

Europe is not paradise as many imagine

BY NAFHA MAANI

I went to my car company for the yearly service and to change winter tyres to summer ones. As I waited for my turn, an elderly man was chatting with the receptionist while the latter prepared his invoice. He was talking about politics, particularly the situation in our neighbouring country, France. The receptionist listened patiently, nodding from time to time in agreement.

Their discussion soon turned to the harsh economic climate worsened by the recent clashes in the Middle East. These days, it seems no conversation starts or ends without touching on this alarming situation. Another employee, a Portuguese man, joined in, saying, "You should come and see the situation in Portugal." According to him, people with low salaries are finding it increasingly hard to make ends meet. Public transport has become the daily norm because many can no longer afford fuel prices. He added that buses and trains are so crowded "it looks more and more like the Indian buses and trains where you have to push one foot in to be able to put the second in." Honestly, I had never imagined such a situation in this part of the world.

When my car service took longer than expected and the showroom became quiet, the vendor offered me coffee and we continued chatting. This time, the topic shifted to the painfully long waiting hours in emergency rooms at our national hospitals. Despite all the available resources here, overcrowded emergency wards remain far from resolved. Waiting times can stretch up to five hours before a patient is even seen by a doctor.

Unfortunately, I have experienced this firsthand. On one occasion, I almost lost my thumb to a severe infection but was prescribed only antibiotics, "too little too late," as they say. The following day, I went to another hospital, where I was told that a few more hours would have meant amputation.

I remember the first time I walked through Mulago Hospital's emergency department. My head spun in horror. Patients lay on the floor along both sides of the corridor, waiting in pain. The situation here is not much different, except perhaps for better hygiene standards and a few chairs and benches.

There are many stereotypes about Europe that are far from reality. Some still imagine we step outside every morning and pick money from trees. It is true there are systems such as health insurance and pension plans, but these come with hard work and vary by country. In Greece, for example, pension allocations were drastically reduced during the economic crisis, and many people's dreams of a comfortable retirement simply vanished.

In Luxembourg, refugees whose status is approved and who reunite with their families do benefit from government support, sometimes enough that some "don't feel the urge to work any more." Yet they too must eventually find housing outside the camps, which is often no easy task. I only hope their dream of reaching the promised land does not turn into a nightmare.