These migrants from West Africa are taking the railroad to what they hope will be a better life. It’s an illegal journey fraught with dangers. Not only dodging trains but also evading the police. They’re taking risks to start over again, looking for jobs in Western Europe.

‘Most us, we are from Africa and we have many problems in our continent. Bad economics, bad politics, bad work... so like, you can get a diploma and you don’t find work.’

Fidel Castro Chimana – his parents in the Congo were ardent communists – is one of 43 men, women and children paying around 500 dollars to take what is known as the Western Balkans route to Europe.

Many of them feel they have no choice. Hilarion Charlemagne, from the Ivory Coast, saves his cell phone SIM cards from every country he has tried to get to Europe from.

‘We know that when we cross the border it’s against the law, this we understand. When you enter clandestinely into a country you feel you are a criminal, the feeling is indescribable.’

They start in the Greek port of Thessaloniki. Their smuggler, who agreed the Associated Press could observe the journey on condition he remained anonymous, leads them through back routes in Greece. They illegally cross into Macedonia and then on to the Serbian border. Here a group of other smugglers will take them to Hungary. Hungary is key because it’s in the European Union. From here they can get to wealthy countries like Germany and France without visas.

It’s an arduous trip... not all of them will get there.

‘There is women walking, there is old men, old women, they are walking. What about me? So ok! I’m still young, so I can walk man [laughs].’

Mireille Djeukam, who is 34, from Cameroon, has been trying for a year now to join her husband and daughter in Paris. That’s why she risks taking her 10-month old son Christian on the rail tracks. Across rickety bridges and along miles of old shepherd’s trails. She’s finding it tough going.

‘The trip has been very hard, too hard. If I knew it was this difficult I wouldn’t have done it. I just can’t walk like this.’

Normally, the near-200 mile trip takes six to eight days but it’s taking much longer. It’s a bigger group. The women and children can’t move as fast as the men and the weather has taken a turn for the worse.

‘So how did you sleep?’

‘Bad man! Cold!’

Growing exhaustion and lack of food leads to rising tensions. Charlemagne reads the Old Testament book of Job... a good choice! He needs all his patience when Miriam Tore, a migrant from Mali, accuses him of stealing her backpack. Charlemagne denies it was him.
Much of the movement in Macedonia is done at night to avoid detection, but that brings more dangers. Dodging cars on busy highways and walking through Macedonian towns when the railroad leads them there. But the visit to the town of Veles is just one risk too many. Most of the group are arrested and sent back to Greece. Thirteen escape and only 10 make it to Serbia.

Mireille Djeukam was too exhausted to carry on. She was left at a church with her son. They are now both back in Athens with no plans or money to try again any time soon.