

## **SEEKING REFUGE, FINDING SUFFERING**

### **MSF calls on Italian authorities to drastically improve conditions for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants fleeing North Africa, including Libya**

#### **Introduction**

Since the popular uprisings and violent confrontations that have shaken the Arab world began in December 2010, some 27,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants from North Africa,; have arrived by sea on the southern Italian island of Lampedusa. The majority of boats that arrived originated from Tunisia, but increasingly boats brought people from Libya seeking refuge – culminating in one of the largest single landings the island has ever seen, with 760 people in one boat arriving on April 19<sup>th</sup> 2011.

Many of those arriving from Libya are sub-Saharan Africans, mainly from Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, or Nigeria. These people had already fled their own countries, seeking the means to survive or to find safety away from war or violence. They were then forced to flee the conflict in Libya.

All the refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants landing in Lampedusa, whether departing from Libya, Tunisia, or elsewhere, have risked an often perilous sea journey to reach Italy. They do so as part of their attempt to find a way to survive, escaping precarious and often insecure living situation either in their home countries or in North African countries where they had also sought a means of survival. Some speak of having been victims of detention, rape, and torture, or targeted as foreigners in the current or recent violence in North Africa; others are particularly vulnerable people, such as unaccompanied minors and women travelling alone.

The reception conditions for these refugees and migrants on Lampedusa are generally poor and fail to meet the minimum standards for reception of vulnerable persons, which leads to renewed suffering and uncertainty. There is inadequate separation between men and women; overall poor living conditions in reception centres; lack of access to information about rights; lack of suitable measures for the most vulnerable groups, including victims of torture and violence, unaccompanied minors and women.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has worked in Italy since 1999 at landing points and in open settings to provide medical care and mental health support to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants arriving. The organisation has repeatedly called attention to the appalling reception and living conditions facing this population upon their arrival—and the far-reaching impact on their physical and mental health.

Since February 2011, MSF has conducted 765 medical consultations for migrants and refugees in Lampedusa, and has provided them with a total of 2,500 hygiene kits and 4,500 blankets, and 2,500 bottle of water. After witnessing the inadequate and appalling reception conditions in Italy<sup>1</sup>, MSF is compelled to speak out again about

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<sup>1</sup> MSF teams assessed the general reception conditions from 3rd to 10th of April in Kinisia (Trapani), Pian del lago (Caltanissetta), Mineo (Catania), Manduria (Taranto), Restinco (Brindisi), Bari Palese

the failure to provide assistance and protection to those fleeing from North Africa, many of whom have experienced violence and torture.

Lampedusa has in the past faced regular arrivals of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants by sea. This year, is no exception. Clearly, Italy can anticipate new arrivals, possibly in increased numbers due to the ongoing uprisings in the Arab world, so it is imperative that the country takes its responsibility to ensure adequate, humane reception conditions for people who have fled there in order to survive or to escape violence.

The new arrivals on Lampedusa face vulnerability that goes beyond the need for medical care and material assistance. It is also the responsibility of the Italian state to ensure adequate reception conditions and provide information and access to legal procedures and protection.

“There was shooting every day, every night, it was very dangerous [in Libya]. Sometimes, they come house by house. You walk in the street, a car stop and then, someone behind you push you in the car and you disappear. I could not go out anymore. I took a boat to any country to save my life.”

*Nigerian man (28), Piam Dem Pago Centre, Italy, April 2011*

“I arrived this morning; I was in the boat that sank. I was injured in the face when the boat took water. I really struggled to survive. And then the coast guards took us on their boat. They rescued the three of us, but many people did not make it.”

*Somali man (17), Lampedusa, Italy, April 2011*

“Some friends told me that if I get US\$900 I could leave on a boat. I spent two days waiting for a seat on the boat. One group left first, but it was too windy and their boat broke down at eight km from the coast. We had to wait all together again. They came back; they had found a bigger boat for all of us. We were 300 persons. It took us four days from Tripoli to reach Italy. It was very difficult on that ship. Water started to enter in the boat; we were very scared. They came with the Italian authorities to rescue us. A woman gave birth on the boat. We had nothing to clean the baby with.”

*Eritrean woman (22), Mineo, Italy, April 2011*

### **Poor Conditions in Centres Increase Vulnerability**

For many years, MSF has repeatedly called attention to the appalling reception conditions in Italy and their impact on physical and mental health. With the increased influx of refugees and migrants from North Africa, Italy is responsible for ensuring humane conditions for new arrivals and providing access to legal procedures and protection.

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(Bari), Borgo Mezzanone (Foggia) centers; and mental health needs from 11th to 13th of April in Mineo (Catania) and Pian Del Lago (Catlanissetta) centers. Testimonies were collected during this same period.

Migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are distinct legal categories with different rights. In addition, many of those who left Libya or Tunisia in recent months have special needs for assistance and safety. These include particularly vulnerable persons, such as children, unaccompanied minors, pregnant women, the disabled, and victims of torture and violence, including sexual violence. However, they all share the same inadequate conditions when they arrive in Italy.

The European Council Directive establishes minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers (2003/9/EC) and explicitly states that “reception of groups with special needs should be specifically designed to meet those needs”. Vulnerable asylum seekers require priority treatment according to their needs, including systematic identification of vulnerability at arrival, specialised health care if necessary and psychosocial care addressing the short- and long-term effects of sexual and physical violence<sup>2</sup>. This should be applied regardless of which country, Libya or Tunisia or elsewhere, that they arrived from.

MSF is deeply concerned about **victims of violence** among the refugees and asylum seekers, but also among the migrants we have assisted in Italy. Many have been directly affected by violence and war in North Africa, or have been firsthand witnesses of violence. Some tell us they have been victims of sexual abuse and torture, both in their home country or in the other countries where they have fled to survive and seek refuge. Most have experienced extreme hardships and suffering from the day they left their country of origin to their eventual arrival in Italy.

“I tried two times to come to Italy. The first one was in August 2009; our boat was already out at sea but a Libyan boat arrived and took us back to Libya. For this reason I was jailed for about one month in prison near Tripoli airport. Conditions were extremely difficult. We were 65 people in a rectangular room measuring five-by-eight meters. We had three meals a day, but we only had tea, rice, and bread. We did not have water and so we had to drink water from the two toilets we had for 65 people.”  
*Somali man (20), Caltanissetta, Italy, April 2011*

“I spent eight months in a detention centre in Zliten (Libya). They put us in a room that had no window and locked the door. It was horrible. We were 13 women in one room. We were sleeping there, going to the toilet there, taking water there, washing and drying our clothes there. We were lying on the floor and they beat us with plastic sticks. We cried and cried! They took all our belongings, our cell phones, the little money we had left. From the little window in the door we sometimes saw the guards beat the men. They hit them on the bottoms of their feet, they screamed so much, and then they threw water on their heads. When we were watching that, we were all crying, they were our brothers, our men.”

<sup>2</sup> .Article 20 of Directive 2003/9/EC : “**Victims of torture and violence:** Member States shall ensure that, if necessary, persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious acts of violence receive the necessary treatment of damages caused by the aforementioned acts.”  
Art. 15.2 of Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 : “**Health care:** Member States shall provide necessary medical or other assistance to applicants who have special needs.”

*Eritrean woman (22), Mineo, Italy, April 2011*

Women and children in Italian reception centres must be housed in areas where their safety and well-being are ensured. Many **women travelling alone** who were placed in reception centres told MSF that there was no effective separation from men, and they feared abuse despite the strong presence of police. Due to the lack of privacy and security, women reported being too afraid to sleep, to change clothes or even go to the toilet alone.

“Yesterday night, a man followed me to the toilets. I pushed him, I ran away, and I screamed. Men jump over the wall and enter in our room. We are afraid at night; we cannot sleep. The police do not do anything.”

*Tunisian woman (67), Lampedusa, Italy, April 2011*

“I don’t have a husband anymore; I have nobody to protect me. We left because we were not safe anymore and here it is not better. Since we arrived in this centre, we never relax, we are afraid of the men entering in our room. We do not change our clothes; we do not dare to undress because men are outside looking at us at the windows.”

*Tunisian woman (35), Lampedusa, Italy, April 2011*

MSF has also witnessed **children and unaccompanied minors being kept in closed centres** in Lampedusa due to the lack of designated structures to shelter them—a stark contravention to the best interests of the child.<sup>3</sup> According to European standards, “minors should be placed with adult relatives, foster families, in accommodation centres with special provisions for minors, or in other accommodations suitable for minors”<sup>4</sup>.

During our medical and mental health assessments in newly created reception centres in Kinisia, Manduria and Mineo, MSF teams observed that the refugees and asylum seekers had received **no clear information** about accessing legal procedures, or about their practical situation and future options. In some centres, there were serious gaps in the provision of basic and legal services, which caused significant anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty. Initial mental health assessments of the new arrivals pointed to the risk of widespread depression and hopelessness in response to their uncertain situation. These effects are aggravated by the lack of information about legal procedures in Italy. MSF witnessed the same dynamics in 2009 in another country, when our work in Maltese detention centres for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers revealed high rates of depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress disorder<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> As stated in the UN Convention on the Right of the Child.

<sup>4</sup> See Report from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on the application of Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers and Art. 17 of Directive 2008/115/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals.

<sup>5</sup> MSF Press Release: Bearing the brunt of migration policies: MSF urges European governments to respect life, dignity and healthcare of migrants and asylum seekers:  
<http://www.msf.org/msf/articles/2009/12/bearing-the-brunt-of-migration-policies-msf-urges-european->

“This place is not good. Here we are seven women, all from Eritrea. Yesterday a man came at 3:00 am; he entered in the other girls’ room. He started to speak in Arabic. They screamed, so he left. They were so afraid that they came to our room and slept on the floor. We did not sleep, we waited and listened. We are afraid. I went to the police this morning to complain but they told me to come back, they are too busy. Men are drinking outside. There is no security here.” *Eritrean woman (22), Mineo, April 2011*

### **Avoid Repeating Same Mistakes**

MSF has provided assistance to refugees and migrants in Italy, Malta, Greece, France and Spain—as well as in Morocco and Tunisia—since 1999. From 2002 to 2009, MSF worked on the island of Lampedusa and the southern coast of Sicily, the most frequent landing points for regular arrivals of migrants and refugees. MSF has long documented the far-reaching impact of inappropriate reception and living conditions on the physical and mental health of asylum seekers and migrants, based on our work in southern Europe.

In May 2009, new government policies, in particular the “Friendship Pact”<sup>6</sup> between Italy and Libya, curbed the influx of refugees and migrants. After arrivals by boat ground to a halt in Lampedusa, MSF withdrew its team from the island and publicly expressed its fears for the health and lives of the refugees and migrants forced back to Libya<sup>7</sup>.

In response to the renewed arrivals in February 2011 of thousands of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from Tunisia and Libya, MSF restarted its medical activities on the island. Between February 14 and April 21, 2011, MSF medical teams carried out 765 consultations with refugees and migrants in need of care upon arrival at the docks in Lampedusa. MSF likewise provided new arrivals with basic necessities, such as hygiene materials and blankets.

Generally, new arrivals suffered from seasickness, dehydration, hypothermia, and generalised body pain, such as headaches or abdominal pain. At the peak of arrivals in March, 3,000 migrants slept on the docks in Lampedusa for several days, sharing 16 chemical toilets and having access to only 1.5 litres of water per day. This was completely unacceptable, and though conditions in Lampedusa were improved since then, it is clear that the situation facing migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in

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[governments-to-respect-life-dignity-and-healthcare-of-migrants-and-asylum-seekers.cfm](#) In Malta, MSF consultations with the detainees revealed the extreme mental health impact as a result of the harsh journey to Malta and their subsequent confinement in detention centers. One-third of the patients consulted showed symptoms of depression and one-quarter were suffering from anxiety. Nine percent were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

<sup>6</sup> . “The Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between the Italian Republic and Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya” has been signed on August 30, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> . MSF Press Release: “Fears For Migrants Forced Back To Africa”  
<http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/press/release.cfm?id=4076&cat=press-release>

Lampedusa and other centres across Italy today, continues to simply compound their suffering and increasing their vulnerability.

### **MSF Urgently Calls on Italian Authorities to Prepare For Influx**

“Since the beginning of the fighting, things got more and more difficult. Still, I wanted to try to remain in Libya because I was really afraid of travelling to Lampedusa on a fishing boat. But on 17<sup>th</sup> March I decided that time was up for me in that country. I was working in a restaurant and went to deliver food with my Moroccan colleague. A pick-up driving past with armed men shot at us. My Moroccan friend was shot in the chest. He died right there, in front of me. The pick-up made a U-turn to come back and kill me. I ran back to the restaurant. There were four black people working in the kitchen of the restaurant, including me. All of us decided to leave immediately. As a black person in Tripoli you cannot move around. You are in danger. I still have many friends in Tripoli that want to leave.”

*Gambian man, 29 years old, Lampedusa, Italy, April 2011*

People fleeing Libya describe the terrifying situation of migrants and refugees still trapped by the violence. Countless people are still searching for ways to flee to greater security and to simply survive. People arriving in Italy from other countries in Africa also speak of their flight from violence, fear and extreme poverty.

In view of the regular and long-standing arrivals of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in southern Italy from North Africa, MSF is highly concerned about the lack of concrete preparation for the continued arrivals in the coming weeks and months. Despite the generally predictable nature of arrivals, reception centres currently take an unacceptably ad hoc approach that barely covers basic needs and does not adequately ensure the safety and security of new arrivals, particularly for the most vulnerable, including those who have experienced violence.

Refugees and migrants stories of flight in order to survive and reach safety away from violence and vulnerability reveal the extreme mental and physical hardship they have escaped and endured. Upon their arrival in Italy, poor reception conditions expose them to further suffering and renewed vulnerability and uncertainty.

MSF calls on the Italian authorities to develop a concrete strategy to ensure an adequate, humane reception for all migrants and asylum seekers already in the country or soon to arrive, but particularly for the most vulnerable, including women, children, unaccompanied minors and victims of violence. .

The Italian government must take concrete measures to better receive, assist, and protect these people. The measures should include:

- Ensuring appropriate medical and mental health support
- Improving overall conditions in reception centres
- Ensuring that minimum standards for reception of vulnerable people are upheld, including:

- systematic identification of vulnerable persons
- specific attention to victims of torture and violence
- separate, adequate living areas for unaccompanied minors and women travelling alone, regardless of time spent in any one location
- Providing systematic information to all new arrivals on asylum procedures and practical arrangements (e.g. transfer to other centres)
- Developing a concrete plan for the reception of refugees and migrants who can be anticipated to arrive in the coming months

The 27,000 people that already arrived in southern Italy since January 2011 will undoubtedly be followed by others in the coming months trying to flee North Africa to survive or to escape violence. It is time for Italy to step up, fully prepare itself and better fulfil its responsibilities towards the refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants that reach its shores.

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