

Testimonies from Lithuania Migrant Health Project

May 2022

NOTES: these extracts are part of longer testimonies that have been collected by MSF staff working in Foreigner Registration Centres (FRC) in Lithuania, in Kybartai (Vilkaviskis District), and Medininkai (Vilnius District), between February and March 2022.

Since January 2022, Medecins Sans Frontieres teams run mental health activities in support of migrants detained in these structures, where they could be held up to 18 months, with heavy consequences on their mental health. Between January and March 2022, MSF teams carried out 2,636 consultations. The majority were for psychological first aid and psychosomatic complaints, related to detention and lack of access to necessities, including over-the-counter medications.

All testimonies are anonymous to respect the privacy of the patients, and they focus on police brutality, discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals in detention centres (and in country of origin, on journeys), and challenges of the asylum process.

TESTIMONIES EXTRACTS

It is very difficult. Your mind is not ok, every day you think of the situation, you do not know when this will finish. Some people get 6 months of detention, everyone thinks of this. I cannot sleep at night. Why do they keep people here? It is not good for the mental health. If you go [outside] now, many people sleep because they cannot sleep at night. The problem is not sleep, [it] is the thinking. The reality is that you are in prison. What is the reason? You are not a killer; you are not a [drug] dealer.

[...] I used to sleep in the night, now I cannot sleep. I am very small, I have lost weight, I don't have vitamins. It is not only me. A lot of people are sick, but they are not [physically] sick. They do not have covid [or] something like this, they are sick mentally.

Man detained in Kybartai, from Mali.

[...] Talking about the place, daily life. There is no [personal] space, also, there is no rest. They don't have a procedure from midday to midnight for people to have quiet time and to rest. There is noise, music in the night, there is no time management. I think those things they did them for their benefit; They make it cruel so people get tired and will apply for voluntary return, because they want to go back home.

Man detained in Kybartai, Kurdish Yazidi

The Belarusian guard was aggressive with us, and they took our phones, documents and \$4,500 from me. After crossing the border [from Belarus], we stayed in a Lithuanian village by the highway. We were waiting for the police to come for us. In my mind, I said 'we are in Europe', and I am looking for them to protect me. This was just my imagination. A police car came and took us to the border camp.

Within the month, I [moved] between two camps. I was taken to Prabrade for 15 days followed by Rudininkai for about two months. Then I was moved to Kybartai . . . I faced some insults. They had some sense that I am gay. I was hearing comments from people. During this time, I was pushing LRC (Lithuanian Red Cross) to transfer me. I did not want to end up with everyone knowing about me, [who] I am is a personal matter. Then they moved me downstairs. One of the reasons that I was pushing LRC to move me was that one of my roommates was my neighbor back home, I was afraid that he would find out and then my [family would] find out where I was. He kept asking, "Don't you know me?" I denied [it and said], "No, I don't know you." My father has money, and he could pay someone to reach me here and harm me.

Testimony from a person in one of the centers where MSF works

Psychologically, I got really tired and started [being] traumatized being around those people. I suffer a lot. Every day I go down to the guard asking them to be transferred. Whenever I go, there is a guard that wears glasses, he keeps bullying me as well. He says, "What do you want gay?" He does not listen to me, he just says, "Go away gay."

I am feeling I am in a dark hole. It has happened several times. I sleep while I'm hungry because I am afraid to leave my bed and start getting comments. I am also afraid wherever I go it will be the same. I am trying to be optimistic maybe it will be better for me in a different camp.

[...] What I can say is that it has been the same feeling since I left Iraq. Whenever I need anyone, it kind of wounds me, until now imagine how many wounds I have. I have no hope. I don't see anyone powered by humanity. Even if I see LRC and tell them how I suffer, they don't feel what I am feeling, they don't experience what I have been through.

To identify humanity when you are bound to other people is when you put yourself in others' shoes, this is when you can feel more and understand people. Here I found they just see that you are fine physically, so they ignore the rest, but we are wounded inside.

Man detained in Kybartai, from Iraq

Yesterday [my detention] got extended for six months. Three months ago, I received my rejection. Nov/Oct I applied for appeal. I have sent four emails, but they never replied. They told me that I did not prove my nationality although I have submitted my driving license. They asked me for my passport, but I told them that smugglers took it from me, together with my phone.

[...] I cannot describe my situation: I am depressed because of this situation. I fear that I will not see my parents. My mother has to have a surgery and she cannot reach Baghdad because my family has been threatened. I cannot talk about it, I feel depressed. I went to the psychologist¹, but he did not tell me anything, I need psychological support to change my thoughts to feel I am safe. Nobody gave me this feeling. This psychologist has hurt me more, they put me in the isolation room after the session, I had a panic attack, and it did not help at all.

Man detained in Kybartai, from Iraq.

A guard comes to the window to count us, and he goes, "You are not sleeping. Are you going to Germany? Some African ladies want to go to Germany, but they have to have sex with the guards" I told him that Germany is my problem, he left saying he was joking. He was laughing when he left. My friend told him, "She is young, what are you doing?" He said he was joking.

Woman detained in Medininkai

It was the day before yesterday at night, it was approximately 12 o'clock. I went to the fence and saw that no one was there. [in detention] [the guards] were racist and they treated us very badly. The food was not enough, and they already extended our time another six months after already spending seven months in detention.

We ran, we jumped over the fences—three fences. After like five minutes, the border guards became aware of it, and they came after us with dogs. We fled to a street on the left, where we saw a big truck. We went under the truck to hide ourselves. But the driver was in the truck, and he started his truck and blew the horn. So, we ran away fast, for about one hour, in the snow, which was [up to] our knees. Our clothes were wet, we were very tired and scared.

The security guards chased us. They came with four cars, two with a Kalashnikov on it (K9). We hid in the snow for almost one hour, they came close to us but could not find us at first. Then, they brought two dogs and they found us. While we were laying down, one of the border guards came and struck me with his feet on my back neck [pointing to the backside of his neck, cervical spine area], and my face went into the snow. And he did this to all of us, one by one. And still with that, he jumped holding his both knees and struck us with his legs on our back. We were almost out of breath, like we were choking. One of the border guards, a woman, was holding a dog. She released the dog on us and the dog bit me on the shoulder and on my feet, and then he bit my friend as well, on the shoulder and on the feet. After that,

¹ not an MSF psychologist, but psychologists working in the Registration Centers

they kept us laying down in the snow for another half an hour, and then they got us into the cars, and then to a van, back to Medininkai. The back of the van is like a jail, like a small jail. Each of us were in a [different] van. I could not even move to my left or my right, it was so tight. They left us on the van for almost six hours with wet clothes, without food, without water, exhausted and scared. We asked for the toilet, they did not let us [go] to the toilet.

Man detained in Medininkai, recounting about an episode of violence in the detention center