

The Lampedusa solution: Italy hardens heart to refugees

PAOLA TOTARO EUROPE CORRESPONDENT

7/02/2009 1:00:01 AM - The Canberra Times

THEY arrive in their thousands, a seemingly never-ending wave from Africa, fleeing violence and hunger, driven by a sheer will to survive. Filthy, terrified and mad with thirst, they are often found close to death, crowded in their hundreds onto tiny, wooden fishing boats bobbing aimlessly in the endless sea.

Last year, according to the United Nations refugee agency, a record 36,952 refugees landed on Italian shores, a 75 per cent increase on 2007. More than 31,000 of them were rescued by the Italian coastguard and disgorged onto Lampedusa, the tiny, rocky outcrop that has become the bridge between Africa, Italy, Europe and beyond.

For decades, Italy has provided a first point of humanitarian aid for the new arrivals: after sea rescues they are checked by medical volunteers from the Order of Malta and 24-hour teams from Medecins Sans Frontieres are on hand to greet them at the dock on arrival. A purpose-built "Centro di Accoglio", or welcome centre, on the island allows them a few days to rest until finally, re clothed and fed, they are transferred to Sicily or the mainland to await processing in refugee centres.

Now, Italy has hardened its heart. MSF has been ordered off the docks in Lampedusa and the Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, has decided that the island - just 130 kilometres from Tunisia - is no longer to be a transit point.

Instead, the little island - much loved by holidaying Italians for its bright blue swimming bays - is to become a permanent holding camp. Lampedusa is to be transformed from a stepping stone of hope to a prison. Already a former NATO military base has been converted into a second refugee camp, but this one - known as an "identification and deportation centre" - is patrolled by Italian military police and the carabinieri.

"We don't want to become the Alcatraz of the Mediterranean," says the island's mayor, Bernardino de Rubeis.

"We are not angry with the immigrants but don't know why we should be seen as the solution for a problem that the whole of Europe cannot resolve."

And as the financial crisis engulfs the world, the nationalist song in Italy is becoming even louder.

Mr Berlusconi and his centre-right coalition were helped back into power last year by a pledge to oust illegal immigrants as quickly as possible. They have since said that all efforts have been made to strike repatriation deals with both Tunisia and Libya, demanding that both nations patrol their own waters to intercept them before they enter Italian waters.

But the hypocrisy of this rhetoric could not be more glaring. Italy has long benefited from the floods of immigrants ordered to leave the country, closing its eyes as they are allowed to disappear into the south to become the cheap labour that keeps the region's agricultural sector moving.

The African illegal immigrants, known to locals as "i clandestini", pick the fruit and vegetables that feed Italy's rich, industrial north.

When the Herald spent a week on Lampedusa with the Italian coastguards last year, the level of refugee fatigue was palpable. The officers did their job, day after day, with patience and humanity - but talking informally, they would wonder "where it would all end".

Coastguard Commander Gildo Damanti remains proud of his ship and his crewmen's rescue work but is fearful that the life that awaits so many of the new arrivals may be worse than what they fled.

"So many young women arrive and I wonder what choices they have ... and the little children. It is a cycle, a horrible cycle, and nobody can know what awaits them."

The Herald, with special permission, was allowed to visit the arrival centre and we roamed relatively freely, taking photographs and talking to military security men, volunteers and refugees.

We have kept in contact with one young Nigerian woman, Sonya, who came ashore during a mid-sea rescue we reported in September.

Aged just 19, she fled violence and went to look for a new life in a bid to feed siblings left behind after they were orphaned.

She spent close to two months in a refugee camp in Sicily, then was given papers that said she could not claim refugee status but was allowed to go, with one month to leave: with no money, contacts or potential for work, let alone travel.

She found her way upwards through Italy and is now in Verona, housed in a one-bedroom flat with many others.

"I don't know what to do. They say I can give my paper to a lawyer but I don't know the lawyer. I have nobody, nothing, please can you help me," she cries in desperate daily phone calls.

The Lampedusa operation costs Italian taxpayers 50 million euros (\$99 million) a year, a cost that increasingly infuriates island residents. They say their town centre has become reminiscent of a Third World shantytown - decrepit buildings, potholed roads, crumbling school, ancient desalinator and no hospital - because all state money goes to the refugee centre.

Now that the Government is planning to enlarge one centre and make it a permanent detention facility, they fear that tourism, their main source of income, will die completely.

The awful irony is that while residents complain and stage strikes - last month, they closed the town in protest - the African exodus has already created a state-funded service industry in which local contractors vie for multimillion-dollar tenders to provide the centre with clothes, food, security and transport.

This industry, of course, will only boom if a permanent detention centre is finally built.