

Articles in Le Soir by Lorraine Kihl

IN ITALY, SEARCHING FOR MISSING MIGRANT CHILDREN (26/10/2016)

Over 20,000 unaccompanied minors have arrived on Italian shores since the start of the year. Thousands have disappeared without a trace.

Alpha began taking night classes in Italian a few days ago. It does not fill up the entire day, but it's a start. The rest of the time: sleep, eat, TV, boredom, boredom, boredom. "When it's possible to go out, we go outside and we watch the traffic. There's not much to do actually." But after forced labour and prison in Libya, that's OK.

The 17-year old from Guinea lives with 24 other boys in a former police station in Catania, Sicily, that was converted into a reception centre two months ago. With 20,160 unaccompanied minors registered since the beginning of the year, according to Save the Children, "emergency" centres set up in parallel to the standard reception system have become the norm in the south of the country.

With few resources (the State provides 45 euros per child per day, compared to 60 to 80 in Belgium) and little organisation, the structures rely heavily on external support (volunteers, foundations, etc.) to provide suitable and complete services for minors: psychological assistance, educational and cultural activities, etc., which produces a lottery effect for young people. Overall, the south of the country, which is poorer, is at a great disadvantage: not only do the municipalities have fewer resources than those in the north, they also bear the bulk of arrivals. As such, Sicily alone hosts over 40% of unaccompanied minors. After three years of back and forth, a framework law that will streamline the system is set for a vote in Parliament on 25 October. It is a way to acknowledge politically the massive flows of minors as the norm and not the exception and ensure more protection and better follow-up of young people. Things are changing. Slowly.

"People told me that when we arrived here, things would be easy, recalls Ibrahim, 16 years old. That we could do what we wanted, study, that we would go to school." The boy is still processing the feeling of disillusion. The slow pace of the procedures does not help: consider family reunification, for example. The wait-time is measured in months, often it takes over a year. And for those who want to work, soon, to pay back a people smuggler or support their family, as is the case for most, the wait is incomprehensible.

So they take off, even at the risk of become clandestine.

The strategies differ depending on the nationality. "Eritreans and Somalis rarely stay longer than a few days, notes a youth worker. These are long-standing and very organised migrations. The children already know when they arrive where they will find the contact person for the next part of the journey. As for Egyptians...it depends.

"I ran away from the hospital."

In front of the procession of buses at the station in Catania, Sicily, a small group of Eritreans kill time around a bench. A pale 17-year old boy sitting cross-legged on the ground is leading the conversation. Biniam arrived only a few days ago and just ran away from the hospital he was sent to. On his skinny

wrist still hangs the paper bracelet with his name and blood type. “Do you know where I can get a coat? We’ll sleep somewhere on the grass tonight, but it gets cold at night.”

He has a brother in The Netherlands - or an uncle, it’s not very clear. In Rome, a “friend” is going to help him. He is adamant: he must go to Rome. As quickly as possible. But first, he needs a jacket for the night. He is waiting for “the Oxfam people” so that he can get one of the backpacks they hand out to migrants. “They’ll surely have a jacket for me.”

The “Oxfam people”, Andrea and Chiara, are talking a little farther away, visibly preoccupied. Biniam’s situation, and that of another teen accompanying him, Habtcom, presents them with a dilemma: the bags containing an arrival kit (towel, soap, socks, toothbrush, city map, etc., but no jacket) are exclusively intended for adults. “It’s important that we not substitute ourselves for reception centres”, explains Andrea.

Except that the two frail boys, if they are telling the truth, have no centre. They only have this idea of following the group of adult Eritreans to the park where they sleep. With night falling, it is time for a decision: OK for the bags, on the condition that Biniam and Habtcom spend the night at the emergency centre a few blocks away. The teens nod in agreement, repeat the address like good pupils, before taking off in the direction of the soup kitchen.

Chiara and Andrea, from Oxfam, deplore the lack of follow up: “Most minors will vanish into thin air.”

“Many unaccompanied minors hang around here during the day, explains Andrea as he watches the two silhouettes walking away. This is where they’ll be able to catch the bus north when they’ve got the money for the bus fare. We always tell them that there are legal solutions for them to reunite with their family in another country, that they will be better taken care of in reception centres. There is almost no way to follow up on them, but we mustn’t kid ourselves: most will vanish into thin air.”

In Rome, children on the street

Yonas tried playing by the rules of the system. A little bit. The 17-year old Eritrean is looking to join his brother, who has been living in Finland for two months now. A month went by, then a second. In the meantime, no file has been established for the boy, and he has not seen a translator. Two months spent trapped by his language, doing nothing.

“There is a feeling of urgency among all these young people: you must do things quickly, be the first one. They have the idea that with each day that passes, their odds of moving on to the next step have decreased, says Valentina Aquilino, coordinator for Civico Zero, a Save the Children project that helps unaccompanied minors that are in transit or living in Rome. And they don’t have faith in the system. Their understanding of what is going on should not be underestimated: the slow pace of procedures, the hostility of European governments towards them, tightened border controls, Brexit, etc.”

So without a ticket, he boarded a train for Milan, where he knew where to find a contact person. The police got him. He was scared, but he was just kicked off the train. The next train went to Rome. So Rome it was.

And the danger of being on the street.

Unlike other large cities in the north, the Italian capital refuses to set up a reception centre system for migrants in transit who do not intend to seek asylum. For a little over a year, a citizens' association has been compensating as best as it can by distributing hot meals, blankets, and offering a semblance of shelter near the Tiburtina train station where migrants congregate. But after being first expelled from their premises, then from the back alley where a makeshift operation pursued the effort, the volunteers now play a cat and mouse game with the police each night, as they come to disperse any gathering.

Near the train station, dozens of small groups of two or three migrants roam around carrying bags that contain their meagre belongings. Half are minors or very young adults, some barely pubescent. Two days earlier, they were able to sleep in the basilica garden, then on the lawn in front of the metal gate. For now, all reception centres are at capacity.

Italian authorities estimate that there are 6,357 unaccounted for minors. Although this number must be put in perspective, as some may re-enter the system by re-registering under another name in a northern city, it gives an idea of the magnitude of the phenomenon and the poor quality of the follow-up.

“We estimate that half of the children that we see passing through present a specific vulnerability: a health problem, a psychological problem, a situation where they are being exploited, or a learning difficulty - which is a real problem in a country where they do not speak the language, explains Valentina Aquilino. But what is important to understand is that ALL are very vulnerable. They are all under the control of the people smugglers, who have complete power over them.”

Exploitation, criminality...

Originally, these big cities were only passing-through points. Two days, one week maximum, the time to find some money and the contact person for the next part of the journey. But with the increased border controls, passing through has become much more difficult, and more expensive. “Young people now stay several weeks, sometimes months”, points out Michele Prospero of Save the Children.

And what's at stake is money.

In the best-case scenario, the family back home or a relative sends them some. In Yonas's case, it's his brother. But having barely arrived in Finland, he has not yet been able to come up with the entire amount. Then the boy will need to find a person he can trust - an adult with papers - to retrieve the transferred money. With the risk that this person will demand a commission... or take it all. “And if the family does not have the means, the children must turn to the underground economy,” explains Marco Cappuccino, the coordinator for the Civico Zero network, which is also present in Milan and Turin. Depending on the urgency and the amount necessary, this will involve work paid under the table for a ridiculously small amount, petty criminal acts, drug sales and, in rarer cases, prostitution. “For fieldworkers, it's touchy work. Earning the trust of young people requires time, sensitivity. It also involves keeping a clear distance from institutions.” The objective of Civico Zero is to operate in this risk

zone. Quickly providing a solution to basic needs: providing a safe place during the day, information on their legal rights, a place to talk, medical care, etc. And only when a situation seems to be critical do we alert social services or the police.” Since the start of the year, the centre has seen over 1,200 children come through its doors. And the same observation is made as elsewhere: minors are getting younger and younger.

Taha, “everyone in Sicily knows him now”.

In the San Giovanni reception centre, in Catania, he’s a real dynamo. He yacks all the time, turns around, nabs a camera, hugs a teacher, focuses on his pictures, asks a question, comes back... Youth workers have stopped running after him. “Taha!” Since arriving in Sicily when he was 13, Taha has made the rounds of reception centres. He ran away each time. Except here.

“Arriving in Italy was very tough on him, explains Glaoco La Martina, the director of the cooperative that manages the centre. He was very scared. One night, while staying at a reception centre, he ran off to steal a small rescue boat. He wanted to return to Egypt. He was found by fisherman in the open sea, the next day.”

The staff at Cooperativa Prospettiva was able to locate his older brother, also a minor. Taha left to be with his brother... and things did not turn out well. He ran away and returned to Catania.” But we had no more room for him here so we sent him to another centre. Each time, he held out one, two days. Everyone in Sicily knows him now, even the railway police.”

Before Europe, working to death in Libya

Bakary and Alpha crossed over together from Libya on 7 August. They travelled on a small inflatable dinghy in which people smugglers had crammed in 126 persons. They talk about their life in Libya.

“We were picked up with other Senegalese to go find gold in the Sahara”, relates Bakary. He was 14 when he started working in Libya. “For three months we dug holes in the sand, 25, 30 metres deep. We didn’t find anything. Afterwards, I stayed to work as a day labourer to pay for the crossing (815 euros).” They were exhausting construction site jobs that paid 4 to 10 euros a day. Fifteen euros for the most physically demanding and most dangerous. Daily life in Libya meant a constant fear of being beaten, arrested or killed. “There is no government over there, it’s just terrorists. Even children are armed.”

“Shortly after my arrival, they caught me and I spent three months in prison, explains Alpha. Then I started working a little again. One night, Libyans attacked the camp where I lived with other workers. They were shooting at everybody... I was living with two friends, brothers. They died.”

Karamo (The Gambia, 18 years old)

Karamo is 18. He has been in Italy for over three years now, he's had time to integrate. Does he have friends? He thinks about it a little. "When I feel sad, I go see these boys in the city. They stayed at the centre too but are a little older than me and live outside now. They're also from The Gambia. So I ask them to tell me about my country. I was 8 or 9 when I left - first for Senegal and then the neighbouring countries. I have some memories but it's all very vague. When I listen to them talk about The Gambia, it's as if I'm reconnecting with who I am, a little bit."

By the end of the year, Karamo should be done with nautical school in Catania - he's at the top of his class. He'll be able to work as a ship mechanic. "I always wanted to be a sailor, travel. Travel especially, in fact. We're learning, at least as much as in school. I think I'll like it."

Yonas: "I don't even have a dollar left".

Yonas, 17, has a sentence written on his forearm, rough lines like a marker, but no, it's a tattoo: "I love you mam". "I left home when I was 15. The first months in Ethiopia were horrible. I missed my mother so much. I wanted to go back, but my friends convinced me to keep going. That's when they gave me that tattoo."

His mother and three sisters stayed in Eritrea. His father has been on active duty fulfilling his military service obligation... since 1998. His father is there on his hand, in a tattooed symbol that represents the first letter of three first names: his own, his father's and his best friend's.

"I feel stronger now that I'm older. So things are better. I want to be able to help my family, and soon." The trip cost his family and community a fortune: 1,600 dollars to reach Sudan, then another 1,600 to go to Libya and 2,200 for Italy. "I don't even have a dollar left."

12 HOURS OF WORK WITHOUT A BREAK FOR 30 EUROS (26/10/2016)

The fate of unaccompanied minors from Egypt used as cheap labour is cause for concern

If the worry about unaccompanied minors in Italy is increasing, it's because the numbers are distressing. The number who have arrived already greatly exceeds the total for 2015. The share of unaccompanied minors among the total number of migrants has almost doubled in a year, going from 8 to 15%.

An anomaly among anomalies: Egyptians. In 2015, two thirds of Egyptian migrants were unaccompanied minors. Field workers denounce a vast network that exploits children as cheap labour.

"Egyptian minors leave the system to re-enter it better: they leave their centre, go up to Rome, Turin, where there are established communities, then approach police and enter a new reception centre", relates Michele Prospero of Save the Children. Like Amr, 18 years old today, who has been living in Rome for a year. He dreams of a less "hectic" job in his future. Hectic? "I worked in a car wash for a while. 12

hours of work in full sun and without a break for 30 euros. It was horrible.” According to the youth workers of Civico Zero, the day centre he attends, he’s actually rather lucky. At markets, also run by Egyptians, a day’s pay for minors does not exceed 10 euros.

It’s a well-run operation, explains Marco Cappuccino, the coordinator for the Civico Zero network. “Before, families would sacrifice something of value to come up with the sum allowing their child to cross the Mediterranean. But now, more and more, they go into debt directly with the people smugglers.” The contract implies that reimbursement begins from the moment the child indicates that he is safely in Italy. “The people smugglers then put pressure on the family to collect what they are owed. That’s why minors are so desperate to work, yet it’s completely incompatible with the system.”

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 15% of Egyptian minors who arrived in Italy in 2015 already had a “job” waiting for them before they even landed.

“They now go directly to Sicily to find children when a spot opens here”, laments David, a social worker from Turin. For two years, he has watched helplessly as children are exploited in markets, kebabs shops and even industry. “And when they become adults and need an employment contract to stay in Italy, no problem, but they have to pay for it.”

“Egyptian minors have started showing up in drug trafficking convictions, notes a street youth worker from Turin. That may be an indicator that they are also turning up in this market.”

For associations, as for the authorities, dealing with this phenomenon is extremely difficult. First, because even if young people are trusting enough to talk, no one is ready to take the risk of being an informant and, second, because the migrant intake and integration system is not designed to deal with the indebtedness problem of young people and their families (a crossing from Egypt costs between 3,000 and 5,000 dollars, according to the IOM). And any action of this type risks encouraging people smugglers.