

Europe: dreams and despair on immigration frontline

By Rory Carroll

REGINA PACIS (Italy): The sun has just risen over the Adriatic when several dinghies are spotted racing for shore. Bedlam erupts outside as carabinieri guards scramble into Land Rovers. Stray dogs snoozing at the gates uncoil and gallop ahead of the vehicles as they head for the beaches.

It will be a few hours before the carabinieri return with the new arrivals. Inside, their predecessors crank up for another day. Some call Regina Pacis a prison, others a haven. Officially it is a holding centre for illegal immigrants and asylum seekers. Its two storeys gleam yellow and orange but steel grilles ring the complex.

The foamy sea that carried the inmates here, between Lecce and Otranto on Italy's heel, laps a few yards away. Once it was a playground for the rich, not smugglers. Some 270 men, women and children from more than a dozen countries fill the corridors, dormitories, canteen and courtyard. Some are certain to be deported, some are certain to stay, most are certain of nothing.

This frontline of the European Union's battle to keep out the uninvited doesn't hit the headlines often. Not even last New Year's Eve, when a dinghy on a moonlit dash from Albania flipped and 59 people drowned.

Survive, dodge the carabinieri and what awaits are the jobs Italians no longer want: cleaner, carer, fisherman, fruit-packer, dish-washer, prostitute. But Italians equate the arrivals with crime and so measures to keep them out dominate the election campaign.

Marius Charri, a sandy-haired 14-year-old, came to learn computers.

"That's the future," he grins. He travelled alone and with one leg, the other claimed in a car accident. The ambition of Jara Zija, 15, was curtailed by a voyage in which half his boatload drowned. Happy to be alive, he'll settle for dishwashing or farming. In his seven months here he has picked up conversational Italian, Arabic, Romanian and Moldovan.

As he speaks the carabinieri vehicles return, disgorging 31 Kurds from Turkey. About 30 Albanians were also caught but they were aged over 18 and subject to immediate deportation. Soaked up to their chests after wading ashore, the Kurds, who can claim persecution and thus asylum, tramp sand and seaweed into the registration office.

Clutching plastic cups of hot milk, they are hollow-eyed and fidgety yet relieved that a \$1,700 investment in a two-month odyssey through Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania has paid off. In time they will probably be allowed to join relatives throughout the EU.

The Kurds do not realise their luck. Partly because it is run by the Roman Catholic church rather than the state, Regina Pacis is a palace compared with other holding centres. It has a warehouse of donated clothes, a cinema, a football tournament and occasional day passes to nearby San Foca. Fr Cesare Lodeserto encourages inmates to run it themselves.

Rivalries fester. Three Palestinian refugees from Gaza are incandescent that Kurds have come

and gone since they have been detained. Bangladeshis resent Sri Lankan Tamils.

The quietest compound is that of ex-prostitutes. Mostly eastern Europeans under 25, they have been plucked from the streets, often pregnant, and sent here to build their own community. A Robbie Williams poster hangs in a yard dotted with prams, toys and a washing line of baby clothes.

Angela Slobodciuc, 24, was arrested with her pimp just after arriving from Moldova, where she had a son's medical bills to pay. "I never walked the streets. Now I work in the kitchen here and in a restaurant in San Foca. It's enough to get me money and papers so I can bring over my family."

Her four roommates, the youngest 17, were not all so lucky. Escaping poverty was little compensation for the brutality of being sold from pimp to pimp. Remnants of their girlhood line the shelves: pink flowers, teddy bears, a Barbie doll, a furry dinosaur and brightly wrapped sweets.-Dawn/ Guardian News Service

<http://www.dawn.com/2000/12/24/int11.htm>