



THE TORTURE FACTORY

Report on Human Rights Violations Against Migrants and Refugees in Libya (2014-2020)

March **2020**



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Cover image

Alessio Romenzi ©UNICEF/UN052682

Issaa, a 14-year-old migrant from Niger, rests his hand on a gate inside one of the detention centres, Libya 2017

Graphics

Laura Galli Studio redDotgrafica

We thank all migrants and refugees who shared their story and made this report possible.

Thanks to all the operators and volunteers who over the course of 6 years have daily collected stories and testimonies in the MEDU projects in Italy and Africa. Special thanks to cultural mediators for their irreplaceable work.

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Medici per i Diritti Umani – MEDU (Doctors for Human Rights Italy) is a non-profit humanitarian and international solidarity organization, independent of political, trade union, religious and ethnic affiliations. MEDU aims to bring health aid to the most vulnerable populations, in crisis situations in Italy and abroad, and to develop, within civil society, democratic and participatory spaces for the promotion of the right to health and other human rights. The actions of MEDU are based on civil society militancy, on the professional and voluntary commitment of doctors and other health workers, as well as citizens and professionals from other disciplines.

To the witnesses, to their courage
and their humanity

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Introduction

*These terrible things are happening now.
You have to go to prisons in Libya
to go and free who is inside!*

F., 24 years old from Sudan, February 2020

From 2014 to today (February 2020) 660 thousand migrants have landed in Italy. About 90% of them have passed through Libya from the countries of West Africa or the Horn of Africa, with a minority coming from some non-African countries such as Syria and Bangladesh. According to the data from the International Organization for Migrants (IOM), there were about 636 thousand migrants present in Libya in December of 2019, while 48 thousand refugees and asylum seekers are currently registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)¹. Libyan legislation continues to consider the entry, exit or irregular stay in the country by foreign citizens a crime, without making any distinction between asylum seekers/refugees, migrants or victims of trafficking.

Libya is not party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its Protocol and has no asylum legislation or established asylum procedure. As a result, all non-Libyan people, regardless of their status, fall under national immigration laws. Only persons belonging to the nine nationalities that the Libyan authorities recognize as eligible for international protection can be registered as asylum seekers: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

To date, there are 11 detention centres for migrants and refugees formally controlled by the authorities of the Government of National Accord (GNA) operating², while over the past few years 63 detention centres have been surveyed throughout Libyan territory³. From 2014 to today, tens of thousands of migrants and refugees have passed through these centres, while according to the latest estimates, about 2,800 foreign citizens are still imprisoned in these facilities, 1,700 of which are under UNHCR mandate⁴. In addition to the official centres, a myriad of informal places of detention managed by large and small criminal organizations have proliferated over the years, likely receiving hundreds of thousands of migrants. There are no reliable estimates of how many people are currently being held against their will in these facilities. It is presumed that the number is much greater than the number of prisoners in official centres.

¹ UNHCR UPDATE, LIBYA, 28 FEBRUARY 2020 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74314>

² UNHCR, February 2020

³ Global Detention Project, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/libya>

⁴ UNHCR (January 2020). The detention centres where refugees and asylum seekers registered by UNHCR are located are: Al Sabaa, Janzur, Triq al Seka, Al-Nasr (Az-Zawiyah), Az-Zawiyah Abu Issa, Zuwara, Daher Al Jabal, Al Khums, Suq Alkhamis, Zliten

This report is based primarily on the direct testimonies of migrants and refugees who have passed through Libya. The stories have been collected by the operators of Medici per i Diritti Umani – MEDU (Doctors for Human Rights Italy) over the past six years. The reliability of the information provided by the witnesses was verified on the basis of the objective evidence available such as the actual existence of the detention centres in the places and times reported, the existence of testimonies, information, and third party reports to either confirm or disprove what they have said. The organizations mentioned were directly consulted to verify their actual presence in the places at the times reported in the testimonies. Overall, the stories collected show a significant correlation with respect to the places, perpetrators and types of violence that took place inside and outside the detention centres despite the fact that they were collected by different operators in different places and times. We believe they constitute a powerful witness of the tragic human rights abuses that have been taking place in recent years on the migratory routes that lead to Europe through Libya.

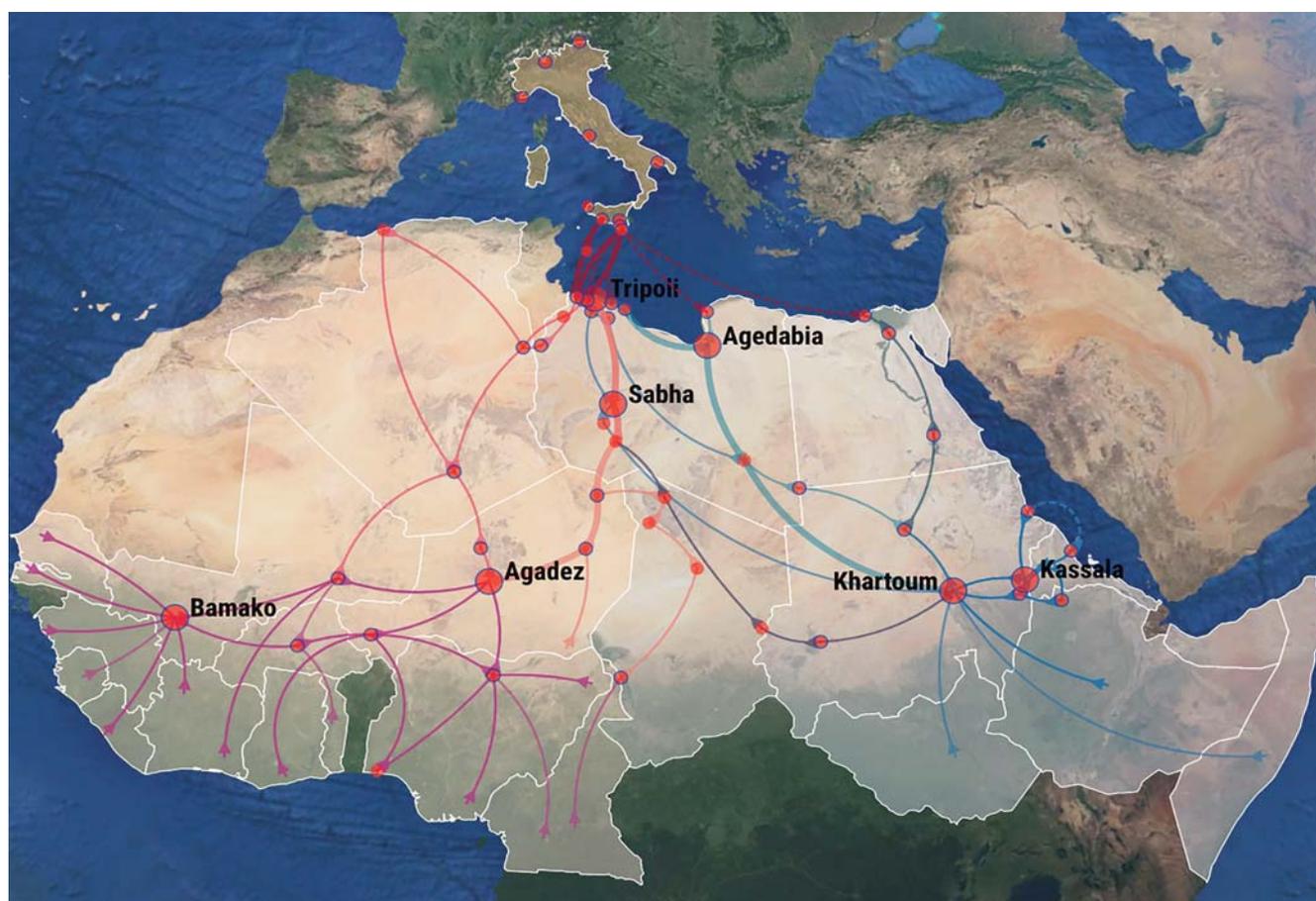
The witnesses

The Torture Factory is based on over three thousand direct testimonies of migrants and refugees who have transited through Libya. The stories were collected by the operators of MEDU over six years (2014-2020). After careful analysis, 50 testimonies were selected for inclusion in this report, which powerfully illustrate the systemic human rights violations taking place in this country. To protect the identity of the witnesses, fictional initials have been used in place of their real names. The interviews took place with informed consent and were held on an individual basis with the help of a cultural mediator.

These testimonies were collected primarily in Sicily, in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, in the reception centres (CAS) of the province of Ragusa, in the reception centre for asylum seekers (CARA) in Mineo (Catania), in the multifunctional centre of Ragusa where the MEDU clinic is located. Other testimonies were collected in Rome, in informal reception facilities, and at the Psychè Centre for the rehabilitation of torture victims. Additional testimonies were collected in Agadez, Niger, at the humanitarian site for refugees set up by UNHCR. In all these places MEDU works to provide first medical assistance to migrants and refugees and/or medical-psychological rehabilitation services for those who survived torture and inhuman and degrading treatment.

Figure 1. Migration routes from sub-Saharan Africa drawn on the basis of the testimonies collected by MEDU

(<http://esodi.mediciperidiritiumani.org/>)



The average age of migrants and refugees (88% male and 12% female) assisted and interviewed by MEDU is 26. Among them over 300 minors (13%), were met in the informal settlements of Rome and at the Agadez humanitarian site. The people assisted in Sicily were all asylum seekers living in institutional centres or temporarily hosted in the Hotspot of Pozzallo. In Rome, those assisted were migrants in transit to other European countries, asylum seekers and refugees, and migrants with other residence permits or with irregular status. In Niger, those assisted were asylum seekers hosted at the humanitarian site. The main countries from which witnesses came are Eritrea, Nigeria, Gambia, Sudan, Senegal, Ethiopia, Mali, Ivory Coast, Somalia.

Among those who come from East Africa, the main reasons for leaving the country of origin are conflicts (Sudan) or serious violations of fundamental freedoms and rights (Eritrea). The factors driving migration from the countries of West Africa, according to interviews conducted by MEDU, are primarily political or religious persecution, with economic reasons being mentioned by a small minority (11%) of immigrants.

Torture, inhuman and degrading treatment and their psycho-physical consequences

According to data collected by MEDU, between 2014 to 2020, 85% of migrants and refugees from Libya suffered torture and inhuman and degrading treatment in that country, 79% were detained in overcrowded facilities with poor hygienic conditions, 75% suffered from constant deprivation of food, water and medical care, and 65% experienced serious and repeated beatings. In addition, a smaller, but still significant number of people, suffered sexual rape, burns caused with many different tools, *falaka* (beatings on the soles of the feet), electric shocks and positional torture, being forced to maintain stressful positions (handcuffing, position in standing for a long time, hanging upside down, etc.). These gross violations of human rights have continued, and they even intensified since 2017, when the Italy-Libya deal on migrants was signed.

All detained migrants and refugees suffered constant humiliation and other forms of degrading treatment, including outrageous religious persecution. Nine out of ten migrants said they had seen someone die, be killed or tortured. Some survivors were forced to torture other migrants to avoid being killed. There were numerous testimonies of migrants being forced to labour under conditions of slavery for months or years. These data, which are probably even underestimated, represent, in our opinion, a faithful picture of the systematic violence to which almost all migrants and refugees who come from Libya to our country are subjected.

A clinical study conducted by MEDU and recently published in the European Journal of Psychotraumatology confirms this overall data⁵. The 120 participants in the study were all asylum seekers and refugees who came to the MEDU clinical centres seeking treatment for mental and emotional issues related to traumatic events that occurred in their country of origin or along the migratory route, particularly in Libya. The patients included in this study (average age 25 years; 86% men, 14% women) came from 19 African countries: Nigeria (26.7%); Ivory Coast (15.8%); Gambia (11.7%); Senegal (9.2%); Ghana (8.3%); Guinea Conakry, Sierra Leone (5.0%); Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Somalia (2.5%); Cameroon, Egypt, Mali, Morocco (1.7%); Benin, Congo-Brazaville, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Sudan (0.8%). Overall, the majority of asylum seekers and refugees came from West Africa (90.8%) and to a lesser extent from North Africa (5.8%) and East Africa (3.3%). All patients had survived multiple cases of serious abuse, the most frequent of which were torture (81%), deprivation of food and water (77%) and detention (64%).

Among this group of patients, 92% had reached Italy from sub-Saharan Africa, crossing the Sahara Desert, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea along migratory routes controlled by smugglers and traffickers; 5% came from North Africa and had crossed the Mediterranean on makeshift boats. Only 3% had reached Italy by flight or scheduled ferry. Most of them were asylum seekers (94%), while only 6% had obtained a residence permit for international or humanitarian protection.

⁵ Barbieri A, Visco-Comandini F, Alunni Fegatelli D, et al. Complex trauma, PTSD and complex PTSD in African refugees. *Eur J Psychotraumatol*. 2019;10(1):1700621. Published 2019 Dic 10. doi:10.1080/20008198.2019.1700621

<i>Traumatic event</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Torture	97	80,8
Lack of food or water	92	76,7
Imprisonment	77	64,2
Non-sexual assault	72	60,0
Lack of shelter	68	56,7
Murder of one or more strangers	56	46,7
Disappearance or kidnapping	51	42,5
Being close to death	48	40,0
Serious physical injury	42	35,0
Ill health without access to medical care	41	34,2
Murder of a family member or friend	36	30,0
Unnatural death of a family member or friend	29	24,2
Forced separation from family member	25	20,8
Non-sexual assault by a family member or someone you know	22	18,3
Sexual assault by a stranger	19	15,8
Serious accident, fire or explosion	17	14,2
Enforced isolation from others	16	13,3
Life-threatening illness	15	12,5
Combat situation	14	11,7
Sexual contact when you were younger than 18 with someone who was 5 or more years older than you	9	7,5
Sexual assault by a family member or someone you know	8	6,7
Brainwashing	6	5,0
Natural disaster	1	0,8

Table 1. Traumatic events reported by asylum seekers and refugees (Barbieri et al., 2019)

Among migrants, asylum seekers and refugees assisted within the MEDU medical-psychological rehabilitation projects for the victims of torture in Sicily and Rome (about 800 patients), 80% still had physical sequelae consistent with the reported violence. Moreover, in addition to the physical signs there are, often more insidious and invalidating, the psychological and psychopathological consequences of intentional violence. Among the mental disorders most frequently detected by MEDU doctors and psychologists, there are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other disorders related to traumatic events but also depressive disorders, trauma-related somatization, anxiety and sleep disorders. Unfortunately, these ailments often receive less attention than physical illnesses as they are frequently ignored or not promptly diagnosed. This results in a worsening and chronic clinical picture, causing serious difficulties on the integration path of migrants and refugees in the host countries.

According to the MEDU study published in the European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 79% of patients had PTSD. Among the most frequent symptoms: recurrent intrusive memories and/or nightmares of traumatic events; persistent strong negative feelings (fear, horror, anger, guilt, shame); difficulty concentrating; feelings of estrangement and detachment from others; hypervigilance and exaggerated alarm responses; loss of interest and participation in significant activities; severe insomnia. A third of the patients also had a particularly severe form of PTSD, called complex post-traumatic disorder (CPTSD) characterized by important alterations in affective regulation, negative self-concept, and disturbed interpersonal relationships.

The epidemiological profile of the patients assisted by the MEDU team operating at the Agadez humanitarian site in Niger presents a similar but even more severe picture. During 2019, the clinical team, made up of doctors and psychologists, assisted 188 refugees with post traumatic psychological distress. The patients, mostly from Darfur (Sudan), had all transited through Libya where they had suffered torture and serious abuse, almost always in a state of detention or abduction, before reaching Agadez between 2017 and 2018 (see map 2). For many of them, the violence suffered in Libya represented a serious factor of re-traumatization after the atrocities that had already experienced during the conflict in Darfur. Eight out of ten patients had PTSD and over half had complex post-traumatic disorder (51%). Among these patients, 28% had major depressive disorder.

The network of exploitation

Over the years, a vast, heterogeneous and widespread network of exploitation of migrants and refugees has been organized in Libya, managed both by highly organized criminal groups, elements belonging to militias, armed forces and police and by small gangs or individuals. However, the boundaries between these groups are often non-existent and it is therefore difficult to understand where one starts and the other ends. Human smuggling and trafficking in Libya has become in these years of socio-political chaos a sort of swamp, in which even a single individual can exploit migrants and refugees, through kidnappings, forced labour, or extortion of money. In fact, today in Libya "the industry of exploitation of migrants" is one of the main sources of income throughout the country.

The migrants and refugees interviewed by MEDU have identified a large set of abuses and violence perpetrated in Libya by different actors:

- police officers, who after arresting migrants often subject them to beatings and torture.
- military or militiamen, who inflict cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, serious abuse and torture to migrants and refugees detained in prisons, detention centres or military camps.
- groups of professional traffickers and criminal gangs such as the Asma Boys, who manage the so-called *ghettos* or "special places" where migrants are kidnapped and tortured for extortion purposes. The same groups are responsible for violent attacks with firearms, sticks and knives in the streets, inside the migrant gathering places on the migratory routes (the so-called *foyers* or connection houses) and in private houses.
- Libyan civilians and businessmen who can exploit migrants by compelling them to work in conditions of real slavery.
- Libyan citizens or even sub-Saharan nationals (employed by Libyan traffickers) who manage *ghettos*, *foyers* and connection houses and who use violence against those who are unable to pay the monthly rent.

The violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees kidnapped by criminal groups, but also in places of detention with an appearance of legitimacy (police stations, prisons, detention centres), mostly aim to extort money from victims in exchange for their release. In many cases, however, the atrocities committed also have reasons of racial and religious hatred. Finally, in the perverse logic of concentration camps, violence often occurs solely based on the whims and sadism of the guards or jailers. In all places of detention and/or kidnapping, migrants and refugees are often forced into labour, for months or years, in conditions of real slavery.

Official and non-official detention centres

Applicable Libyan laws criminalize all irregular entry, stay, or exit, for example without the appropriate documentation or through unofficial border posts, without distinguishing between asylum-seekers/refugees, migrants, or victims of trafficking. Violations are penalized with an undefined prison sentence with “hard labour” or a fine of approximately 1,000 Libyan Dinars (621 euros, ed) and eventually deportation once the sentence is completed⁶. Many irregular migrants, or suspected of being, are picked up at roadblocks, on the street, during raids inside homes or are reported to the authorities by their employers. Thousands are held in official, state-run detention centres operated by the Department for Combating Irregular Migration (DCIM, a division of the Libyan Ministry of Interior), in detention for an indefinite time pending expulsion.

Following their interception or rescue at sea (central Mediterranean), people are handed over by the Libyan Coast Guard to the DCIM authorities, who transfer them directly to the detention centres managed by the government. Although these facilities officially depend on the Ministry of the Interior, they are often managed by militias and armed groups operating outside the effective control of the GNA. Alongside the so-called official centres, there are a myriad of places of abduction and informal detention controlled by armed groups and criminal networks throughout Libya. Appalling living conditions, systematic abuse and indiscriminate violence are characteristics common to official and unofficial centres. In many cases, the only way to escape is to pay a ransom.

While in April 2019 there were 17 detention centres (with about 7,000 migrants and refugees detained) that the GNA formally controlled through the DCIM⁷, today it is estimated that only 11 official detention centres are still operational with about 2,800 people detained⁸. Moreover, on the basis of some testimonies recently collected by MEDU, it seems that there are many alternative detention centres, controlled by various Libyan authorities, which are not included in these numbers. In this regard, the IOM recently declared that it no longer had news of about 600 migrants intercepted at sea in early January, later brought back to Libya by the Coast Guard and transferred to a facility controlled by the Libyan Ministry of Interior⁹. It is also impossible to know the real number of the people held in informal places of detention, a figure certainly much higher than that of prisoners in official centres. A recent report talked about “40,000 people living in makeshift detention centres in Libya”¹⁰.

From 2014 to 2020, MEDU operators collected testimonies of migrants detained both in official centres and in informal detention places in Sabha, Al-Qatrun, Tripoli, Janzur, Zawia, Surman, Sabratha, Zuwara, Al Khums, Misrata, Ajdabiya, Tazirbu, Gharyan, Bani Walid, Ash Shwayrif, Nasmah.

⁶ UNHCR (2018). UNHCR position on returns to Libya. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b8d02314.html>

⁷ UNHCR, April 2019

⁸ UNHCR, February 2020

⁹ OIM, February 2020 <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-calls-international-community-urgent-action-find-alternatives-disembarkation-libya>

¹⁰ Al Jazeera, January 2020 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/40-000-people-living-makeshift-detention-centres-libya-200125093802764.html>

Figure 2: Map of detention centres in the Tripoli region drawn on the basis of the testimonies collected by MEDU



-  - Unofficial detention places
-  - Official detention centres
-  - Boarding points
-  - Sea routes
-  - Route from Sabha to Ajdabiya

Length of detention - Identity of the jailers / kidnappers (MEDU testimonies; sample = 512 people)

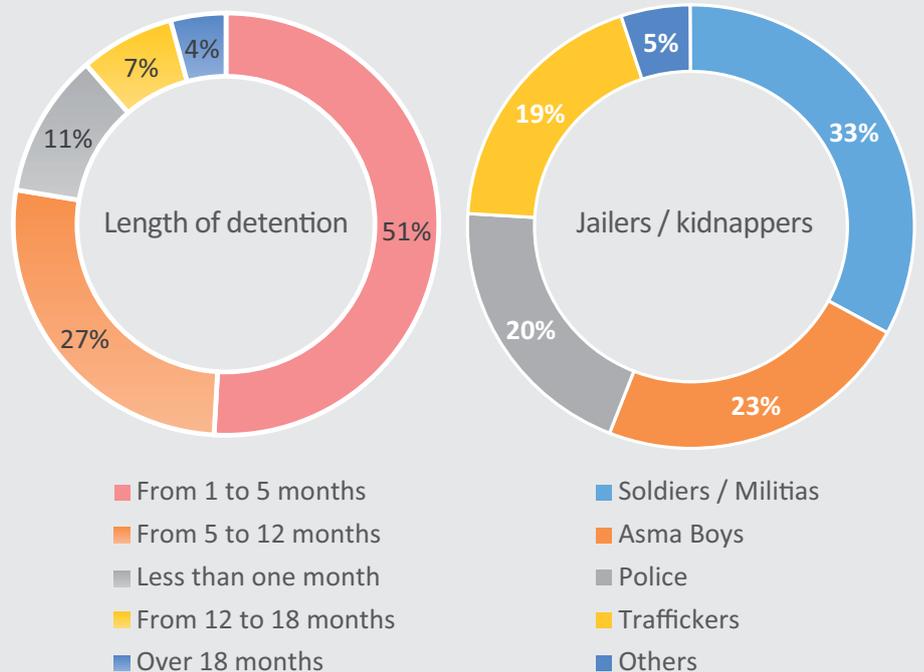


Figure 3: Map of detention centres in Libya drawn on the basis of the testimonies collected by MEDU



 - Unofficial detention places

 - Routes from sub-Saharan Africa to Libya

 - Official detention centres

 - Route from Libya to Niger

Name of the detention centre	Location	Characteristics
Tajoura	Tripoli	Government centre managed by the DCIM with a standard capacity of 500 people (2017). Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR (2018). Not operational *
Triq al Seka	Tripoli	Government centre managed by the DCIM with a standard capacity of 1,000 people (2016). Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR (2018). Operational
Salah Aldin	Tripoli	Government centre managed by the DCIM with a standard capacity of 600 people (2016). Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR (2018). Not operational (2019)
Abu Salim	Tripoli	Government centre managed by the DCIM with a standard capacity of 1,200 people (2017). Access by UN organizations: OIM (2014) and UNHCR (2015). Custodial authority: DCIM. Operational
Ain Zara	Tripoli	Government centre managed by the DCIM with a standard capacity of 900 people (2017). Access by UN organizations: OIM. Custodial authority: militia known as Battalion 42 or "al-Sheikh". Not operational (2019)
Janzur	Tripoli	Government centre managed by the DCIM. Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR (2018). Custodial authority: Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration (Ministry of the Interior). Operational
Mitiga	Tripoli	Centre with a standard capacity of 600 people. Not operational
Al Sabaa	Tripoli	Government centre managed by the DCIM. Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR (2018). Operational
Al-Nasr (Az-Zawiyah) "Ossama Prison"	Zawia	Centre run by militias called al-Nasr Brigades, the DCIM and the police. Access by UN organizations: OIM (2017) and UNHCR*. Custodial authority: al-Nasr Brigades, DCIM, Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration (Ministry of Interior). Operational
Az-Zawiyah Abu Issa	Zawia	Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR* (2018). Operational
Surman	Surman	Centre managed by the DCIM. Access by UN organizations: OIM (2015). Custodial authority: DCIM, Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration (Ministry of the Interior). Not operational (2019)
Sabratha	Sabratha	Centre managed by the DCIM. Access by UN organizations: OIM (2018). Custodial authority: DCIM, Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration (Ministry of the Interior). Operational
Zuwara	Zuwara	Government centre managed by the DCIM. Custodial authority: DCIM, Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration (Ministry of the Interior). Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR (2018). Operational
Gharyan	Gharyan	Government centre managed by the DCIM. Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR (2018). Custodial authority: DCIM. Not operational
Daher Al Jabal	Zintan	Government centre managed by the DCIM. Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR* (2018). Operational
Bani Walid	Bani Walid	Custodial authority: Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration (Ministry of Interior). Not operational (2016)
Khums	Khums	Government centre managed by the DCIM. Custodial authority: Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration (Ministry of the Interior). Access by UN organizations: OIM (2019). Not operational
Kararim	Misurata	Government centre managed by the DCIM. Custodial authority: DCIM, Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration (Ministry of the Interior). Access by UN organizations: OIM and UNHCR (2018). Not operational *

Table 2. Official detention centres mentioned in the testimonies collected by MEDU (Source: Global Detention Project) * Source UNHCR

Fezzan, southern Libya:

Sabha and Al-Qatrun

Sabha

It is an oasis city in south-western Libya, approximately 640 kilometres south of Tripoli. It was historically the capital of the Fezzan region. Given its strategic position in the Libyan desert, Sabha was until the last century a major hotspot of the Libyan caravan trade crossing the Sahara. Since the nineties of twentieth century it has been the arrival point of the so-called “way of hell”, a track that crosses the desert and brings sub-Saharan migrants from Niger to Libya. In Sabha and Tripoli there are several gathering places for migrants and refugees (*foyers*, connection houses), often organized according to nationalities or geographical areas of origin. These places are managed by smugglers and traffickers: Libyan citizens or sub-Saharan nationals working for Libyan heads. Many migrants are reported to have paid a certain sum to stay in these places at the end of the month. Despite paying a “rent”, *foyers* and connection houses are unsafe and are often subject to attacks by criminal groups who steal migrants or kidnap them for extortion. Instead, the so-called *ghettos* are places of detention and kidnapping managed by Asma Boys and other criminal groups where migrants and refugees suffer violence and serious abuse.

“In January 2016 I arrived in Sabha, where I was kidnapped and taken to a prison called “Ali Ghetto”. I don't know the identity of the people who took me, but they spoke Arabic. I was in a cell with 150 other inmates. They gave us very little food, a soup of water and flour (bankou), more or less a portion for about twenty people. To drink they gave us dirty water. They didn't give us food every day. The jailers asked us for a ransom; those who didn't have the necessary money, including myself (W.U. shows signs of torture suffered, ed), were tortured daily with electric shocks. It was painful to the limit of human endurance. I remember that the skin swelled and was injured by the violent shocks inflicted. Some of us passed out, and to wake us up the jailers threw buckets of cold water on us. Every morning the guards came back and checked to find out who hadn't paid yet. Those who had not been able to pay were again made to lie on the ground, and were beaten, whipped and tortured with electric shocks. At other times the guards arrived at unexpected times and beat everyone if they felt there was too much confusion. I was in the Nigerian ghetto, and the head of the centre was the Nigerian man called Rambo. I later learned that there were ghettos for every nationality, but all of them were part of the great Ghetto of Ali. The man who called people who couldn't pay was called Old Burker. I've been locked up there for 8 weeks.”

W.U., 19 years old, Nigeria.

Testimony collected in Rome at the Psyché Centre, February 2017

“Libya was hell. I am cursed, I’m actually cursed. In Sabha they took me and brought me to prison, they wanted money from me. I was in prison for seven months: from September 2016 till April 2017. They did everything to me! Every day they took us and they brought us to some men to satisfy their pleasures. They raped me from the front and the back, they were so violent that afterwards I had difficulties even sitting down. They filmed me while they raped me. They urinated on me! One day they forced me to have a sexual intercourse with a dog and they filmed me. I’m cursed.”

N.S., woman, Ivory Coast, 40 years old.

Testimony collected in the CARA of Mineo, June 2017

“For three months I was held in a prison in Sabha, it’s called Ali’s Ghetto. It’s a sort of private prison with high walls, barbed wire and armed men that tortured and raped hundreds of black people like me. The guards had fun watching us suffer. They brought us food once a day and while they gave it to us they tortured us with electric shocks. For 3 months I have been beaten every day. The guards came, they made me take my t shirt off and they hit my back with a stick. They said that without clothes it hurt more and they had fun. Sometimes instead of hitting me they burned me, they heated an iron and put it on me.”

G.O. 19 years old, Nigeria.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, August 2017

“I entered Libya 15 months ago and in this time I never had a day of freedom. For the whole time of my stay I have been sold and bought and transferred from prison to prison until the last camp before my departure to Italy. I spent my first 6 months in Sabha in a terrible prison. They tortured me every day, they especially beat me with sticks or they whipped me. We lived in fear even because the jailers seemed to hurt us for personal entertainment or pleasure. Sometimes they came back drunk at night and if anyone moved they shoot. Sometimes they let people bleed to death. From Sabha they transferred me in a prison in Sabratha where I was detained for 3 months. Afterwards they transferred me to Tripoli, where I also stayed for about 3 months. Finally, they brought me to Tajoura, a gathering camp. I was the slave of the traffickers. I had no money to pay for the journey. I had to work for them in the camp and then they let me leave.”

O., 18 years old, Nigeria.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, September 2017

“As soon as I arrived in Sabha, I was detained in an informal prison called “Osopo Prison” run by Ghanaian traffickers. They put me in a cell with 80 other people, every day I suffered beatings and the “falaka” torture (torture method which consists of hitting the soles of a person's bare feet, ed). Every week, my parents were forced to pay 200 Libyan dinars (124 euros ed) so I would stay alive, whereas in order to be freed they asked for 3,000 Libyan dinars (1,864 euros ed). I was then transferred to another centre controlled by Arabs that randomly killed prisoners to “set an example” to the others so they wouldn’t complain. During my imprisonment in this second prison, I suffered torture with electric shock (they stick electrodes to our feet and made us jump around the room flooded with water). They tried to poison me with a plant-based drink. One night I was taken by the traffickers and brought to the Libyan coast. I saw thousands of people on the beach watched over by armed guards shooting towards the people who were embarking. Along with a hundred people I was locked up in a boat, forced into a sitting position. Before letting us leave they yelled <<go and die on your own>>.”

M.C. 20 years old, Nigeria.

Testimony collected in Rome at the Psyché Centre, November 2017

Al-Qatrun

Al-Qatrun is a village in Libya, situated in the desert of Fezzan, south of Sabha. It is located in one of the main routes connecting Libya to Niger and Chad.

“I was in Al-Qatrun in March 2017, working in a supermarket. One day some robbers plundered the store and took me and my colleague to a camp whose name I am not aware of. I cannot tell anything of what they did to me. It was awful, I should have died there. They have constantly and continuously tortured me; they forced me to hold my friend while they were torturing him. They told me <<Either him or you>>. They hung me upside down and immersed my head in water, and when I would start suffocating they would bring me up and start all over again. But there is something I cannot share, it hurts me too much, it hurts. They would tell me <<you are not a man, you are an insect, so we can kill you>>. They forced me to stare at and be with my friend and others’ murdered bodies. Only in April 2018, I managed to run away from that atrocious place and headed to Niger.”

I.A.K, 19 years old, Sudan (Darfur).

Testimony collected in the Humanitarian Site in Agadez (Niger), December 2019

Tripoli

Capital of Libya, it is a fundamental hub of migration routes coming from both West Africa and the Horn of Africa. According to the testimonies collected, Libyan employers often look for workforce in the *foyers* and connection houses; this occurs especially in specific streets in Tripoli and Sabha where migrants are used to gather and wait for them to be offered some occasional work. Indeed, very often migrants are not paid for their work and they are *de facto* in a condition of forced labour and slavery. The living conditions in Tripoli are extremely dangerous for migrants according to what reported by all the witnesses over the six years. The “gun rule” seems to run the city, with armed groups and militias launching indiscriminate attacks on civilians and committing abuses in total impunity. Any black-skinned person in Libya becomes the target of violence and assault. For this reason, migrants and refugees are often robbed, they risk being imprisoned or even killed.

“We were brought to a prison in Tripoli, called Zanzoo (Janzur, ed). My husband and I were brought to different areas of the prison. They asked us 1,000 dinars to get released (621 euros, ed), but we didn’t have them. I was in a room with another 72 women, and there was no room to lie down and I was always sitting down with my arms under my legs. The food was full of worms, I spent nearly a month eating almost nothing. There was only one bathroom for 75 people. I’ve been repeatedly beaten, I’ve seen two men repeatedly beating a person to death. After 8 months, a policeman let my husband free, but forced him to work for him in a carwash. After two months I was also released and I joined my husband at the car wash. Finally, the policeman decided to go to Tunis because of the clashes in Libya and he organized our trip to Italy.”

B.J. woman, Nigeria, 26 years old.

Testimony collected in Ragusa reception centre (CAS), February 2015

“I was locked up in the prison of Abu Salim. They tied my hands and feet under the sun and beat me! They hit me with the iron end of the belt many times. I still have scars on my back. They tied my hands and arms together and they put me lying down, afterwards they entered the cell and gave me electric shocks with an electric baton; these are the scars! They beat me because I’m Christian and they are Muslim. One day, they put me in a room staring at a lightbulb. I couldn’t take it anymore, so I closed my eyes and they put chili pepper in my eyes. It really burned. Now I still feel bad, I can’t sleep at night, I still think about what happened to me, I have that pain imprinted in my mind.”

G.B. Ghana, 30 years old.

Testimony collected in the CARA of Mineo, June 2017

“I was put in prison for the first time in Libya when I got off the plane. Before leaving they assured me all my documents were in order, but maybe that wasn't the case. From this prison they freed me quite soon, but I was then kidnapped and sold many times. The hardest detention was in a prison in Gargaresch, a district of Tripoli. They tied my ankles and wrists and for the first five days they left me like that. They didn't give me any food, they didn't let me go to the toilet. They came and hit me. Afterwards they untied me, but it didn't get any better. For about a month they left me in complete darkness. They hit me with a stick on my body and under the soles of my feet and from that day I can't walk without feeling pain. They tortured me with electric shocks. Once they pointed a gun at my temple and threatened to kill me. When I started to cry, they were laughing. Instead of shooting me, they hit my head with the butt of the gun.”

M.K. 30 years old, Bangladesh.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, June 2017

“I spent my last four months in Libya in a gathering centre in the outskirts of Tripoli, not far from the sea. We were around 500 there. They said the centre had to fill up before we could leave. The Libyans came every night to take one or two prisoners. Sometimes the prisoners were taken to do forced labour. Sometimes they were taken to go steal. Much more often they were sold and brought in another prison. I saw many people taken away that never came back. The day of my departure they called a friend of mine. He was really scared of going back to prison, so he decided not to go. The Libyans told him they would kill him. He started to run. They killed him with two shots at the head whilst he was running. They killed him the day of departure, he was nearly safe. We all watched this scene. Afterwards they forced us to move the corpse and they let us on the dinghy.”

M. 20 years old, Ivory Coast.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, September 2017

“We were brought to a prison near Tripoli that was called “Mitiga”. I suffered a lot of violence. I was beaten every day. I was tortured whilst my family members were obliged to listen by phone the tortures I suffered in order to convince them to pay a ransom. They tied my legs and then put me upside down and violently hit me under my feet. Sometimes they poured cold water over me and then hit me on all my body with hard plastic tubes. I felt very intense pain, my skin swelled and become red, and then these scars disappeared. Once an Arab cut me with a knife on my hand. I saw many people getting killed for futile reasons, sometimes only for fun. Very often I was afraid of dying, I thought I would never get out of prison...”

I. 20 years old, Ivory Coast.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, September 2017

"I have been in Libya for 10 months. I spent all the time in detention in a shed near Tripoli run by a trafficker, a truly cruel man. This man is Eritrean but he calls himself Walid and collaborates with the Libyans. Especially Somalis and Eritreans are locked up in there. I believe that people end up in this prison because of the struggles between the traffickers. It may happen that some people are about to leave, then the Libyans arrive, block them and take them to Walid prison. And the ransom to get out of this prison is very high. Walid asks for "five and fifty", which in our part is a way of saying 5,500 USD. And all these people had already paid a lot of money to have arrived a step away from the sea. The treatment that is reserved for Eritreans and Somalis is not the same. Eritreans in general are treated a little better, Somalis instead are massacred. There is no food and water for anyone. However, Somalis are subjected to more violence and cruelty. These things are done by Walid and his men who are very many. They enjoy seeing us suffer. Usually they come in the morning and spend the whole morning playing with us. They force us to harm each other. For example, if they notice that two people are wife and husbands, they ask one to beat the other as hard as possible. Or if a person is very ill the guards go there and say <<You are neither alive nor dead, you have to decide>>. And then they beat him violently. So the person has to choose whether to get up and continue living or to let go and die."

G., 18 years old, Eritrea.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, November 2017

"In November 2018, I made the first attempt to cross the Mediterranean. The Libyan coastguard intercepted us and brought us back. They took me to the centre in Ain Zara (a detention centre in the southern outskirts of Tripoli, ed). There, they fed us in the mornings and in the afternoons, and every two or three weeks IOM, or UNHCR would come to bring us clothes or take those in need to the hospital. Sometimes, soldiers would come and take three or four of us, make us load heavy shells in large cannons, and then bring us back and confine us to the cell again. I have never undergone violence in Ain Zara, but toward the end we were fearing the bombings. That is why I ran away; one night bombs were falling nearby, and the guards opened the gates and told us to leave and find shelter. When I escaped I stayed in Tripoli, where I worked odd jobs to pay for my journey. I departed from Zawia; at night bombs would fall there as well. We were 65 people when we left. We disembarked in Pozzallo on the 22nd of October, thank God. I had a fifty percent chance of dying, but I am here."

A.H., 19 years old, Somalia.

Testimony collected in Ragusa refugee reception centre (CAS), November 2019

“In Ain Zara’s prison I spent the five worst months of my life, worse than what I went through in Sudan. I was tortured for five months, they extracted my toes and fingers’ nails and at some point I was so in pain, so desperate, that I would have preferred to die. I saw many people who could not stand the pain and died. Too many times during the tortures I would faint and wake up, the pain and the fear were too strong. These times were dreadful and I do not want to remember them...”

M.A., 34 years old, Sudan (Darfur).

Testimony collected in Agadez humanitarian site (Niger), December 2019

“I had to flee my village at the age of 16 because of the conflicts between the governmental militias and the anglophone separatists. I ran away and went to live with my aunt. That house was hell, my aunt’s husband would come in my bed at night and rape me. One day in September 2016 my aunt decided to leave her husband, bringing me and her son with her. We arrived in Libya in 2017. Our first stop was in Sabratha, in a foyer. We were supposed to get to Gharyan, but we were arrested and brought to Tajoura’s repatriation centre (12 km east of Tripoli, ed). The food was little and the treatments were inhuman. Once a pregnant woman with two twins asked for some food for her hungry little girls and a soldier with his face covered came and beat the woman fiercely. The soldiers often had their faces covered, because they were the same people who made us depart for Europe, so we were not supposed to recognize them. In this centre I had to declare a fake nationality, because Cameroonians were repatriated. We stayed there for about six months, then my aunt managed to have some money sent from her friend in Algeria. However, soon we found ourselves trapped in another centre for illegal immigrants in Tariq al Sikka (a Prison in Tripoli, ed). There I could go out to work every day, I would clean or do other houseworks. After a couple of months, they freed us and brought us to the beach to embark. There were three dinghies and a big crowd, I could not find my aunt and when I saw her she was already on the first dinghy with my cousin, while I embarked on the second one, as the first dinghy was full. I cannot recall exactly what happened during the journey. I just remember that at some point we were all in the water. I would go underwater from time to time because others would hang on me, but I would always come up as I luckily had the life jacket on. The Libyan coastguard saved us, but brought us back to Libya in Janzur (12 km west of Tripoli, ed).”

Y.E., woman, 22 years old, Cameroon.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, November 2019

“I was in Libya for more than three years. My 15-year-old brother B.J. is still there, he tried to leave a few months ago but he was caught at sea and taken to prison by the Libyans, I have not heard from him for months but we managed to talk a few days ago. I am afraid. He is in Abu Salim’s prison in Tripoli, he told me that he tried to leave but he was then captured at sea, then the prison was bombed and he ran away. Libya is an inhumane place. My brother is in Tripoli’s al-Serraj territories now, he met with some UNHCR aid workers, they told him that they will help him, they gave him a paper and an appointment for January. I continuously think of what could happen to him.”

S.J., 21 years old, Sudan. Disembarked in Pozzallo on July 31st 2019.

Testimony collected at MEDU clinic in Ragusa, November 2019

“I was incarcerated for four months in Salah al-din too, in Tripoli’s area. There they used to keep us locked in a huge room, they would tie us up, beat us up with sticks, and throw water on us. From time to time, NGOs would come, including MSF, and they would let us out in the backyard and let us play football. When the NGOs would leave, they would lock us up again and treat us worse than they already did before. I tried to cross the Mediterranean to reach Italy five times, but the Libyan coastguard brought me back and imprisoned me in Tripoli and Zawia’s prisons. In Libya the prisons are very harsh, I do not want to think about it anymore but I still have nightmares at night.”

I.C., 25 years old, Guinea.

Testimony collected at MEDU clinic in Ragusa, December 2019

“I left my country in April 2017. I tried to escape from Libya five times, and each time I was brought back to prison. I spent three years in Libya, and only three months outside of a prison. I left my country because of the war, my brother was killed before my eyes. In Sabratha’s prison I was forced to work, they forced us to do heavy brickwork; as you can see there are calluses all over my hands. I haven’t slept well for two years. I was detained in Tajoura’s prison for eight months. We were many there and we would continually hear bombings. I cannot exactly recall the day but in 2019, it was just before Eid (Islamic “Festival of the Sacrifice”, ed), a bomb blew up part of the prison (bombing of the Tajoura detention centre for migrants, which took place on 2 July 2019, where more than 50 people died, ed.). Many migrants died, I saw things I will never forget. Look at my wrists, can you see these scars? I was in a prison near Tripoli and at night the jailers burnt me with fuel. My body is covered in scars, cuts, and aches. I think continuously and I now understand I have many psychological issues.”

F.H., 23 years old, Sudan.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, February 2020

“Please help me! I sleep very little at night, I have nightmares and I think a lot. I tremble without reason during the day. In my mind I have images of injured people covered in blood, dead, and with their guts exposed. I was in Tajoura prison, near Tripoli, it was July 2019. About 500 migrants were incarcerated there, and the majority of us came from the Horn of Africa and from sub-Saharan countries. Suddenly I heard the noise of bombings, the people screaming, and I saw a lot of dust, dismembered bodies, blood everywhere, and fire. There was a big warehouse near our prison, with weapons and munitions, and the Libyan guards forced us for months to go there to clean the rifles, and to order the ammunition boxes and the explosives. That day Haf-tar’s militias bombed the warehouse and everything exploded, part of the prison col-lapsed and I saw hundreds of people severely injured, and dozens of torn bodies. My head thinks all the time and I sleep poorly; during the day I still see these images. I’ve been in Italy for few days. I am less afraid but at night I cannot sleep and find peace.”

A., 20 years old, Sudan.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, February 2020

“I survived. I’ve seen death come many times. I left Somalia four years ago. In the summer of 2018 Libyan traffickers kidnapped me in the area of Bani Walid; they wanted money from my family, and thus they filmed a video in which they were beating me with kicks and slaps, and torturing me with electric shocks. They did falaka on me (torture method which consists of hitting the soles of a person’s bare feet, ed), and I lost four teeth for the violence I endured, and I never received medical assistance. I stayed there for about eight months. I left the Beni-Walid area in the beginning of 2019, and lit-tle after I was captured and imprisoned in the detention centre of Ain Zara, a few kilo-metres away from Tripoli, for about five months. In the beginning UN workers would come and visit us and things were fine, but with the war everything got worse. The Libyan guards would threaten us and we were forced to work in a nearby military camp where there were weapons, military vehicles, and soldiers; we cooked for the militias, we had to wash the pots, tables, and floors. They treated us like animals and we only had to obey. While trying to reach Italy in the past two months, I was stopped by the Libyan coastguard three times; I saw many people drown at sea because the waves were too high and as they fell in the water they did not know how to swim. Last week we departed from Zawiya with a dinghy, and I paid 1,500 dollars to the traffickers. Let me talk to my family on the phone. I beg you, let me call. I survived.”

S., 22 years old, Somalia.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, February 2020

West of Tripoli:

Janzur, Zawia, Surman, Sabratha, Zuwara

Janzur

Town in the Tripolitania region. The centre is only 12 kilometers from Tripoli.

“The Libyan coast guard saved us, but brought us back to Libya in Janzur. Many died during the shipwreck, nobody from the first boat survived. Janzur’s detention camp was divided by gender. We were treated better compared to the other centres I was in before; international organizations would come and visit us. In this camp there is no voluntary repatriation but only deportation. We would always hear the wails and tortures coming from the male side. One day they sold me to a Libyan man like I was a merchandise; from then on, I became his property. For twelve months I worked as a cleaner in his house while I was continually abused. One year later, I got in touch with some friends I met in prison who had managed to get to Malta. By then I already gave up and surrendered to my destiny; after all, I had food and I was not sleeping in the street. But my friends convinced me to run away from that man and to try the journey again. And now I am here.”

Y.E., woman, 22 years old, Cameroon.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, November 2019

Zawia

Zawia is a coastal city located 50 kilometers west of Tripoli. It is one of the main boarding points used by traffickers to make migrants sail to Italy. There are numerous *connection houses* and formal and informal places of detention.

“The first time I left by sea, the Libyan coastguard intercepted us and brought us back to Libya. They brought us to a prison in Zawia called Ossama Prison. What differentiates this prison from the others is the fact that if you pay the ransom you are sure you’ll be released, something that is not always true in other prisons. An endless amount of cruelties and tortures happen in there but aimed at getting the money not the widespread violence that you see in other places. This prison is monitored by a commission of Europeans once a month (the witness claims to have recognized UNHCR operators, ed). During their monthly visits the guards would hide all the instruments of torture, the chains and they opened all the cells so that it might seem as like a refugee camp rather than a prison. When the visit was over everything went on as before.”

X.Y., Cameroon, 25 years old.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, July 2017

“I relied on a trafficker in Zawiya and I found myself locked once again in a place that reminded me documentaries on Guantanamo. Beyond being a huge warehouse where human beings were tortured and humiliated, there were weapons everywhere, of any kind and size. When I looked around I understood with whom I was dealing with. There were people locked in for months, and some for more than a year. Can you see those guys sitting on the stone bench? If you ask them to lift their shirts, you will see the marks of the tortures. The Somali women were all raped. We were about 600 people but you could not hear a pin drop, as the fear and terror to be beaten up reigned. One day a trafficker showed up with about 70 Somalis he bought in a police station for 100 dollars each. They tied them up and tortured them. Then they made a video call to their families while torturing them, and asked for a ransom of 2,000 dollars. If you ask me whether NGOs and other humanitarian organizations could help us, all I can tell you is that someone in a situation like this could only rely on other stronger and more armed militias to seek help and protection. Relying on humanitarian organizations would just bring you more troubles. When I departed on the dinghy we knew that many groups left in the previous weeks but their dinghies were immediately intercepted by the Libyan coastguard. This is how it works; as soon as the dinghies depart, the traffickers warn Libyan coastguard. Thus the migrants are taken back, they put them in detention centres for illegal immigrants, where to be free one must pay yet another ransom.”

H.A., 45 years old, Syria.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, October 2019

“My time in Libya was tragic. I have been in Italy since August 2019; I am still alive and I cannot believe it. I was incarcerated in Ossama-Prison in Zawia for about two weeks in 2019; there the jailers would shoot at my feet and injure me to obtain ransom. I saw IOM and UNHCR plates ¹¹hanging on a wall in that detention centre. Ossama prison’s jailers are clever and violent.”

I.C., 25 years old, Guinea.

Testimony collected at MEDU clinic in Ragusa, December 2019

¹¹ IOM told our researchers that in the mentioned period it was not present directly but through its partner organization

“I tried to cross the sea in August 2019 but the Libyan coastguard stopped us and brought us back to Zawia, in the prison called Ossama Prison. We were 350 in that prison, I stayed there for five months, until December. In Ossama Prison they beat us and tortured us. Can you see the scar on my ear? They did it with a locker. My body is covered in marks and scars. We were in pain but we could not seek medical help or take medicines. The food was very little, they would give us rotten food. Another thing that I saw happening before my eyes was making a detainee strip and forcing him with rifles to have sexual intercourse with another man. One day we tried to escape but as soon as the guards realized they started shooting; four people died that day. The UN and international organization cannot do anything. When they would come to the centre, the tortures were hidden and the guards would take the goods destined for the detainees. The guards would tell us <<Europe cannot save you, here we are in control. This is our land, this is our nation>>.”

G., 19 years old, Sud Sudan.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, February 2020

Surman

A coastal urban centre about 60 km west of Tripoli.

“After our village in Darfur was attacked, my whole family sought asylum in Chad, but even there many problems happened so I decided to find a job in Libya and help my family. I arrived in Libya in 2016 but I do not remember the name of the place. I found a job in a camp but they never paid me; they treated me like a slave and when I asked them for a salary my boss threatened to kill me. I managed to run away and I went to Surman, it was April 2017, and soon after my arrival some men took me to prison, they wanted money from me but I had no one to ask, they would beat me every day for over a year, they beat me so hard I almost died. It pains me greatly to tell what they did to me, I am confused and in pain, I relive everything I went through. After almost a year in 2018 I managed to escape and I went to Al-Qatrun where I was told of a Sudanese refugee camp in Agadez, and thus I decided to leave. I am not doing well, I always dream of what they did to me. I am really not doing well.”

M.A.M., 20 years old, Sudan (Darfur).

Testimony collected in Agadez’s humanitarian site (Niger), December 2019

Sabratha

Sabratha is a coastal city located 70 kilometers west of Tripoli. It is one of the main boarding points used by traffickers to sail migrant boats to Sicily. Lampedusa is 162 nautical miles away. Different militias involved in the migrants trafficking operate in the city.

“I left Ethiopia when I was just 13 years old. I arrived in Libya and there I was in a detention centre for nearly two years, in Sabratha. Nobody could pay my ransom, that’s why I was locked up in there for a long time. They tortured me for months, they forced me to stay in hanging from my wrists or ankles. They beat me every day, even though they understood no one would pay for me. Two friends who had left with me, died before my eyes while they were subjected to the same tortures.”

T.W. Gambia, 15 years old.

Testimony collected in Rome at Medu Mobile Clinic, June 2017

“I haven’t been able to sleep for months, I have nightmares, I’m always afraid that something bad can happen to me. Thoughts fill my mind and never go away. Night and day I think of what I saw during my journey from Gambia to Europe. My mind is crowded with images of dead people. Once again, I see the face of a girl who died during an accident on a pickup truck in the desert between Niger and Libya. I see the dead bodies in the water. I was in Libya, in Sabratha, together with 150 people that were waiting to boarding the dinghies, I was locked up in the connection house and close to the beach, in the sea rotten dead bodies of dozens of people were floating eaten by the fish. The Libyans forced me to bury those bodies. They were unrecognizable, they stunk. I remember that sea and beach of death and while I was digging the ground the fear made my teeth chatter and my legs were tense like wood. I always think of those dead bodies and their unrecognizable faces eaten by fish.”

S. E. Gambia, 19 years old.

Testimony collected in the CARA of Mineo, June 2017

“I stayed one month in the connection house. There were large rooms and other smaller rooms where some people were brought to be tortured, to have money. One day the Europeans of UN came to visit that place. Our jailers made a lot of things disappear. They asked us how we were treated, everyone nodded their head as to say “it goes... it goes” we couldn’t complain otherwise the spies would’ve told the bouncer of the boss, a man named Rasta.”

E., 23 years old, Cameroon.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, August 2017

“I was in Sabratha prison for 12 months, until December 2019. We were more than 1,000 people in the prison, maybe 1,500. Sometimes NGOs would come, but in the last few months they stopped, probably because the zone was too dangerous. The militias were fighting outside, as there is a conflict going on. While inside we would undergo tortures and violence, they wanted money and asked our families for ransom. It happened to me too; they made the scars you see on my body in prison, now my hip is still injured from the beatings. Towards the end of December, a bomb fell 30 metres from our cell, in a nearby courtyard. We were very lucky, but many jailers died that day. Today I still have nightmares about the bombs, the shootings, and what we went through in prison.”

M.H., 17 years old, Bangladesh.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, January 2020

Zuwara

Zuwara is a coastal city, 100 kilometres west of Tripoli and one of the most important boarding points for migrants heading to Italy.

“I was in Libya for 3 years, the last two of which in Zuwara. I worked for the Libyan police but it wasn’t really a job. They used me, I couldn’t refuse. When I tried to refuse they violently beat me and they threatened to kill me. My job was to recover dead bodies from the sea, dead bodies of my brothers that died during the shipwrecks. I would recover them and then I had to bury them. In these two years I counted around 3,000 bodies. I ended up getting used to it. In the end I didn’t get emotional anymore, I didn’t get upset. Only for women that were clearly pregnant or for the bodies of children I couldn’t get used to it.”

L., 17 years old, Gambia.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, September 2017

“We brought 18 children with us, they are our children. They are the reason behind our departure. At the end of August, after K. Haftars’ militias attacked Zuwara, a group of families (our neighbours) decided to leave and my family and I decided that it was the best thing to do, we did not have a choice. Since April life became unlivable. Before, conflicts and normality would alternate, there was a minor internal war between tribes but lately the war became continuous and dying was the norm. Children could not exit the house and the terror became constant. We belong to the Berber minority

(Imazighen, ed). There are checkpoints between neighbourhoods, and as Berbers we are not worth anything; minorities can be arrested without any reason and be imprisoned from three to six years. It became impossible to move around or go to hospital, for instance, because the risk of being arrested was too high. It is a disaster. We don't want any more trouble. I don't want war for my children."

M.O., 33 years old, Libya.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, September 2019

"Since April 2019 I was imprisoned in Zuwara for six months. They brought me there when the Libyan boats stopped our boat and brought us back to Libya. Horrible things happen in that camp. They beat me under the soles of my feet many times. A friend of mine was injured and killed before my eyes. All the women were raped, sometimes ten or twenty men would abuse one woman. This place is still working, these things are still happening right now. You have to go to Libya's prisons to free who is inside!"

F., 24 years old, Sudan.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, February 2020

East of Tripoli:

Al Khums, Misrata, Ajdabiya

Al Khums

City and port of northern Libya, 100 kilometers east of Tripoli, is the capital of the district of al-Murgub, in the historic region of Tripolitania. Starting from the second half of 2017, MEDU operators have collected several testimonies of migrants who have embarked from Al Khums. After the partial blocking of boarding from the cities west of Tripoli (Zuwara, Sabratha, Zawia) as a result of the Italian-Libyan agreements to combat migratory flows, Al Khums has in fact become an alternative boarding point used by traffickers.

“I found myself in a place in Tripoli (Kupri) where migrants go to wait to find a job. A Libyan man stopped me and asked 5 people to work and then chose me. But instead of offering me a job, he brought me to the police station. From there I was brought to the Al Khums prison, far from Tripoli. There were more than 300 people in every room, there was no space to lie down or sleep. They gave us little water and food. Every day at 1 pm they brought us a piece of bread and a glass of water. This is all we received for the 8 months I was detained in there. They beat us every day with rubber tubes. Usually they would come and pour icy water over us. Then they would call us, group by group and they beat us. Many people were severely injured. I saw some people lose their legs because of the violent beatings they were subjected to. They beat us a lot and asked for money. They asked me many times to give them 500 dinars (321 euro, ed) to be released, but I didn't have that amount of money and so they continued beating me.”

A.D. 20 years old Gambia.

Testimony collected in the reception centre of Canicarao (Ragusa), November 2014

“My journey at sea started from Khums. Before embarking on the dinghy, between September and October 2019, the traffickers forced me to work without retribution. During the journey many migrants were afraid as they were telling how they were brought back by the Libyan Coastguard, and thus they were brought to prisons, many times. There was tension on the dinghy, as no one wanted to be in the Libyan's hands again, and this even led to a brawl. Thank God, nobody was hurt.”

O. D., 21 years old, Mali.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, November 2019

“I tried to flee Libya many times. Once the coastguard brought me to Khums’ detention centre. Every Tuesday MSF workers would come and bring goods such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, they were allowed to enter for one hour only, we could not talk to them. When they would leave, the guards would take everything they brought us. When the Open Arms vessel rescued me, I was treated as a human being for the first time in a long while. I now hope to be treated as an animal here, as animals are treated better than how humans are treated in Libya.”

J.S.K., 20 years old, Sudan.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, February 2020

Misrata

Libya's third city, Misrata is located on the coast, 210 km southeast of Tripoli. It is a hub of migratory routes from both West Africa and the Horn of Africa.

“In 2017 I was kidnapped twice in the area of Tripoli. They beat me and they gave us little food and water. They tied me and hung me with a rope: they wanted money and they made me phone my family. I don’t sleep at night, I have nightmares, I think too much. I’m scared and it’s not easy to talk about these things. The Arabs of Libya are evil. They also put me in prison in Misrata for three months. It was a three-storey building and my cell was very small. There was no space to sleep on the floor and they beat us every day with a pipe. They hit me under the soles of my feet and I still feel pain. They used electricity with me. The guards were violent and they asked for money. I also always think about the journey on the dinghy driven initially by an armed Libyan. We departed from Sabratha and the armed Libyan traffickers escorted us on another small vessel and after a couple of hours they forced me to drive the boat. They inverted the route and they left. I had never driven a dinghy before, I was very scared and fortunately we were saved after 6 hours by a big ship. We then arrived at Pozzallo where they brought me to prison for a couple of days and then I was in the street. I’m not a trafficker and I don’t understand why they detained me and then abandoned me in the street. Help me, I have a family that lives in Senegal.”

N. M., 30 years old, Senegal.

Testimony collected at MEDU clinic in Ragusa, November 2017

Ajdabiya

Ajdabiya is located approximately 16 km from the Mediterranean coast and 154 km from Benghazi. It is one of the main arrival points from the desert route of Sudan. Migrants from the Horn of Africa arrive there and then try to reach Tripoli and the western coast of Libya.

“Close to the city of Ajdabiya we were kidnapped by Daesh militants (self-proclaimed ISIS, ed) and we were held hostage for three months. At the beginning they mistreated us with guns and knives, they urinated on us and did everything they wanted without mercy. We slept huddled together in a shed without eating or drinking. I am Christian, but when I understood that the only way to save my life was to convert I did it: I became Muslim to please them. From then onwards their treatment changed. They transferred us in a house and they brought us food.”

M.I., Eritrea, 22 years old.

Testimony collected in Rome at the MEDU mobile clinic, November 2015

South of Tripoli:

Gharyan, Bani Walid, Ash Shwayrif

Gharyan

City located 80 kilometers southwest of Tripoli. There is a prison described in 2017 as a large complex in the middle of the desert, which houses up to 1,000 prisoners, divided into different sectors, according to the country of origin. The conditions of detention are described as terrible and marked by continuous violence and mistreatment. The prisoners are crammed into small cells, with few mattresses and few sheets thrown on the floor. Migrants report that it is sometimes difficult even to sleep because of the appalling overcrowding of the cells.

“I was in the prison of Gharyan for three months. It was terrible, they hit us without any reason, I saw a lot of people being sexually abused and some people died because they were sick and without treatment. I was beaten many times with a black pipe and twice in the head with the butt of the gun. The cell was overcrowded, we were 70 people in a cell of 30 square metres. The hygienic conditions were horrible, they gave us something to eat in a small plate twice a day. There was no light inside and there were insects that bit us all the time.”

B. S., Gambia, 20 years old.

Testimony collected in the CARA of Mineo, April 2015

“Inside the prison of Gharyan, the police killed two people in front of me. It was the first of October 2013, Liberation day in Nigeria. The Nigerians inside the prison started to scream. The police reacted, took us out and threatened us with guns. Two of us were killed. They also violently hit me; I still have scars on my body because of those beatings. They hit my head with the butt of the gun. They also beat me on the soles of my feet (falaka, ed), in such a hard way that I couldn't walk for a while.”

D. A., Nigeria, 26 years old

Testimony collected in the CARA of Mineo, March 2015

Bani Walid

A city of Tripolitania, 150 kilometers southeast of Tripoli. Many migrants have reported being held in horrific conditions in the city official and unofficial detention centres.

“We were Sudanese, Eritrean, Ethiopian, we arrived at Al Kufra and from there they brought us to Bani Walid. I stayed in prison for a year and three months. We were a lot of people, from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan, locked up in one room with little food and water. The Arabs tortured us every day. They took us, tied us and they put us on a table and hit us under the soles of our feet with an iron bar. Some people were tortured with electric shock whilst they were on the phone with their family. I saw more than 40 people die.”

M., 27 years old, Sudan.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, September 2017

“During my stay in Libya I was kidnapped by the Asma boys and brought in an informal prison in Bani Walid. I was detained for 5 months. The jailers came to torture us every day. They were always three people. They were all standing around me, one behind, one on the side and one in front of me and they hit me simultaneously. Sometimes they whipped me until I bled. I have my back full of scars. It was terrible. Sometimes someone died. Because of torture or illness. The Libyans would come, they wrapped the body in a blanket and left it in the room. We slept next to the dead bodies. We ate next to the dead bodies. They brought us a slice of bread a day throwing it on the floor. We were forced to eat right next to those dead bodies. The aim of the tortures was to make us call our families to have sent money as a ransom.”

D., 19 years old, Ghana.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, September 2017

“While I was going to Tripoli I was kidnapped by an armed group and brought to a prison close to Bani Walid. They locked me up in a room with other 200 people mainly coming from Gambia and Nigeria. The bandits entered every day inside the room and chose people at random, they beat them and tortured them. They forced us to pull the ropes tied around the other prisoners to lift them a couple of metres off the ground and then let go so that they would quickly fall to the ground. They also forced me to pull the ropes. I feel condemned for what I did, they forced me to do things I would've never wanted to have done.”

M.D., 20 years old, Senegal.

Testimony collected at the MEDU Psyché Centre, September 2017

"I fled my country in February 2014 and entered Libya in 2016. Libya is a terrible place. I was kidnapped and detained 4 times and 4 times I had to pay. To be here today, I paid the smugglers 12,000 dollars. The first time I was kidnapped I was in Kufra, they kept me in a prison that was built underground. The second time they kidnapped me, they brought me to the middle of the desert and left me there. They let me wander around a lot of time, then they asked me for money to be brought back. The third time was in Bani Walid. I was abducted and brought to a detention centre run by a man named "Ahmed Whisky." He was terrible. The guards were really cruel. The fourth time I was sold to a trafficker, an Eritrean man named "Abdu Salam" who eventually let me go. I thank God for being alive today. And I really don't know how I survived. You can't eat or drink, you're exhausted, you're weak and tired, and they, besides that, take you, take you away, torture you and beat you. Many died. Every week two or three people died. And the most terrible thing is that it was mostly women and children who died. I have never met any doctor or international delegation in these 2 years. In October 2017, there was a rumor that someone in some prison would come in to observe and make medical examinations. Those who had met them told us. I've never met anyone. There's nothing you can do in Libya to save yourself. Even in short periods when you stay free there is nothing you can do. You can't go to the police because cops are often corrupt and you risk being sold again. I think the situation has gotten worse over time. Before, people came in to Libya all the time. Now that the entrances have been reduced, the smugglers have to turn us from prison to prison to earn the money. So they free us and kidnap us again, move us and sell us to keep making money."

AS, 27 years old, Eritrea. .

Testimony collected at the MEDU mobile clinic, Rome, September 2018

"Libya was the most terrible part of our journey. For 13 months my daughter and I were sold and detained in 4 different places, I paid to be freed and instead the traffickers sold us to other traffickers and we ended up in prison again. I can't tell what we've been through. I have seen many people die before my eyes, every day I feel like I'm seeing them again. I remember the Bani Walid prison where we stayed for two months, the food was very little and they beat me all the time. One day a trafficker grabbed me and started beating me in front of my daughter, I dream of it every night. My daughter remembers everything, she repeats it to me almost every day and I do not know how I will help her. I pray every day. Here I can pray, it is important to me."

A.O. 37 years old, Eritrea.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, July 2018

“I arrived in Libya on the 25th of October 2016. I can still remember the day. I am from Mogadishu; Al Shabaab terrorists killed my father and then my mother, they cut her throat with a knife. My brothers and I sought asylum in Yemen. Then I decided to depart for Libya, crossing Sudan. We were 200 Somalis. I was locked in Bani Walid for a year and nine months on the ground floor of a building managed by a tall and fat man. He always said that those who pay are brought to the sea to depart, while those who don't pay will die there. We had very little to eat, a pot of pasta for 10 people, the time for a bite and it would be gone. I was beaten, they gave me electric shocks, they caused me stab wounds (he shows marks on the hip and near the armpit, ed), while they were calling my family to ask for ransom to free me. One day a guy imprisoned with me died. We called the man hoping he would have mercy since one of us died. Instead he kicked his body and said that he ended up like that because he did not have the money to pay.”

A.H., 19 years old, Somalia.

Testimony collected in Ragusa refugee reception centre (CAS), November 2019

“I left my country because of the war. I travelled in a truck, we were 24 people. Once we got to the border, the Libyan bandits captured and kidnapped us. They brought us to a warehouse in Bani Walid. After the first three days they began to torture us on a chair with electric shocks, they would ask me 8,000 dinars (about 5,000 euros, ndr) but I had no one to ask, since my mother passed away and I have never known my father. Two migrants who travelled with me were killed. I stayed there from May 2017 to February 2019. Since then, I am not doing well, my mind is always solely in that prison. This is the first time I tell someone what has happened to me. I tried to escape, but they caught me back. The Libyans forced me to work for them, at night they would make me unload drugs and weapons. I spent two years under continuous threats, I always had weapons pointing at me. They would bring us pasta cooked in warm water and would force us to eat it; they would shoot in the air, and if we would not eat they shot us. There were times in which we were left without any food. Once we didn't eat for about a week, then the guards arrived and forced us to drink salt water.”

J.S.K., 20 years old, Sudan.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, February 2020

Ash Shwayrif

Village located southeast of Tripoli, about 330 kilometers from the Libyan capital.

“I crossed Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Libya. In Sudan I paid 3,500 dollars; to enter Libya I paid 2,500 dollars. In 2017, I was taken by traffickers to a prison in the city of Ash Shwayrif, near Tripoli. My family had already sold the house and ran out of money to help me. I didn't have anyone to pay for me. They beat me every day, I was tortured with electric shocks, they gave us very little food, it was dirty, there were many insects, we were all locked up in a large room. I stayed in prison for a year. I saw 21 people die, most died in the winter. It was very cold. A friend of mine died in front of me, for days he had been losing pieces of skin and flesh, there were no medicines. I could not do anything to help him. I could not touch him. His body started to stink but he stayed there together with all of us. When I am alone, I happen to feel like I'm in Libya. I see my friend again. He asks me to help him. I hear his voice, but I can't do anything. Maybe I'll be better in the future, but now I can't sleep at night.”

L. 19 years old, Somalia.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, July 2018

“I was forced to go to military school for 6 months in Sawa (Military training centre in Eritrea, ed). I didn't want to do the training but when I didn't show up, the police came looking for me. In Eritrea all are military. Men and women after 18 are forced to become soldiers. My husband was also a soldier. One day he disappeared. I think they arrested him. I tried to look for him, but I never heard from him again. For five years I was forced to perform the "national service." That is a job that they decide and for which they pay you very little. When they want, they can move you and force you to another job. I could not decide anything, so I decided to run away. I decided to escape to Sudan and then to Libya. I crossed the desert with a Toyota, crammed together with 75 other people. The journey lasted 5 days; twenty people died of thirst. In Libya I stayed for a year and I spent time in four different prisons in Ash Shwayrif, Bani Walid, Nasmah, Al Zaleti (unidentified location, ed). In a prison they locked me up for two months without light. There I started having eye pain. The conditions were always the same, they gave us three or four macaroni a day. I drank dirty water with insects inside, no shower and every day they beat us for money. During the entire trip, I paid 8,800 USD. I think about what I experienced and all the people who stayed in Libya. This thought haunts me. I pray for them.”

H. G., woman, 33 years old, Eritrea.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, August 2018

Kufra, southern Libya:

Tazirbu

Tazirbu

Tazirbu, is an oasis located in the Libyan desert in the Kufra district of Cyrenaica, about 250 kilometers north-west of Kufra.

“I fled my country in 2013. I crossed Ethiopia. I entered South Sudan where I stayed for 2 years, then I moved to North Sudan for 4 months and I entered Libya. In Libya I stayed 1 year and 5 months and was detained all the time. Of these 17 months, I spent 6 in the dark. This was the most terrible thing I have ever experienced. We were 150 people in this room, including women and children. They kept us in the dark to encourage us to pay. It was terrible and now my eyesight is no longer the same, I can't see better. The traffickers "elected" among us someone to act as their representative, nobody could refuse. So somehow, even in the dark, they were always present. And they were there to take us and torture us. During these months, food and water were never enough and no one could ever be visited by a doctor. Even though we said we were sick, medical treatment was always denied us.”

X.Y., 39 years old, Eritrea.

Testimony collected in Rome at the MEDU mobile clinic, September 2018

“I left my country because of a conflict between the villages, during which my father was killed. In Libya I spent a long time in prisons, about a year in two prisons. The traffickers sold me from one prison to another. When I think of prisons I become very sad. I think in Libya they don't see men, but they only see money. I had to pay the ransom to not be killed like other brothers who were with me. Torture took place every day both in Tazirbu and Ash Shwayrif (330 km south-east of Tripoli, ed.). In the first prison I saw ten people die of hunger and thirst. I was whipped with water pipes, they tied me up and beat me under the soles of my feet, in the early morning they threw icy water on me. My body is full of scars, I don't know if they will go away. At night I often dream of my father and my travel companions who are dead. It's not easy.”

H.Y. 26 years old, Comoros Islands.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, July 2018

“I was sold many times in Kufra. On the way between Kufra and Ajdabiya there is Tazirbu, where the slave market is held. There are huge warehouses, each owned by someone. The first days I was locked in a large room, about six by four metres, and we were 70 people in there. There was a phone to call your family, and every passing day the amount to be paid increased, and if your peer or someone near you died you had to pay for them too. I paid 3,500 dinars (2,247 euros, ed). I was imprisoned there for 19 days. There was only a bathroom and a room, small like a bathroom, for torturing with electric shocks. Those who did not pay were brought to the warehouses and sold, and those who bought you could choose to never free you and only use you to work. My friends were sold and forced to work in gold mines. I tried to cross the Mediterranean twice, the first time I departed from Zliten in September 2019, we were 72 people on a 10 metres long dinghy. We stayed on the dinghy without food for five days, the last three days we didn't have water, and I saw things I cannot tell; some people were so skinny that their skin cracked open. Then an Italian boat and a helicopter arrived, and we thought they were going to save us; instead they only reported our position with the headlights, and after a couple of hours the Libyan coast guard arrived and brought us back to Al Khums. It was the 30 September 2019.”

S.A., 20 years old, Sudan.

Testimony collected in the Hotspot of Pozzallo, February 2020

The Italy - Libya deal

on migration and the Libyan civil war

Libya has experienced a long phase of political instability since the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. The second Libyan civil war that began in 2014 provided fertile ground for illicit activities, in particular the trafficking of oil, weapons and human beings, which today, together with the extraction and export of hydrocarbons, constitute the main sources of revenue for the country. At the same time, Libya has been the main gateway for migratory flows from Africa to Europe in recent years.

On February 2nd 2017, the Italian government and the Libyan GNA chaired by Fayed al-Serraj signed a new Memorandum of Understanding in Rome in order to combat illegal immigration, trafficking in human beings and to strengthen border security. Within the Memorandum of Understanding the two countries committed to: 1) cooperate for supporting Libyan security and military institutions in order to stem the flows of illegal migrants also through Italy's technical and technological aid to the Libyan Coast Guard (Article 1); 2) close the southern border of Libya (Article 2), which is the main transit point for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa; 3) adapt and finance what the Memorandum call Libyan "reception centres"; 4) propose a more complete and broader vision of Euro-African cooperation in order to eliminate the causes of illegal immigration.

Italy also committed to financing all the initiatives contemplated by the agreement, including the launch of development programs in the Libyan regions affected by illegal immigration. In summary, the agreement was that Libya would commit to block the flow of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa by closing its southern border and to intercept and block the boats leaving its shores for Italy. In return Italy undertook to offer organizational support (by training and equipping the Libyan Coast Guard and the staff of the so-called "reception centres"), and to fund development programs. On February 2nd 2020, the Memorandum of Understanding was automatically extended for an additional three years.

In order to cope with the increasing number of migrants and refugees fleeing Libya and heading for Europe, the European Union (EU) in recent years multiplied its efforts to contain migratory flows through a process of externalising the Union's borders and by funding a tighter control of its maritime and land borders. Furthermore, EU suspended European search and rescue missions at sea. These policies made the crossing of the central Mediterranean extremely dangerous: 5,410 people died crossing this stretch of sea in the three-year period between 2017 and 2019¹², with a fatality rate (proportion of people dead or missing at sea compared to the total number of people who tried the sea crossing) that increased from 2.3% in 2016 to 5.8% in 2019. In the same three-year period, 39,628 migrants were brought back to Libya by the Coast Guard¹³ and returned to their original places of detention, despite the very

¹² OIM, Missing Migrants Project

¹³ UNHCR January 2020

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjozMzBmYWVlOWQlMTdhNS00YTJLTkZMzYtOTJmZTMwMzY3ZmY1IiwidCI6IjFjMjlyMTRhLTk5NWWEtNDVjNi1hODNlMTMxMTM1ZTUzMDhmYSIsImMiOjF9>

serious and the systematic human rights violations they have been exposed to, and which have been widely documented by many international organizations¹⁴ and repeatedly denounced by the United Nations dossiers¹⁵ and by the surviving migrants themselves¹⁶.

It was precisely the awareness of the inhuman conditions of migrants in Libya, made known to the public by some CNN services¹⁷, that pushed in 2017 the European Union, the African Union and the United Nations to create a taskforce with the aim to increase the voluntary repatriations managed by the IOM (48,000 from 2017 to 2019¹⁸) and to organize the asylum seekers and refugees evacuations through the transit centres entrusted to UNHCR (4,441 from the end of 2017 to November 2019¹⁹). Despite these efforts, after two years the conditions of migrants in Libya appear to be even more precarious in the absence of any real protection possibilities. To add some perspective to this untenable situation, if on one hand 2,189 people were evacuated from Libya in 2019 through UNHCR camps²⁰, on the other hand, 8,848 were rescued and brought back to the detention centres by the Libyan Coast guard²¹. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine different results, since from 2017 to the end of November 2019 the resettlement mechanism allowed the resettlement of only 3,477 people (directly from Libya or through Niger, where they were evacuated by UNHCR) in 13 Safe Third Countries (Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Holland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States)²², compared to the 48,042 asylum seekers and refugees registered by UNHCR in Libya²³.

Today the situation appears even more worrisome due to the escalation of the conflict in Libya. Since April 4th of last year, following the attack on Tripoli by the troops of General Khalifa Haftar, who controls the eastern part of the country at the head of the LNA (Libyan National Army), a prolonged and bloody civil war began, which also sees regional powers increasingly involved. From April to December 2019, at least 284 civilians lost their lives due to the conflict and 363 were injured, including around 150 migrants²⁴. Of these, at least 53 were killed and 130 injured in the airstrike that hit the official Tajoura detention centre, adjacent to Dahman military base, southeast of Tripoli, on July 3rd, where about 600 detainees were present²⁵.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *No Escape from Hell*, January 2019

Médecins Sans Frontières, *LIBYA: Report on nutrition screening findings in Sabaa detention centre*, March 2019

Matteo De Bellis (Amnesty International), *Torture and violence on refugees in Libya: the failure of European policies*, Newsweek, 7 March 2019

¹⁵ United Nations Support Mission in Libya, *Report of the Secretary-General*, January 2020

United Nations Support Mission in Libya, *Desperate and Dangerous: Report on the human rights situation of migrants and refugees in Libya*, December 2018

United Nations Support Mission in Libya, *Detained and Dehumanised. Report on Human Rights Abuses against Migrants in Libya*, December 2016

¹⁶ Medici per i Diritti Umani, *Move or die. Migratory Routes from Sub-Saharan Countries to Europe*, July 2015

Medici per i Diritti Umani, *Rapporto sulle condizioni di grave violazione dei diritti umani dei migranti in Libia (2014-2017)*, December 2017

¹⁷ CNN, *Migrants being sold as slaves*, Agosto 2017 <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/11/13/libya-migrant-slave-auction-1on-orig-md-ejk.cnn>

¹⁸ OIM, 2020

¹⁹ UNHCR: Libya - Niger situation <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/72298.pdf>

²⁰ UNHCR UPDATE LIBYA, 6 December, 2019

²¹ Ibidem

²² UNHCR, Resettlement Update #86

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/72298.pdf>. From September 2017 to November 2019 there were 6,169 places for resettlement made available by 13 countries for asylum seekers fleeing Libya.

²³ UNHCR UPDATE, LIBYA, 28 FEBBRAIO 2020 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74314>

²⁴ Press briefing on Libya of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Rupert Colville, 20 December 2019

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25445&LangID=E>

²⁵ UN News: Six children among 53 confirmed fatalities after Libya detention centre airstrikes: Security Council condemns attack

Political instability and the consequent exacerbation of the economic crisis have profound repercussions on the lives of detained migrants, who are exposed indefinitely to further risks and abuses in the absence of essential means for survival and with no hope for escape or evacuation. Following the escalation of the conflict, some official detention centres have been closed, but migrants released ended up on the streets in extremely dangerous conditions, being exposed to war and at risk of being kidnapped and held in unofficial detention places for ransom. In February 2020, UNHCR estimated the presence of around 2,800 migrants (including 1,700 asylum seekers) detained in Libyan official centres²⁶ in inhuman conditions. In the first two weeks of January 2020 alone, around 1,000 migrants were rescued and brought back to Libya²⁷.

The seriousness of the situation prompted UNHCR to close the GDF (Gathering and Departure facility) in February. The GDF is a transit centre established in Tripoli in December 2018 to offer vulnerable refugees a safe place, waiting to find other solutions outside Libya (resettlement, repatriation, family reunification, evacuation). From December 2018 until its closure, 1,700 people were evacuated from Libya through the GDF²⁸. In addition to the overcrowding and the difficulty of transferring people to other places, the decision was made necessary because of the impossibility of guaranteeing the safety of both those hosted there and the UNHCR staff due to the escalation of the conflict, and the proximity of the GDF to a military and police training area.

The Berlin Conference of 19 January, which brought together the conflicting parties (GNA and LNA) and the representatives of the main countries and international organizations involved in the Libyan crisis, with the aim of negotiating a peaceful solution to the conflict under the auspices of the United Nations, did not lead to the desired results. Although the conference ended with an agreement on a ceasefire and an arms embargo, neither commitment was respected by the parties involved in the conflict.

Despite this dramatic situation, the Italy-Libya deal extension means that Italy will continue to finance the Libyan Coast Guard in rescuing migrants at sea and in returning them to a country where they will continue to be exposed to gross human rights violations and to the risks resulting from the ongoing civil war, without real possibilities for evacuation to safer countries. Concerns related to the protection of human rights prompted the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe Majatović, to ask the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, to immediately suspend cooperation with the Libyan Coast Guard, and to prevent rescued migrants from being returned to a country where torture and massive abuse are generalized.

The proposed Memorandum amendments submitted by the Italian government to the GNA on February 9th do not contain substantial changes, and probably will not have any substantial

²⁶ UNHCR, February 2020

²⁷ IOM: Nearly 1,000 Migrants Returned to Libya in the First Two Weeks of 2020: IOM
<https://www.iom.int/news/nearly-1000-migrants-returned-libya-first-two-weeks-2020-iom>

²⁸ UNHCR, *UNHCR to suspend operations at GDF in Tripoli amid safety concern*
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/1/5e32c2c04/unhcr-suspend-operations-gdf-tripoli-amid-safety-concerns.html>

impact on the safeguard of the fundamental rights of migrants and refugees. In fact, the objective of blocking the flow of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa by closing the southern border and blocking the boats leaving the Libyan coast, remains untouched. Furthermore, the role of the Libyan Coast Guard has not changed: it continues to be supported with economic resources, training courses and equipment for search and rescue activities at sea. Also the commitment to provide technical and technological support to Libyan authorities in charge of preventing and combating irregular immigration in the desert has also been renewed.

Regarding the official detention centres, the request for “release of women, children and other vulnerable individuals” appears positive, although the timing is not specified. Also the request for “closure of those centres which, in case of hostility, are more directly exposed to the risk of being involved in military operations “ is considered as a positive step. On the other hand, the official detention centres are again defined, contrary to all evidence, as “reception centres”, without changing anything except for the request to allow "full and unconditional access to humanitarian workers" and to exclude "personnel who do not have adequate human rights credentials" from the centres management.

As for unofficial places of detention managed by militias and traffickers, their closure is required. Furthermore, in order to generate substitute sources of revenue, it is proposed to start implementing development programs for generating job opportunities in areas which are most affected by human trafficking. Despite the focus of the text on “compliance with human rights and international protection obligations”, Libya is neither a signatory to the Human Rights Convention, nor to the Geneva Convention of 1951. Indeed, it is unrealistic to assume that a new national legislation guaranteeing the rights of migrants and refugees will be implemented in the next future, especially if the current phase of extreme political instability will continue.

Conclusions

For the purpose of our investigation, it is possible to analyse the period from 2014 to today from two points of view: 1) the migratory flows reaching Italy from the Libyan coasts; 2) the system of abuse and exploitation that occurs in Libya against migrants and refugees. It is then useful to divide this whole period into two phases; the three years preceding the Italy-Libya deal on migrants (February 2014- January 2017) and the three years following the same agreement (February 2017-January 2020).

With regard to the first point, a drastic drop in migratory flows arriving in Italy, in 90% of cases departing from Libya, through the central Mediterranean route is evident. Indeed, in the three-year period 2014-2017 about 504,000 people disembarked while in the following three years only 153,000 landed on Italian shores, that means a reduction of about 70%. As for the gross human rights violations inside and outside the places of detention, it is not possible to obtain exact figures. It is difficult to establish the total number of migrants and refugees who were held in official detention centres during the first and second period and it is impossible to obtain the same data for the many unofficial detention places.

Although it is not possible to get reliable numerical data, over three thousand direct testimonies collected by MEDU over six years (2014-2020) describe the consistency and continuity between the two periods. The stories of the survivors describe in great detail (places, times, events, perpetrators) a country that has turned serious violence and abuse against migrants and refugees into one of its main sources of income; a country where crimes against humanity are committed systematically and on a large scale like few other in the contemporary era²⁹; a country that has become a place of death and torture for hundreds of thousands of men, women and children. Furthermore, the picture that emerges from the testimonies of this report is also confirmed by numerous reports of international agencies and human rights organizations and by rigorous journalistic investigations.

According to data collected by MEDU, in the period from 2014 to 2020, 85% of migrants and refugees who arrived from Libya suffered torture, violence and inhuman and degrading treatment in that country. Two thirds were detained, nearly half were kidnapped or in situations that put their lives at risk. Nine out of ten people said they saw someone die, be killed or tortured. A large number of witnesses reported they were subjected to forced labour or slavery for months or years. We believe that these data, concerning the sample of over three thousand people assisted by MEDU, represent a faithful picture of what happened, and what happens, to the majority of migrants and refugees who have passed through Libya in recent years, or who are there in this moment.

Among the migrants and refugees assisted by the teams of the medical-psychological rehabilitation projects for the victims of torture carried out by MEDU in Italy, 80% still had phys-

²⁹ According to article 7 of the Statute of the International Criminal Court, crimes against humanity are defined as, among others, the following acts, repeatedly noted in the testimonies provided by migrants: enslavement, imprisonment or other serious forms of deprivation of personal liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law, torture, rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy and other forms of sexual violence of similar gravity, other inhuman acts of a similar nature intended to intentionally cause great suffering or serious damage to physical integrity or to physical or mental health.

ical signs of the violence suffered on the migration route, particularly in Libya. Although the population of migrants and refugees demonstrates a remarkable, if not exceptional, capacity for resilience, the psychological and psycho-pathological consequences of intentional violence often occur in more insidious ways than physical sequelae. Many times, severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorders receive less attention than physical diseases as they are ignored or not promptly diagnosed, resulting in very negative consequences on the overall health and integration path of migrants and refugees.

It is also necessary to analyse the results achieved by the Italy-Libya agreement recently renewed for a further three years. If on the one hand the objective of curbing the migration flow from Libya to Italy and Europe has been temporarily and partially achieved, partly also thanks to this agreement, on the other hand the objective of improving respect for human rights and the living conditions of migrants and refugees in Libya has totally failed. In other words, it happened what MEDU and most of the human rights organizations feared when the Memorandum of understanding between Italy and the government of Al Sarraj was signed. It was in fact evident that the references to concrete acts to improve the conditions of human rights of migrants and refugees were so generic as to risk remaining a dead letter to the facts.

The presence in Libya of the United Nations agencies, IOM and UNHCR, made possible also by the agreement, represents a relevant aspect worthy of a specific analysis. Operators from both agencies have access to the main detention centres formally controlled by the Al-Sarraj government. From 2017 to today, their presence in the country has allowed UNHCR to evacuate over 4,000 people to Safe Third Countries and IOM to repatriate 48,000 migrants. These are not insignificant numbers but they are clearly below the actual needs if we consider that the currently registered asylum seekers and refugees (February 2020) are 48 thousand. On the other hand, it is evident from the testimonies of this report, as by the two agencies admission^{30 31}, that the operational possibilities within the centres are extremely small as well as the possibility to offer effective protection to migrants and refugees on Libyan territory.

Thus, although the presence in Libya of United Nations agencies is certainly a positive development, there is a risk that their very presence can be exploited and used as a sort of “fig leaf” to maintain the *status quo* characterized by the systematic atrocities committed against migrants and refugees. In this regard, the words of the Syrian asylum seeker detained in Zawia mentioned in this report are illuminating: “You ask me if NGOs and human rights organizations could help us, but I can only tell you that whoever is in those circumstances, to get help and protection should turn to other stronger and more armed militias. Contacting humanitarian organizations would only get you in trouble.”

³⁰ OIM, Urgent Shift Needed in Approach to the Situation in Libya, November 2019 <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-urgent-shift-needed-approach-situation-libya>

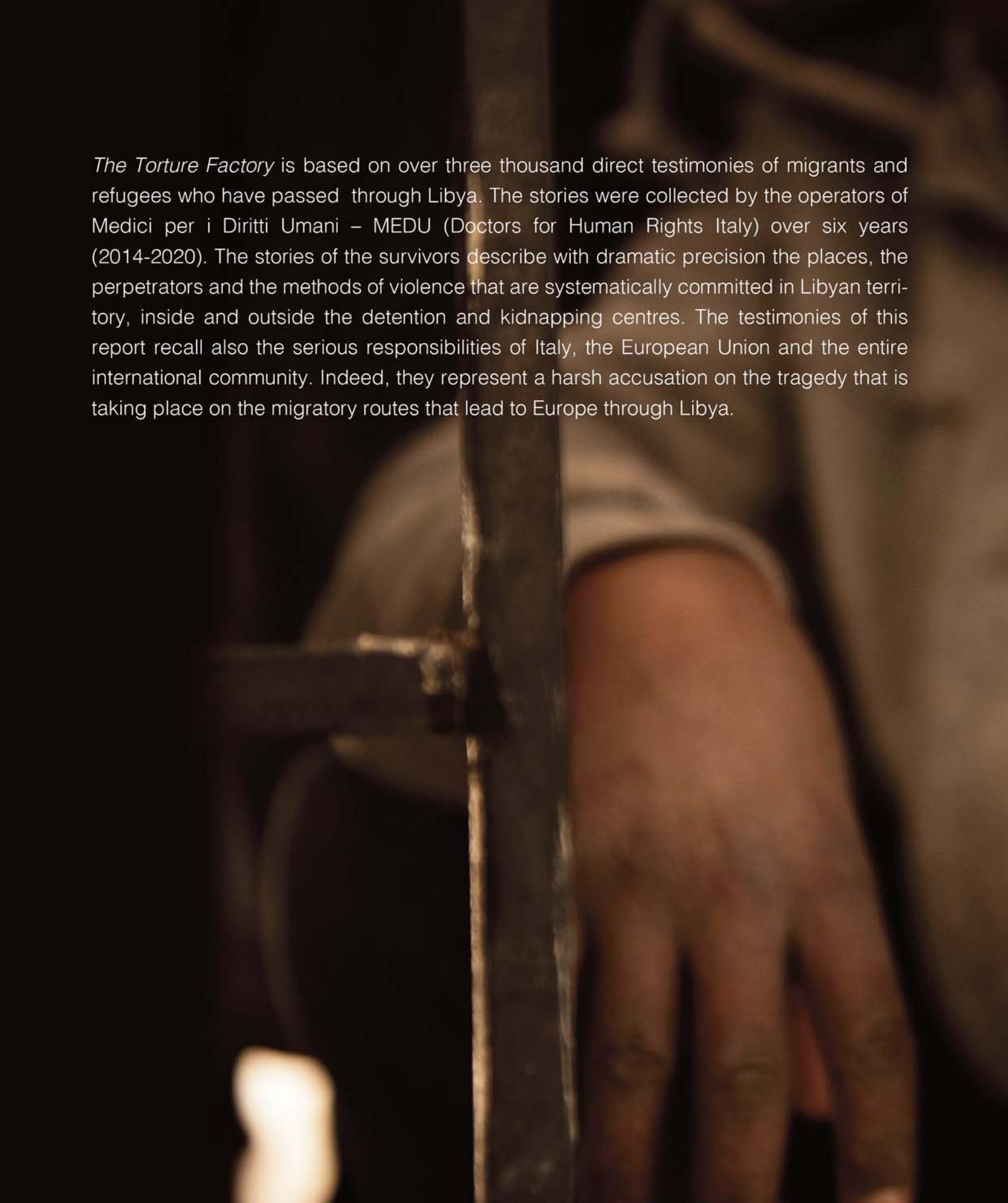
³¹ OIM, February 2020 <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-calls-international-community-urgent-action-find-alternatives-disembarkation-libya>

It is quite probable, that the Memorandum amendments proposed recently by Italy, if they were to be accepted by the Al-Sarraj government, will not substantially change the framework characterized by ferocious exploitation and “unspeakable horrors”³² against migrants and refugees. The proposed changes concerning the protection of human rights remain too general and are not made mandatory by a verifiable implementation calendar. Italy will continue to support the activities of the Libyan Coast Guard, thus considering Libya a safe country where migrants and refugees can be returned. On the contrary, numerous testimonies of people returned by the Coast Guard to Libyan prisons, even in those where IOM and UNHCR staffs are present, show that migrants are exposed to severe torture and abuse and are even sold to traffickers and criminal organizations.

Even the language used in the Memorandum contrasts dramatically with the reality of the facts. In some passages, for example, the terrible Libyan detention centres are still defined as “reception centres.” All these aspects further increase the responsibility of the Italian government since, while on the occasion of the first signature of the agreement, it was still possible to believe that the situation regarding human rights abuses would improve, today, in the light of three years of implementation, its renewal without radical changes represents in fact an act of connivance with the atrocities that continue to be perpetuated.

With this as background, MEDU calls on the Italian government to suspend and fully review the Italy-Libya agreement. MEDU also appeals to the European Union and to the international community to act for the immediate closure of all official detention centres and for the urgent evacuation, under the auspices of the United Nations, of detained migrants and refugees to safe countries. MEDU also appeals to Italy, to the European Union and to the international community to take all possible initiatives to free the tens of thousands of migrants and refugees still kidnapped in informal detention sites. As MEDU has already had the opportunity to affirm in the conclusions of the previous report on the human rights violations of migrants and refugees in Libya (2017), the international community has the historical responsibility for not having tangibly reacted to a phenomenon of these proportions and today it is called, albeit in a very serious delay, to respond with the utmost energy and urgency.

³² On 21 March 2019, during an update at the UN headquarters in Geneva, the Deputy Secretary General for Human Rights, Andrew Gilmour, renewed the concern: “Migrants are subjected to unimaginable horrors from the moment they enter Libya”.
<https://www.avenire.it/attualita/pagine/libia-onu-accusa-autorita-di-orrori-indicibili-sui-migranti>



The Torture Factory is based on over three thousand direct testimonies of migrants and refugees who have passed through Libya. The stories were collected by the operators of Medici per i Diritti Umani – MEDU (Doctors for Human Rights Italy) over six years (2014-2020). The stories of the survivors describe with dramatic precision the places, the perpetrators and the methods of violence that are systematically committed in Libyan territory, inside and outside the detention and kidnapping centres. The testimonies of this report recall also the serious responsibilities of Italy, the European Union and the entire international community. Indeed, they represent a harsh accusation on the tragedy that is taking place on the migratory routes that lead to Europe through Libya.