

HARMFUL BORDERS

An analysis of the daily struggle of migrants as they attempt to leave Ventimiglia for northern Europe

Summary

Background

Since 2015, the Italian town of Ventimiglia, on the border with France, has been one of the major transit points for migrants attempting to leave Italy and reach a final destination in northern Europe. **Migrants in transit often experience harsh and extreme living conditions**, find themselves exposed to physical abuse and vulnerabilities, **and are routinely victims of deprivation and pushbacks at the Italian border**. Shortcomings in protection and the health hazards experienced by these groups may result in acute and longer-term illness, further aggravated by their poor access to health services. To respond to the considerable needs of this group of people, **MSF) teams worked in border areas of Italy, including Ventimiglia, Como and Gorizia.**

Method

A cross-sectional quantitative survey combined with selected anonymous interviews was carried out by MSF between August and September 2017 at two sites: Roja camp and an informal site near Roja River, located in Ventimiglia. The survey consisted of a structured questionnaire on the living conditions of migrants, their experience of violence, migration plans and access to health services. The study population included a random sample of people in Roja camp and an exhaustive inclusion of people in the Roja River settlement. In total, 287 individuals participated in the study.

Results

Among interviewees, **44.2%** (126 persons) reported having **experienced at least one violent event along their journey before arriving in Italy**, while 46.1% (131) reported being pushed back while attempting to cross the Italian border towards another EU-country **Of those who attempted to cross the border, 23.6% (31) reported suffering at least one violent episode during the pushback** and 17.4% reported being transported to the south of Italy. The **main perpetrators of the violence** experienced by migrants at the borders were reported to be the **Italian police** for 45.2% (14) of interviewees, **French police** for 29% (9) of interviewees and Austrian police for 6.5% (2).

Lack of access to healthcare was reported by 37.5% of interviewees in Roja camp and by 24% of interviewees in the Roja River settlement. The overall living environment was described as poor by 79.1% of interviewees in the informal settlement and 68.5% of interviewees in Roja camp. The **main**

reasons of concern in both sites were the lack of general hygiene (27%), the quality of food (12.2%), lack of space and outdoor sleeping (6.3%) and the lack of privacy and isolation from the city (3.4%).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The survey indicates that migrants experience a significant level of violence during their journeys and in their attempts to cross borders within Europe. The progressive closure of Italy's northern borders and the containment measures in place, combined with the use of force by state authorities, have exposed migrants in transit through Italy to adverse medical and humanitarian consequences. The report also documents the use of violence against migrants, both during the journey and at the Italian border, and highlights the inadequacy of reception and protection responses, which exacerbate people's vulnerabilities and condemn them to live in unacceptable conditions.

All of these findings are the **medical and humanitarian consequences of short-sighted migration policies,** which leave migrants who wish to reach other destinations with virtually no option but to resort to dangerous solutions in their search for protection and more dignified lives.

Regardless of their status, women, minors, victims of trafficking and other vulnerable migrants in transit should be entitled to receive protection and services tailored to their needs. Instead, all that is available to them are sketchy initiatives from civil society groups and short-term institutional responses.

The **'bottleneck' created in Ventimiglia is causing unnecessary suffering** among migrants attempting to continue their journeys. It is yet another instance of migration policies that privilege containment and continue to fail the vulnerable and the destitute.

Under these circumstances, **MSF asks European member states to:**

- **Prevent and condemn the use of violence** during pushbacks at borders and forced transfers, as it puts people's health at risk and exacerbates existing medical conditions and vulnerabilities;
- **Enhance the provision of safe and legal migratory channels,** making wider use and improving accessibility of existing legal entry schemes and procedures, such as family reunification, humanitarian visas, resettlements and relocations;
- **Prevent collective expulsions** and implement measures to assess the individual situations of migrants in transit.

MSF asks Italian authorities i.a. that:

- **The Ministry of Interior ensure that all over the Italian territory migrants are treated in a humane and dignified manner,** no matter their legal status, **and ensure that migrants in transit** who are victims of violence and physical abuse are **referred to appropriate services,** including medical and psychological services;
- **The local Health Authorities guarantee access to healthcare** to all migrants in transit and provide them with the STP code if they do not have a residence permit and are therefore not registered with the national health system;

- **The local Health Authorities and the Municipalities should put in place outreach activities** for migrants in transit, especially within informal settlements, to orient them to local health services. **Provide primary health services on an outpatient basis, with the support of cultural mediators**, to address the basic medical needs of migrants in transit, and refer them, where needed, to secondary health services.