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Immigrants sail into Italian election battle

By Gideon Long

SAN FOCA, Italy, May 7 (Reuters) - Michael Mbom sits alone in the sunlit courtyard of his strange new home, oblivious to the Bengali, Urdu and Arabic voices which fill the spring air.

He says he has little in common with the Bangladeshis and Pakistanis who share his living space behind the high wire fences of the Regina Pacis immigration centre.

They, he says, are economic migrants while he is a refugee from war-torn Sierra Leone. It is simply fate which brought them to Europe on the same ship.

Calmly, quietly, he recounts his story.

He says he fled fighting in Sierra Leone to neighbouring Guinea and from there was smuggled aboard a cargo ship with a promise of a passage to Europe.

He and four compatriots spent three months in the ship's hold. They were fed by the crew only sporadically and for one period of four days he says they had neither food nor water.

Then, he says, they were herded on to dry land at night and told to run across a quayside in the dark and board another ship. Only later did he find out he was in Turkey.

For a further week, Mbom sat in the hold of the second vessel watching it fill with immigrants - "Bangladeshi people, brown people, people from all parts of the world".

The ship finally left port and days later Mbom emerged into blinding sunlight to find he was in Gallipoli, a sleepy port on the southern tip of Italy.

"It is miraculous that we are here," says Mbom, a 27-year-old student. "We don't know what they'll do to us...and we don't know if we'll be sent back."

Mbom is one of thousands of illegal immigrants who wash up on the docksides and beaches of southern Italy each year.

Of the 26,817 who - according to the Interior Ministry - made the journey in 2000, nearly 19,000 landed in Puglia, the sparsely populated province which stretches up the Adriatic calf and heel of boot-shaped Italy.

They are taken to reception centres where they are registered, questioned and divided into groups. Asylum seekers, many of them Kurds and Iraqis, are sent to certain centres while economic migrants are housed in others.

Some are thrown out of Italy immediately, others are allowed to remain on political grounds. Many are kept in centres for 30 days, after which time Italy is obliged to "repatriate" them.

But repatriation in these cases is an illusion.

The Italian government has no intention of funding their return to the developing world and the immigrants, who have already paid a fortune to get here, are in no position to pay for their return journey.

"Repatriation effectively means this," says Don Cesare Lodeserto, a former Roman Catholic missionary who runs the Regina Pacis centre. "We keep them here for 30 days and then we take them down to the main gate, open it and let them leave. We're in no position to do anything else."

It is that sense of helplessness in the face of a relentless tide which has made immigration one of the key issues of an Italian general election to be held on Sunday.

The Northern League, allied to centre-right opposition leader Silvio Berlusconi, has proposed giving coastguards carte blanche to shoot at dinghies and speedboats which ferry their illicit human cargoes across the Adriatic to Italy.

Don Cesare is unconvinced.

"There are some people who want to send all these people back where they came from but that's an absurdity," he says as he strolls the corridors of the centre.

"This is a European problem, not just an Italian one, and every country in the European Union has adopted a hot potato policy on it - they just hope immigrants will go somewhere else.

"We need unified policies on this issue. We've had them on the single currency and mad cow. Why not immigration?"

Only a handful of those who arrive in Puglia are genuine political refugees. The vast majority are seeking a job and a higher standard of living in Europe.

Few stay in Puglia, where unemployment stands at 16 percent. They head for Rome and the industrialised north, where the chances of finding work are higher.

"I want a good future, I want work," says a 28-year-old Punjabi immigrant who identifies himself only as Kamaljit. "I don't mind where it is - in Britain, France, Italy - and I am ready to do anything."

Ironically, many industrialists in northern Italy are crying out for people like Kamaljit to do the low-paid, low-skilled jobs which locals will no longer do.

But the idea of giving work to immigrants is anathema to many southern Italians, whose ancestors suffered crippling unemployment and who have precious little work themselves.

"How can the government even think of doing that," says Silverio Bascia, a construction worker who heads for Rome and the north whenever work dries up in his native Puglia. "Those jobs should go to Italians."

Bascia's problem is that he, like thousands of young Italians, has been priced out of the labour market.

"When I was in Rome I earned 200,000 lire (\$92) a day working on building sites," he says as he passes time with a friend in a square in the port of Otranto. "In Puglia, I would only earn 100,000 lire for the same day's work.

"The problem is that the Romanians I was working with accepted only 80,000 a day," he explained.

"That's not enough for me to live on but it is for them because they have their own support networks. That's why the government does nothing to stop immigrants - because they're a source of cheap labour."

Immigration is an emotive issue in Italy, which for more than a century sent forth millions of its sons and daughters to seek a better life elsewhere.

A recent survey showed that a third of Italians view it as their greatest worry - a point not lost on the politicians clamouring for their votes.

But according to Don Cesare, a change of government in Rome will change nothing in Puglia.

"Both sides are in the same position because both fear immigrants," he says. "The right fears them because it feels they foment social disorder, the left because it feels it can't control them any more.

"They fear them because they know immigration has become a big issue," he says. "It can make or break a government."

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