



Scirocco
borderline-europe, Sicily –
Part 10/2022
Palermo, 10.06.2022



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Scirocco [ʃiˈrɒkko-Schirokko] is a south-easterly, hot strong wind that carries dust and sand across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Italy's north for often only a few hours. This short info in the age of the pandemic will be published from March 2021 in an approx. bi-weekly rhythm. The Scirocco replaces the Corona Update Italy.

Political and Social Situation

In [Tunisia](#), there is still no public institution that takes care of the registration and administration of refugees and migrants. Despite UNHCR taking over these tasks, the situation is extremely precarious for affected persons. Neither the formal signing of the Geneva Refugee Convention nor the adoption of a new constitution, which secures the right to political asylum while prohibiting the extradition of political refugees, has been able to change the **lack of legal protection mechanisms for refugees and migrants**. Since February this year, [migrants and refugees have been protesting](#) against the closure of shelters by UNHCR as well as demanding their immediate evacuation to safe third countries and better living conditions (see [previous issues](#) of this newsletter). Between April 2020 and March 2021 alone, [at least 907 people](#) – including many female refugees from West Africa – were victims of forced labor and sex trafficking in Tunisia.

The [Italian health authority](#) confirmed that as of June, **there will no longer be a quarantine requirement** for people arriving in Italy by sea. Also, the so-called “green pass” will no longer be required. This political decision removes the legal basis for the system of quarantine ships, which had

forced migrants and refugees to temporary accommodation on quarantine ships since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Decree No. 1287 of 12.04.2020).



Quarantine vessel off Sicily (2021)

Lately, only two of the formerly five quarantine ships have been active. These two ships are now used, among other things, as [ferries between Lampedusa and Sicily](#) to transfer migrants to reopened reception centers on the island, now functioning as Covid facilities. The relief of the [Contrada Imbriacola hotspot](#) on Lampedusa was urgently needed because **the humanitarian situation at the hotspot has deteriorated drastically** in recent months due to severe overcrowding, [deplorable working conditions](#) and failing administration. Refugees continue to be forced to live under [undignified conditions](#) in the hotspot of Contrada Imbriacola. However, the reopening of the temporary reception centers as Covid centers for migrants and refugees in Sicily is neither a serious nor a sustainable solution. People suffer from isolation and inhumane conditions in such centers as the example of Villa Sikaniana in Siciliana (Agrigento province) shows: Migrants regularly tried to escape this facility, most recently on May 29, when [27 people](#) escaped through a window. In 2020, a young man even died trying to escape from Villa Sikaniana.

After the closure of the transitional reception center in Parco Roya two years ago, a **permanent reception center for refugees** is to be established in [Ventimiglia](#). This was decided at a meeting in the Prefecture of Imperia. The new center will be moved to the locality of Mortola. The respective mayor Scullino, on the other hand, suggests that instead of a reception center, there should be a transport system to nearby repatriation centers. In his opinion, people do not want to stay in Ventimiglia but should be discouraged from "irregularly" traveling further north, nevertheless. While the prefecture's efforts to create a permanent safe place for refugees and to ignore the mayor's demands are to be welcomed, it must also be ensured that people on the move can decide for themselves where they want to stay.



Transborder-Camp Ventimiglia (2021)

In Milan, the municipality wants to vacate a building in which [25 to 40 people from all over the world](#) have been living for five years – to use it as a place of worship, ironically. The residents are working, some even with permanent contracts, but for various reasons they cannot find housing. "It's not only our home" – they explain in a flyer written in Italian and Arabic – "it's the place where we pray and talk about our countries of origin, about the wars, the famines and the economic crises which have forced us to flee our countries." The building, renovated by

the residents themselves, was already auctioned off at the end of May. Together with the collective "Ci siamo", the current 25 residents have begun to **protest their eviction** – but the city administration has shown little interest or cooperation so far.

A case of misappropriation of funds while housing refugees is currently being heard in Southern Sicily. The administration of a [former shelter for refugees in Manfria](#) which has been abandoned and destroyed by several fires, is under indictment for accusations including **embezzlement of ministerial funds and labor exploitation** of guests and employees. Cases of "caporalato" (forced labor) have also been reported. According to the indictment, food for refugees was rationed and not eatable, and general living conditions were not sustainable. For years, operators have tried to profit from the accommodation of refugees. Since the 2018 security decree cut funding for centers, not only all services beyond food and a bed have been eliminated, but living conditions in the centers, where residents are often left to fend for themselves, did not even meet the minimum standards required. Lack of help in case of illness and trauma, uneatable food, labor exploitation and the absence of help in dealing with asylum procedures have become normality.

Situation of refugees in Italy

After almost five years, the charges against [Father Moses Zerai](#) – an Eritrean priest who was nominated for the **Nobel Peace Prize** in 2015 and has been involved in humanitarian aid for refugees for years – for aiding and abetting unauthorized entry have finally been dropped. The 47-year-old Eritrean from Asmara, who belongs to the Scalabrinian

Order, fled to Rome himself in 1992, where a few years later he founded the NGO [Habeshia](#) for the integration of immigrants from East Africa. He eventually turned to the priesthood. Father Moses Zerai, along with dozens of other cases, was mentioned in the **Iuventa case** (we reported [here](#)).

[Four Eritreans](#) who had helped their people on the Italian mainland were also acquitted of the charges for aiding and abetting unauthorized entry. Their case has now been heard in the last instance by Italy's highest court, the Court of Cassation in Rome. This acquittal sets an **important precedent for similar charges** against refugees and migrants in Italy who are affected by a strong wave of repression and criminalization.



Vos Thalassa at its arrival at a safe port. Photo by Alberto Biondo (2018).

Furthermore, the decision in the case of the [Italian supply ship Vos Thalassa](#) has shown that resistance to forced repatriation to Libya, which according to the court's assessment is not a safe third country, can be considered an act of self-defense.

Arrivals in the region of Calabria continue to be on a high level, but no accommodation for arriving migrants has been found so far. Due to the tense situation, a sports facility in [Reggio Calabria](#) has been converted into a facility of temporary accommodation – to the disadvantage of the local sports clubs, which

are dependent on alternatives. Since last year, the construction of dozens of residential modules has been pending, which, together with the erection of a tent structure, would provide temporary relief in the reception.

In neighbouring [Roccella Jonica](#), responsible politicians also discuss ways to organize the predicted landings of the coming months. In this regard, Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese attended a meeting of the Provincial Committee for Public Order and Security together with Mayor Vittorio Zito, the Prefect of Reggio Calabria and the head of the Department of Immigration. They discussed the **opening of a new hotspot center**. However, [hotspots are not an adequate accommodation nor are reception facilities](#). As evidenced by numerous testimonies of affected people and [human rights organisations](#), they are no humane alternative to the free choice of place for arriving people.



Hotspot Center on Lampedusa (2012)

[Lamorgese](#) also pledged financial and structural support for the reception of migrants and refugees in heavily populated communities. She announced that a new pact on immigration and asylum would be drawn up at the next meeting of the EU Mediterranean countries, which would focus on responsibility and solidarity, and include a distribution key for migrants at the European

level. The binding implementation of such a distribution key has been demanded by [Italy](#) for years, but has so far failed because of the so-called Visegrád countries, which are now confronted themselves with the coordination and reception of many people due to the war in Ukraine.

On the death of Blessing Matthew

In France, two lawyers are demanding the [reopening of the investigation](#) into the death of Blessing Matthew. The 20-year-old Nigerian woman became another victim of the European border regime in the early morning of May 7, 2018. She drowned in the Durance River near Briançon at the Franco-Italian border attending to flee French border guards. In the past, many people have chosen the dangerous route across the Alps in order to get from Italy to France. The investigation of the gendarmerie on this case was stopped in February 2021 in the second instance, although the sister of Blessing Matthew as well as the association [Tous migrants](#) from Briançon suspected a complicity of state forces in her death from the beginning due to witness statements. However, the sister's complaint remained unheard. After members of the NGO Border Forensics have secured a new testimony from a traveling companion of Blessing on the night of her death, the investigation could be opened again as the [new testimony](#) contradicts the testimony of the police officers. These stand by their testimony, in which they assure they neither recognized nor followed Blessing Matthew that night. According to the new witness, there might have been a chase that ended in a physical altercation before Blessing fell into the water. The drowning victim was not helped.

According to [Charles Heller](#), co-director of Border Forensics, such chases are a common practice of Border Patrol in the region. Blessing was the first but unfortunately not the last victim to the EU's dangerous border policy in the Hautes-Alpes. After Blessing, various other people died at this border on their flight.

For more information on the situation in Italy, see our Central Med Info and the previous issues of the 'Scirocco' on our [homepage](#).

Note to the readers of our Streiflicht Italy: Starting this year, our Streiflicht Italy will be published only twice a year with a new layout!

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