaul has spent his last 30 years of academic research.

Most Africans are based in Istanbul, especially in the Şişli neighborhoods of Osmanbey and Kurtuluş, but also in other parts of the city, such as Kumkapı, Merter and Kadıköy.

Africans also suffer discrimination at the hands of Turkish public authorities, especially the police, Şaul said.

"A [black] African migrant is generally exposed to more violence and mistreatment by the police than any other migrant of a different race," he said, but added that the situation had been improving with better training for police officers on how to approach migrants.

Many, however, remember the death of Nigerian migrant Festus Okey, who was shot and killed at Beyoğlu police station on Aug. 20, 2007. There is much controversy over the circumstances of Okey's death, although authorities have established that the bullet that killed the man came from a police gun.

Since the trial into Okey's death began, the court has endlessly postponed hearings related to the case, pretending that it had not yet received the dead man's identity information from the Nigerian state, Şaul said.

### 'Most Africans are immigrants, not refugees'

There is a general misperception that Africans in Turkey are refugees, said Şaul, who added that a majority of them were migrants looking for economic opportunities.

It would be difficult to find a general definition for the socio-economic conditions of Africans living in Istanbul, Şaul said.

"There is a whole spectrum of jobs African immigrants are doing here," Şaul said, adding that a minority of about hundred people had managed to become business owners in a short time.

There are many people who work as translators and brokers between Turkish and African businesspeople, others who work as English or French teachers, said Şaul, but added that a considerable number of migrants lived in very poor conditions and found it hard to find employment.

Legal provisions regarding the issue of residence and work permits is one of the main challenges Africans have to face once they overstay their visas and become irregular immigrants, said Şaul.

"Migrants would contribute more to the Turkish economy and be cheated less if legislation [easing such issues] were improved," the academic said.

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## READER COMMENTS

Guest - JOHN  
NWACHUKWU  
2011-04-15 00:16:27

There was one incident that happened in Nov. 2010, one of our customers that has been buying goods here for past 5 years, also he have one year Turkish business visa. He was going to the airport as usual with the Truck that is carrying his goods, a Turkish driver and 3 undocumented immigrant that will help him to offload his goods in the airport, but on their way they were stop by the police, because 2 of the undocumented immigrants was in the Truck of the car, the African businessman was arrested and charge with human trafficking & all his Turkish customers from Osmanbey came and identify him as their customer still he was later deported back to Africa as a human trafficker. Despect what is happening we are still happy living here

**Guest - JOHN  
NWACHUKWU**  
2011-04-15 00:15:48

Thank you Mr. Şaul, you have said it all. I have a friend who is living here for past 10 years and own a cargo company and his tax payment is up to date but he could not have working permit. Since 2005 till today we have increase of business men & women coming from Africa to buy goods here in Turkey, & I think it also improve the country economic. This is possible because of those African immigrants living here in Turkey.

**Guest - ONE  
MINUTE!**  
2011-04-14 22:04:05

While it may be true that foreigners get charged extra, it is not related to the color of skin. Is this professor even dimly aware that there are people in Turkey with skin as dark as africans? i have lived in this country for almost ten years, have been to and lived in many cities and not ONCE have i been discriminated against due to my skin color. It is one of the MAJOR reasons i love this place as it is the only country i have been to where i feel SAFE WALKING IN THE STREETS. unlike in the west, where having dark skin is enough to get killed or at least physically attacked. How can any Turk sit back and allow this man to insult your culture this way? and more ominously, why and how did this end up on the news?

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