

Cape Verde: A transatlantic travel nightmare

MALIHA FAIROOZ

I have been deported from Macedonia, subject to brutal acts of racism which manifested in physical violence in Hungary, being interrogated in Georgia, Serbia and countless other white-majority countries in Europe. But for the first time in my life, I was subject to horrible treatment by immigration in West Africa and frankly, I am stunned.

Allow me to explain. West Africa is renowned for its hospitality—every country I have been to within the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), has welcomed me with open arms. My plan was to be in Cape Verde for four days and then head to Germany via Portugal for a wedding. I paid for an online visa and the airport tax almost two days before arrival and stood in the queue for immigration with my yellow fever card, passport, visa and reservations for staying in two different hotels and flight out of the country.

Within two minutes of standing in the queue, two immigration officers arrived and took a look at the passports of several people including mine. They then decided to take three people inside which included two Liberians and myself. The man looking through my Bangladeshi passport flipped through every page. Each time I asked what the problem was, he simply said it was for security protocol. His boss, let us call him Zala, then arrived and began to interrogate me. I handed her all the paperwork. She wanted to know why I was there and I informed her it was for tourism.

She disappeared for 15 minutes before telling me to collect my luggage. Owing to a similar experience in Macedonia, I knew this meant they were going to deport me.

I texted my parents asking for help but they were asleep due to the time difference. I, and the other men, were informed around midnight that we would be sent back to Senegal.

I kept pleading her to allow me to go on to Europe for which I had documents ready and I only had a single entry visa to Senegal—but to no avail.

Around this time, a Nigerian and a Malian man arrived after landing from an Air

off, he would hit the door, waking me up in cold sweat. When they eventually opened the door around 9:30 am, I pleaded with them to let me stay outside as I feared for my safety but they did not listen. They gave us food but no matter how many times I asked them what was in it, I got no answer. I explained to them that I don't eat meat but it didn't matter. I pleaded with the new immigration officers, showed my work permit for Sierra Leone and work ID card from Sierra Leone. He answered "I can't do anything. My boss decided not to let you in, but I don't know why."

I had 10 minutes to check my phone and realised that my mom had received the messages. My mother worked as the Deputy Representative of UNICEF in Sudan, so I asked her if she knew anyone at the UN in Cape Verde. In the six hours I had been missing, my mother had managed to get in touch with the UN regional office in Dakar and through them, gotten in touch with the UN office at Cape Verde. She said she had been in touch and that they would try and see what was happening. With no idea whether I would be able to catch my flight to Germany, my 10 minutes were up and we were locked back in.

I tried to knock on the door a few times to be able to use the toilet, but they didn't respond to my pleas. They opened the door again at around 3:45pm to give us lunch and at that point, the first thing I asked was how long it would be till I was sent back to Senegal—only to be told, "You will stay here in Cape Verde. You won't be sent back."

I panicked, thinking they were going to detain me further. So I asked, "In here as in, in the airport or in the country?" The man explained in broken English that someone had called and there were people at the airport waiting to pick me up. I rushed to my phone to find out that the entire situation had escalated up to the level of the foreign ministry in Cape Verde and it was then that I realised the ultimate level of my privilege.

My mother, like any mother, had mobilised the entire regional office of UNICEF in Dakar and the local UN office to figure out what was going on. Only then did the Cape Verdean immigration, for the first time, decide to see my case for its facts and not on the basis of racially profiling a Bangladeshi solo traveller. The people who handled my case in the airport provided inaccurate and false information to the ministry as an excuse for my detention—citing that I was transiting through the country, did not have the permission to travel to Europe, nor had enough funds or reservations to sustain myself. None of which were true.

Eventually, after two more hours in custody, I was allowed to enter the country. For a whole of two days to catch up on some sleep and buy a ticket out of the country as soon as possible.

At this point, I began to see a pattern—they were only detaining solo travelers of colour. In the same flight as mine, there were white solo travelers but none of them were detained.

Maroc flight. At this point, I began to see a pattern—they were only detaining solo travelers of colour. In the same flight as mine, there were white solo travelers but none of them were detained.

They detained us without clarifying why they were deporting us. The Liberian men were told that they were detained for their lack of paperwork. ECOWAS citizens, by law, have free movement of up to 90 days.

Sometime around 3am, they separated us from our belongings, except for our wallets, and locked us into two rooms. The men's room was locked for my safety.

The door could not be opened from the inside. There was no source of natural light and no toilet paper. But the rooms were clean and had bunk beds. The walls were covered with messages from previous detainees and read, "Cape Verdeans will not be happy in this land", "This is no country for black people", and several messages in different languages depicting the emotions of those who were locked here.

They gave us water and told us they would be back around 10am the next day with breakfast.

In the men's room there was someone suffering from claustrophobia who kept banging on the door. Every time I dosed

