



MALTA



Malta's location, in the Mediterranean Sea at the entrance to the European Union, has made it a common port of disembarkation for thousands of migrants and asylum seekers setting off from the coast of Libya towards Europe. All migrants and asylum seekers arriving in Malta are systematically detained for up to 18 months. The prolonged detention and the conditions they are subjected to, both in detention and open centres, add to migrants' suffering and aggravate their physical and mental health. After more than one year providing healthcare mostly inside detention centres for migrants and asylum seekers, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) plans to focus its activities on psychological support.

CONTEXT

Over the past several years, migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe have found themselves trapped in Malta, an island with an area of 316 square kilometres and 400,000 inhabitants. Escaping conflict, deprivation or widespread violation of human rights, migrants travel mostly from Sub-Saharan countries to Libya, where they set off on a perilous sea crossing.

In 2008, more than 2,700 migrants and asylum seekers arrived in Malta. Between January and October 2009, 1,241 migrants and asylum seekers landed in Malta – more than half of the new arrivals were from Somalia and 10 percent came from Eritrea.

The Maltese government reception policy for migrants and asylum seekers is aimed at reassuring public opinion and acting as a deterrent against new landings. Upon arrival, all migrants and asylum seekers are systematically detained for up to 18 months. In the detention centres, they face overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and poor living conditions, an environment that has damaging effects on their health. Many migrants suffer from psychological trauma as a result of their experiences, the dangerous journey to Malta, life in detention and general uncertainty for the future. Yet, the provision of medical

care in the centres is limited and migrants in detention have no access to psychological care.

After their release from detention, migrants and asylum seekers are given a place in one of the 15 open centres on the island. There, they can move freely and begin to build a new life in Malta. But living independently and integration in Maltese society remain difficult and living conditions are still poor. Some centres are overcrowded and lack adequate water and sanitation facilities.

MSF IN MALTA

MSF started providing healthcare and psychological support to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers in Malta in August 2008. Initially, medical care was provided inside two detention centres for migrants: Safi and Lyster Barracks. Consultations in the centres quickly revealed how the appalling living conditions and a lack of access to healthcare - including mental health care - were endangering the physical and mental health of the detainees. Nearly 20 percent of all health conditions diagnosed by MSF medical staff were respiratory problems linked to exposure to cold and lack of treatment for infections. In March 2009, after repeatedly asking authorities to take measures to improve living conditions

inside the centres, MSF suspended its activities. At the same time, MSF published a report to expose the appalling conditions migrants were subjected to in Maltese detention centres. Before suspending its activities, MSF had provided medical care to 2,000 migrants and asylum seekers in these detention centres.

In June 2009, MSF resumed activities inside Takandja, the detention centre where migrants are taken upon arrival in Malta. Since then, MSF has provided more than 1,000 medical consultations inside the detention centre. Among the newly arrived migrants and refugees complaints are often a result of the harsh conditions of the journey to Malta. Most migrants have spent days on a boat, with limited food and water, unable to move, exposed to sun and rain. This leads to musculoskeletal, dermatological, urinary and gastrointestinal health problems.

Experiences in the countries of origin, the harsh journey, poor living conditions and uncertainty for the future contribute to a high incidence of mental health symptoms among migrants. Between July and September 2009, MSF conducted more than 300 psychological consultations. Problems ranged from insomnia and anxiety to depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and, in extreme cases, psychotic behavior.

In 2010, MSF activities will focus mostly on mental health care for migrants and asylum seekers. The services will be available for migrants both in detention and open centres. However, MSF will carry out consultations outside detention centres, to avoid MSF becoming a permanent presence in the Maltese detention centres. MSF will also document the situation of migrants and refugees through its mental health activities and engage in advocacy work.

All MSF activities are carried out with the help of cultural mediators, who speak the patients' language and are able to bridge cultural gaps between health worker and patient. The mediators also work in public health facilities to facilitate migrant access to healthcare on the island.

“The militia came to my house to kill my brother. They shot me in the shoulder. While I was pregnant, militia beat me and pushed me to the ground. I was seriously injured and was sent to the MSF clinic in Somalia. They had to remove my dead baby. I decided to leave. Otherwise, I would have died. The journey to Libya took about a year. I took the boat in 2006. Nobody could really imagine where we were going to land. Malta is very hard. All I really want is to be with my children. I hope to be allowed to live in a nice place and bring my children there.”

SOMALI WOMAN LIVING IN EX APPOGG OPEN CENTRE, MALTA. (SEPTEMBER 2009)



© PATRIK ZACHMANN/MAGNUM PHOTOS

“When we arrived in Malta, we had to pay for a mattress and a blanket. They deducted 30 Euros from the 130 a month we receive to buy food and live on. There are 10 bunk beds in my tent. There are holes in the tent roof and when it rains in winter, the water comes in. There is no electricity and it can be very cold. My father and my brother are dead. My wife is still in Somalia. It is hard to make a life for yourself and your family when they are still there?”

23 YEAR OLD RACHID IS A SOMALI CULTURAL MEDIATOR WORKING FOR MSF IN MALTA. HE SPENT 7 ½ MONTHS IN DETENTION AND NOW LIVES IN A TENT IN ONE OF MALTA'S OPEN CENTRES FOR MIGRANTS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS. (SEPTEMBER 2009)