

Montecampione's refugees surviving sand, sea and snow

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Montecampione is a ski resort 1,800 metres high in the Italian Alps. Nowadays, the mountain top is covered in green fields full of pine trees. But not all recent residents have found it picturesque. This was one of the many communities all over Italy to receive sub-Saharan African workers fleeing northern Africa during the Arab Spring. "This resort was a prison, a cold prison," says Ibrahim Busari. The 30-year-old Nigerian spent five months here after living in Libya for nine years. "I had a good life in Libya, I made good money in my own tailor shop. But when the bombing started I had to leave. Due to NATO, I ended up here." He points at the now deserted wooden ski hotel that served as his home along with 100 or so fellow African refugees. The building looks out over Valle Camonica, a 90-kilometre long stretch in north-east Lombardy, and Lake Iseo. "There's no public transport during the summer, so to get to the closest village we had to walk for about three and a half hours," recalls Busari.

Not suited

In spring 2011, when unrest in northern Africa landed tens of thousands of refugees on the Italian island of Lampedusa, local authorities scrambled to create order. As quickly as they could, they shipped refugees to mainland Italy. "They arrived here in their shorts and flip-flops, and up there it's cold, even in summer," remembers Carlo Cominelli, president of the non-profit foundation K-Pax.

K-Pax quickly collected clothes and shoes from the local population to help the refugees, but it wasn't enough. "No one ever checked whether the hotels were appropriate for housing refugees," Cominelli says about the shelters Montecampione offered.

Integration

At a certain point last October, almost half the Africans living at the ski resort walked down the mountain to protest their situation. They were stopped by the police. From there, negotiations with the authorities started. K-Pax played a major role here. "I personally called all mayors to ask whether we could find a solution for the situation of the refugees. Twelve of them agreed to an integration programme we invented," says Cominelli. Some 70 refugees currently reside in Valle Camonica. They live in apartments, go to school and work. Not long ago, Busari was denied a stay permit because authorities believe he is fit to return to Nigeria. He plans to appeal the decision. Most of his fellow refugees are in limbo, waiting for a committee in Milan to decide whether they'll see Montecampione's next snowfall.

Gardening

"I like doing this. I'm outside and it's better than doing nothing. You start to feel miserable if you're not doing anything," says Martin Ndouga. Three afternoons a week he helps the city of Pisogne keep the local parks clean. The 27 year old from Cameroon lived in Libya before. "I used to work in construction, but often I didn't get paid or [I got paid] less than what I was supposed to get," he says in a low voice. "I also happened to be beaten up. In Libya, they don't like black people." When the war broke, he was forced, at gunpoint, onto a boat. "I didn't know where I was going," he recalls. After five days on the Mediterranean, his boat was picked up by the Italian coastguard. He eventually ended up at the ski resort.

Now Ndouga shares an apartment with his four "Cameroon brothers", as he calls them. They go to Italian language class every morning, where they are taught anything from how to apply for a bank account to the value of *I promessi sposi*, the 19th-century Italian novel by Alessandro Manzoni.