



As Immigrants Arrive, Reception Centers Share Despair

Judith Harris (May 07, 2014)



Both the daily horde of exhausted, hungry immigrants landing on the shores of Sicily and those who tend to them after their arrival are in despair. Even before this week some 2,000 immigrants were known to be on the island. Twice those from last year are arriving, even as the season of fair weather has only begun. The police prefect of Sicily has appealed for help from Rome, but in the meantime the Sicilian holding centers are on the verge of collapse. Many, including a number of pregnant women, arrived via Libya from Syria

ROME - Both the daily horde of exhausted, hungry immigrants landing on the shores of Sicily and those who tend to them after their arrival are in despair. Their stories begin with the statistics. At [Trapani](#) [2] 887 North Africans arrived May 6 by boat, and at [Porto Empedocle](#) [3], on the coast of the Strait of Sicily near [Agrigento](#) [4], another 468 immigrants landed, including 104 women and 25 children.

There would have been 469 but one had died en route, and his body was removed on arrival.

Another 300 were picked up from sleazy boats in the Sicilian Channel. Many of the newcomers, including a number of pregnant women, arrived via Libya from Syria.



Even before this week some 2,000 immigrants were known to be on the island, and this is only the beginning of fair weather. The police prefect of Sicily has appealed for help from Rome, but in the meantime the Sicilian holding centers are on the verge of collapse.

In Messina on May 4, where immigrants are housed, so to speak, in a walled campground, a violent hailstorm aggravated an already difficult situation by pelting the 32 tents which host 250 people. Result: 184 Syrians and Palestinian refugees fled. Last autumn the same camping compound had been flooded. "It's another proof that this just isn't the right place," said Mayor Renato Accorinti of Messina.

Italy is not necessarily their final destination. A good number of these political and economic refugees will move on to Northern Europe, where some have relatives and at least contacts, and for this reason Italy continues to appeal to the European Community for more assistance. But the numbers in the meantime are daunting. In Trapani alone there are almost 3,000 immigrants waiting for a brighter future to open for them.

The dimensions of the problem are daunting. At the Ministry of the Interior the fear is that over 800,000 immigrants are on their way to the shores of Europe, bringing the entire system to the verge of collapse. Last year brought some 43,000 to Italy, but during the first four months this year 25,000 have already arrived, most of them from Africa. At that rate the figure for 2014 will be double that of 2013.

At a hearing in the Senate Defense Commission last week, Giovanni Pinto, national head of border police, said that so far, "We have nowhere to house them. The local people are growing angry over the continual arrival of so many foreigners." Although he later backed away from these harsh words, the fact remains that it is true.

This week the parents of 60 children in Ragusa, Eastern Sicily, protested that the buses their children normally ride to school are also used by night to drive immigrants to various holding centers. The parents argued that the immigrants are germ-infested and the buses are not disinfected before the school children board the next morning. "The risk is real and it is very high," said one parent. "We saw the children's bus on TV taking the immigrants."

Pinto also said that, as in the past, Libya is the point of departure for nine out of 10 immigrants. He points out the bitter irony that the more successful the care for immigrants has been, the more arrive. "Our 'operation Mare nostrum' has given excellent results but has also increased the departures from Libya," he told the Senate Commission.

Last month Interior Minister [Angelino Alfano](#) [5] warned that some 300,000 to 600,000 people are expected to set off for the shores of Southern Europe. But the politicians, struggling to pull Italy out of its economic recession and to introduce institutional reforms, can hardly ignore the situation but do not know what to do.

[Matteo Salvini](#) [6], federal secretary of the anti-immigrant Northern League (he is the youthful successor to [Umberto Bossi](#) [6]), flew to Siracusa and Catania in Eastern Sicily "to give a concrete signal in the battle against clandestine immigration and against exploitation." Salvini claimed that he was speaking for the "good folks of Sicily" who would like to help the immigrants, but at the same time know that "it is impossible for Sicily and Italy to be alone in this, when Europe doesn't give a damn."

His advice: "Reject the clandestines and invest money in Africa to help those countries' development." In the meantime his Northern League is investing in TV ads read by foreign-looking actors to advise wannabe immigrants against coming to Italy.

Please take a look at the deeply moving winning entry for the World Press Photo 2014, of migrants by [John Stanmeyer](#) [7], at [>>>](#) [8]

The series on immigration beginning with his photo can be seen with Italian captions at: [>>>](#) [9]



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