

AS THEY walk unnoticed through a park in Cardiff, Syrian doctor brothers Hussam and Mohammed-Chadi Allahham display no sign of the trauma that forced them from their country.

They laugh and play with Mohammed's children like other families in the playground – two ordinary men enjoying the spring sunshine.

In their quiet moments, however, the screams of the young victims of Bashar al-Assad's gunmen and chemical weapon attacks still ring in their ears. Wales has become their new home but they carry Syria with them always.

This Monday marks 10 years since the uprising against President Assad which triggered the bloodiest war of recent times – a savage conflict that has killed half a million people and made 12 million more homeless, the Mirror reports.

For Hussam, 38, and Mohammed, 41, the anniversary is a painful reminder of how a peaceful demonstration in their home city of Damascus unravelled into the tragedy that changed their lives irrevocably.

Many of the 20,000 Syrians who have settled in Britain to work and start afresh – less than 0.3% of the total number of the country's refugees – are nervous about recounting their ordeal.

These brothers – both of whom want to use their medical training in the NHS – are sharing their dramatic survival story so the world does not forget Syria.

In an interview at Cardiff's Oasis Centre for refugees, Hussam recalls witnessing the first protests the year after starting as a state hospital surgeon.

"I was very happy because I was very well respected and had achieved a high standard after a lot of hard work," he says. "I started to think about getting settled, improving my career, and having a family."

"In 2011 the Arab Spring started. We saw how it started in other countries. It seemed to be successful in some – relatively peaceful. We were looking forward to this happening in Syria. I had spent a lot of time outside Syria so I knew the need for freedom was very high."

"The first protest on March 15 was something very new. On March 18 the first people died. This was the beginning. The regime showed us it would be very brutal – that they would show no mercy."

"During the protests the regime said that anyone who was injured would be treated as a terrorist and would not be allowed to get treatment – even children. They were very strict that any doctor should report any patient with gunshot wounds. The number of people dying increased week after week."

Although they knew it would put their own safety at risk Hussam and Mohammed later worked at makeshift field hospitals in areas controlled by the newly formed Free Syrian Army.

They came under fire from snipers as they crossed from the regime-controlled part of Damascus where they lived and worked officially into rebel-held areas. Some colleagues just disappeared after arousing suspicion.

One of the greatest risks was stealing vital drugs from state hospital stores so they could be used to treat the injured. As professional doctors the brothers saved lives regardless of sides.

"We swore that we would treat all people – that was what I believed,"

The Syrian refugee doctors who want to use their skills for people in Wales

Hussam and Mohammed-Chadi Allahham were forced to treat an Assad general as staff begged 'kill him... he tortured and raped a lot of people', they braved sniper fire and risked death to help in rebel-held areas and were made to keep prisoners alive so they could be tortured further. Now they live in Cardiff. Tom Parry reports

reflects Hussam, who arrived in Britain in August 2014. "Once we had a very important general. He had five gunshots in his body. We took him to the operating theatre. During the operation members of staff said: 'Please can you kill him? Because he tortured and raped a lot of people in our area.' I wished that I could kill him but my job did not allow me to do this. He survived."

"At the beginning it was very hard to believe that the regime would use chemical attacks. When we saw patients with symptoms we didn't realise what it was until the huge chemical attack that killed a lot of people was proved."

"Sometimes Assad's intelligence men came to the hospital and asked a doctor to go with them. They took us to the prison."

"Our task was to check the prisoners who had been tortured. When they tortured them and they lost consciousness, or they thought they were going to die, they brought us to keep them alive so they could be tortured more."

"It's a very hard thing to remember. When you see these prisoners you also wish for them to die because it would be better for them."

Hussam pauses and wipes away a tear. The painful memories are still raw. "At that time I regretted studying medicine and becoming a doctor," he confesses. "Every week we had many cases of people who had been shot."

"When I studied at university I hated surgery because the first operation I saw was a leg amputation. I wanted to focus on something like cardiology."

"But by this time I was the only one who was doing amputations. In the last two or three months I did about 50 amputations for people because there was no-one else to do it."

"I remember the last time I did it I was cutting the leg of an old lady."

"She was diabetic. She didn't feel anything so there was no need for an anaesthetic. I started to sing because I forgot that she was awake. Then the lady was crying. I thought: 'I have

become a monster. I'm not human anymore.' I thought I could not carry on."

Both brothers had to leave Syria because they had been branded traitors for treating Assad's victims – in Mohammed's case a child.

They were reunited in neighbouring Jordan, where they set up their own rehabilitation clinic for injured Syrians. This, however, was unofficial, so the Jordanian authorities threatened to throw them back into Syria. Their whole family had to decamp to Egypt because of the threat from the regime.

Still the courageous brothers wanted to do more so they travelled back to northern Syria through Turkey, believing it was under control of friendly, anti-Assad rebels. Instead they walked into the powder keg of warring militias and Isis and the daily risk of kidnap.

After working as doctors in Yemen for six months there was no choice but to part with their precious savings and join the dangerous migrant route through north Africa and

across the Mediterranean into Europe.

Legal routes were not possible for Syrians. They flew to Algeria, where they boarded a bus that took them 12 hours south to a rendezvous with people traffickers who advertised their services on Facebook.

Later they joined a clandestine two-hour night march through the Sahara desert into Libya. Such was the threat of being robbed that they pretended their arms had been broken so they could hide cash inside fake casts.

Driven to the Libyan coast, they were put in a dirty, crowded safe house with 350 others, all sharing the same toilet. The head smuggler was a former Colonel Gaddafi stooge who would beat clients with a stick.

"During an outbreak of severe food poisoning Mohammed and Hussam saved dozens of lives. This put them to the front of the queue."

"The VIP service," jokes Hussam. "We had to run into the sea until the water was up to our necks," he recalls. "We climbed onto an inflatable with an engine. It took us out to a boat. Whatever you carried they would throw in the sea. There were 150 of us on that boat – many below the deck."

"There were two babies who were turning blue because it was very cold. I took off my pyjamas to cover the babies."

"When the Italian ship came to rescue us we nearly capsized. People panicked. I did not think we would survive."

Hussam admits he is still scarred by the experience. He was in Cardiff for three years before he went to the beach and even then he was scared to touch the water.

After finally arriving in Naples the brothers volunteered for the Red Cross but there were no opportunities for proper employment.

They decided to head for Britain,

Man seriously injured in village crash

A 25-YEAR-OLD man has suffered potentially "life-changing injuries" in a road accident.

The man, who police confirmed is from the Ystalyfera area, is currently receiving treatment at the University Hospital of Wales, in Cardiff, following the crash in Godrergrai, Neath Port Talbot.

The incident took place on Tuesday at around 5pm at the A4087's junction with Church Road and involved a car and a motorcycle.

The stretch of road was closed "for some time".

A spokeswoman said: "A 25-year-old man from Ystalyfera is currently in hospital with potentially life-changing injuries."

Police are appealing for anyone who saw two "off-road-style motorcycles" travelling southbound on the A4067 or anyone who witnessed or may have footage of the collision to get in touch.

Ring 101 with information.

Women arrested after man stabbed

TWO women have been arrested after a man was stabbed in Cardiff city centre.

South Wales Police responded to a report of a disturbance at an address on Caroline Street, popularly known as "Chippy Alley", in the early hours of yesterday, shortly after midnight.

A force spokesman said a 20-year-old man from the Ely area of Cardiff was taken to the University Hospital of Wales where he was treated for non-life-threatening stab wounds.

Two women, aged 25 and 26, have been arrested on suspicion of wounding with intent and were yesterday being questioned.

Officers are appealing for any witnesses to the incident to come forward.

Call South Wales Police on 101 quoting reference 2100110743.



> Hussam Allahham, left, with brother Chadi
Rowan Griffiths / Daily Mirror



> Mohammed, first on left facing camera, and Hussam, fourth from left facing camera, crossing the Mediterranean

where they had an uncle, to claim asylum.

Several years later both work and pay taxes and now speak fluent English – as well as three other languages. Hussam, a community worker, started out in a job helping other Syrian families settle in the Valleys.

During the coronavirus pandemic he has been delivering essentials to people who are shielding.

Mohammed, meanwhile, gained employment as an assistant in a mental health care home and has also been an interpreter for councils, hospitals, and banks. He runs his own business too.

In Abergavenny he met his wife, a Syrian widow brought here with her children from a refugee camp in Lebanon. They now have three children of their own – all of whom speak English and Welsh.

"I spend all my money on the chil-

dren so they can forget about what they left behind," says Mohammed. "They are very damaged."

"Every day I don't leave home until I am sure they are all learning," he adds. "I am trying to push them to get integrated in this society."

Since settling in Cardiff the brothers have stuck doggedly to their ambition to work as doctors again. They claim to be blocked by strict General Medical Council (GMC) rules on foreign qualifications.

"I am a success story for people who met me when I arrived here in shorts and a T-shirt," says Hussam.

"But I am a disappointment for people who knew me as a doctor."

Uncowed by a journey that would have finished most, Hussam and Mohammed are desperate to share their wealth of talents in their adopted country.

Wales is lucky to have them.

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> Hussam and Mohammed with Mohammed's family, wife Fatin and children Ali, Younes, Khadr, Saja, Maya and twin babies Faowaz and Wissam

