Unwelcome choices

Italy is facing a surge of migration across the Mediterranean

With economic migrants piling up in Italy, the EU is doing little to help

Print edition | Europe Jul 20th 2017 | ROME

THE encampment has no name, no water, no electricity and no right to be where it is: an abandoned bus park in a desolate stretch of scrub, east of the Tiburtina railway station in Rome. Most of the Africans dotted across the asphalt in tents or sprawled on mattresses in the enervating heat of a Roman summer have no permission to be there either. Many come straight off the boat, says Andrea Costa, head of Baobab Experience, the NGO running the camp: “For them, this is just the latest stage in a journey that may already have taken two years.”

So far this year, the number of migrants arriving in Italy by sea is up by 17% over the same period in 2016, to 93,335. Unlike the Syrians who poured across the Aegean in 2015, most of them are fleeing not from war or persecution, but for economic reasons. They do not qualify for humanitarian protection, and in most cases do not want to remain in Italy, but to move on to countries with better grey-market jobs.

Latest updates

The EAGLE has landed
GAME THEORY

Donald Trump threatens North Korea with "fire and fury"
ASIA

Why the most prolific penalty-takers might just be lucky
GRAPHIC DETAIL

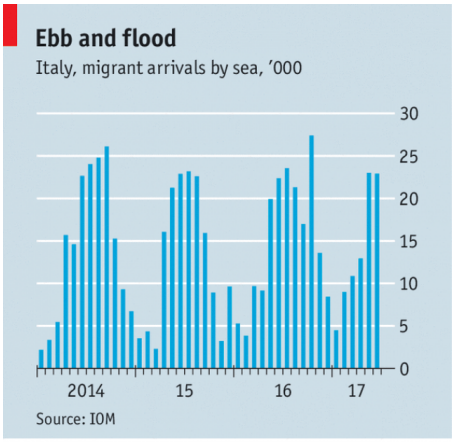
See all updates

Under the European Union's Dublin regulation of 2013, the country where asylum-seekers first land is usually the one that should deal with them. Others are allowed to send them back to that state. Many of those in the camp are among the so-called *dublinati* ("Dublinated ones"), who have tried to leave Italy and been returned—many of them intercepted at the French frontier where stricter controls were imposed last year. "We have some who have been turned back three, four times," says Mr Costa.

Carlotta Sami of UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, estimates that more than 170,000 migrants are in Italian reception centres or are being housed by local authorities. The French blockade is one reason for the growing build-up. Others include the increase in arrivals and more rigorous identification, such as taking fingerprints, which blocks migrants from applying for asylum in other countries.

As the logjam grows, there have been protests in parts of Italy. And with a general election due by May, Paolo Gentiloni, the prime minister, cannot ignore the discontent. His government wants neighbouring countries to accept migrant rescue boats when exceptional numbers are picked up at sea, and for Italy's EU partners to take more of those it already hosts. He also wants international action to stem the flow though Libya.

At Italy's request, the member states of the EU's border agency, Frontex, met in Warsaw on July 11th to discuss changing the rules that govern Triton, the agency's search-and-rescue operation in the central Mediterranean. The following day Mr Gentiloni lobbied the leaders of France and Germany at a summit in Trieste. On July



13th the interior minister, Marco Minniti, flew to Libya to meet the mayors of towns on the coast and the southern border. Officials in Rome are working on a code of conduct for NGOs helping with search and rescue, some of which have been accused of entering Libyan waters in their eagerness to save migrant lives—claims they deny. And on July 18th, a junior foreign minister, Mario Giro, reiterated a threat (disowned by some colleagues) to issue emergency visas that would allow migrants to travel anywhere in the EU's passport-free Schengen zone.

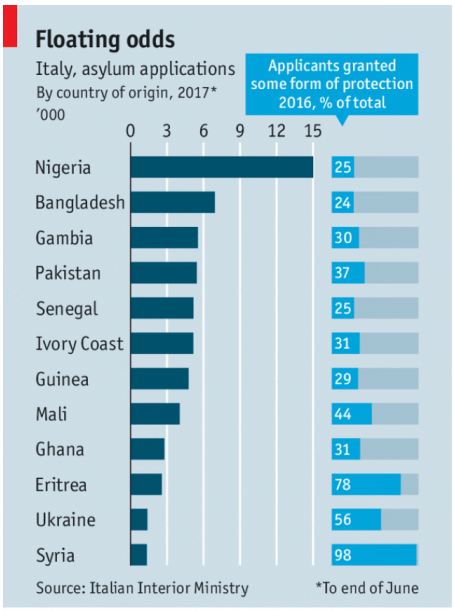
So far, neither bluster nor entreaty has succeeded. A review of the Triton treaty was agreed upon, but with no guarantee it will be altered to Italy's satisfaction.

One of Italy's biggest handicaps is a feeling in other capitals that, because of a mix of soft-heartedness and negligence, it has made itself a "soft touch" for economic migrants. An action plan issued by the European Commission this month is strikingly critical. It urges Italy to extend detention on arrival (currently limited to 72 hours), do more to persuade migrants to agree to be sent back to their home countries, speed up asylum procedures and be less generous in offering protection.

For example, this year has brought a curious surge in the number of Bangladeshis arriving in Italy. They formed the biggest group after Nigerians. That may be related to the fact that in 2016, the last year for which figures are available, Italian tribunals extended some form of protection to 24% of applicants from Bangladesh, a poor country but scarcely Syria.

Italy has one of the world's lowest birth rates, and few countries are in greater need of immigrants. But an influx of undocumented migrants, many of whom end up idling in illegal makeshift camps, is no way to deal with that issue. For Italians, the Mediterranean migration crisis represents a humanitarian burden. Geography has saddled them with the problem, and their governments' disorganisation has exacerbated it. Their fellow EU members are not eager to help out.

This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "Unwelcome choices"


Floating odds
Italy, asylum applications
By country of origin, 2017*
'000
Applicants granted some form of protection 2016, % of total
0 3 6 9 12 15
Nigeria 25
Bangladesh 24
Gambia 30
Pakistan 37
Senegal 25
Ivory Coast 31
Guinea 29
Mali 44
Ghana 31
Eritrea 78
Ukraine 56
Syria 98
Source: Italian Interior Ministry
*To end of June
Economist.com