

Italy's Forgotten Refugees

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TURIN – The abandoned Olympic village in the Lingotto district of Turin, colloquially known as the Ex Moi, was once the site of the city's largest fruits and vegetables market. Today, it is the home of close to 800 African refugees of 25 different ethnic groups who occupied the buildings two years ago, and who now find themselves in limbo after an Italian prosecutor granted the city's authorities an order to evict them.

Souley Soumana Amadou, a 28-year-old Nigerien, is one of them. Amadou grew up in Libya and arrived in Italy in 2011, but is quick to note, this was not a voyage he made of his own volition.

"The Libyan police sent us onto boats by using brutal force," Amadou recounts. "In that moment, we didn't even know where we were going. My family thought I was dead."

The story of the occupation of the pastel-coloured buildings of the ExMoi village – whose doors are still emblazoned with the Olympic rings – is a striking reminder of what its residents and others say are systematic shortcomings in Italy's efforts to assist and integrate refugees. And as European officials scramble to deal with the relentless tide of refugees making an often deadly journey across the choppy Mediterranean waters, the drama that unfolds in the Ex Moi village is a poignant illustration of how cities like Turin are struggling to cope with the masses that have already arrived.

If and when the refugees are evicted, many say they will have no other place to go.

Italy's already deficient system for hosting and processing refugees was thrown into sharp chaos in 2011, as tens of thousands of people fleeing a rapidly deteriorating security situation in North Africa began to arrive on the country's shores.

In an attempt to deal with what then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi described as a "human tsunami" engulfing the country, Italy launched the €1.3 billion North Africa Emergency Plan, which channelled arrivals into reception centres. By February 2013 however, the coffers were depleted, and the government announced the plan would expire abruptly. Many of the 13,000 people still held in those centres ended up on the streets without the proper documentation that would allow them to apply for jobs.

Others began arriving in Turin's Olympic village, a €140.5 million project that housed athletes for sixteen days during the 2006 Winter Olympics. It sat abandoned after the Games, its condition declining briskly as the city decided what to do with it.

"A lot of the time, we don't have hot water or heating in the winter," Amadou notes. "Some buildings lack electricity and some rooms made for two people are shared by entire families, but regardless, this is much better than what we've experienced elsewhere."

The Comitato Solidarietà Rifugiati e Migranti (CSRM), a refugee advocacy group, notes that nearly 30 per cent of the occupants of the Ex Moi village are women, while 10 per cent are children under the age of ten. The children receive Italian lessons at the Scuola Giordano Bruno three days each week. The CSRM says the refugees are a united group and any tensions between certain ethnic groups in Africa have not been transplanted in the village.

Nearly two years after the occupation of the ExMoi, an Italian judge issued an order to evict the refugees. And while it's not yet clear when or how the evictions will occur, this past week, Turin's city council passed a motion asking to hold deliberations about the time and manner of the village's "liberation" within thirty days.

The CSRM is not significantly panicked by this decision. "It will be difficult to decide what to do in thirty days," explained a representative of the group, before adding, "But it is indicative of a troubling line of thinking."

To be sure, some members of Italy's political class are of a much different opinion.

Maurizio Marrone, a regional councillor and member of Italy's right-wing Fratelli d'Italia party, believes the ExMoi represents "violence, degradation, and delinquency."

Last year, Fabrizio Ricca, who heads the Northern League in Piedmont, wished to test Marrone's hypothesis. He went undercover at the ExMoi in search of cocaine and marijuana. He found it and captured the entire operation on video – much is heard, but little is seen. The CSRM says it's impossible to determine where the video was filmed.

For Turin's Mayor Piero Fassino however, an intervention could exacerbate tensions. He believes it's unfair for the municipalities to be left alone to deal with these situations without the allocation of more resources from Rome.

The refugees themselves feel it is unjust that they are being blanket labelled in this way when only a few individuals have been arrested during anti-drug raids, and they have lived in relative stability for two years.

If the eviction happens, it will be the latest in what is seemingly becoming a widespread trend in Italy.

Last year, a number of refugees were evicted from the working-class neighbourhood of Tor Sapienza on the periphery of Rome. Last February witnessed the eviction of a Rom camp in Lungo Stura Lazio, a slum on the northern edge of Turin where more than 600 people live, in order to build a cycling path. And in late March, police evicted 15 squatting families, primarily of Eritrean and Ethiopian descent, from an apartment in Palermo.

The evictions may be a short-term Band-Aid for a serious problem given that migration to the country is not ceasing. The head of Frontex, the European border agency, has warned that close to a million migrants could be preparing to try to reach Italy this year.

Aboubakar Soumahoro, a trade unionist and member of the CSRM, is unwavering in his conviction that the refugees must continue the occupation. “We will not respond to the provocations of those that look to exploit our conditions for political stability. We are not talking about tourists, but about human beings who have had to flee from a war.”