



Jesuit Refugee Service Europe

# EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANTS LIVING IN MOROCCO AND ALGERIA

# LIVES IN TRANSITION

December 2012

Research by **Andrew Galea Debono**

Based on interviews with migrants in Casablanca, Rabat and Tangiers in Morocco, and in Algiers, Oran and Tamanrasset in Algeria

# LIVES IN TRANSITION

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The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation established in 1980 by Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ. Its mission is to accompany, serve and defend the cause of forcibly displaced people.

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	To individuals of goodwill concerned with the rights of refugees and migrants

# INTRODUCTION

The shores of North Africa, separated by sea from the borders of southern Europe, have long been part of routes for trade and migration. Whether it was caravans crossing through the desert from the south or trade by ship from the north, there is a long history of people passing through and settling down in countries such as Morocco and Algeria.<sup>1</sup> Since the end of 2010, there have been a number of dramatic changes in North Africa and the Middle East, having a huge impact on the region and its migratory flows. Conflicts in Libya and Syria as a consequence of the Arab Spring and the concurrent outbreak of violence in Ivory Coast have displaced several thousands of people and changed migratory routes. The Arab Spring had a direct consequence on Morocco, with political changes leading to an increase in raids and expulsions of sub-Saharan migrants from the territory. In recent months, conflict and persecution in Mali has led to over 200,000 people being displaced within their own country and has affected the security in the south of neighbouring Algeria. The Algerian government has temporarily stopped expulsions to the border with Mali and migrants themselves no longer feel safe passing through Mali on their way up north.

European Union border policies, such as the use of FRONTEX-coordinated missions and bi-lateral border control agreements, have also had an impact on North African countries such as Morocco and Algeria.<sup>2</sup> Whilst receiving a constant inflow of migrants either fleeing from conflict and persecution or from situations of poverty, an increasing number of people have been getting stuck there – unable to move either forwards to Europe or backwards to their countries of origin. This has turned countries which were often considered as countries of transit into countries of destination, as the European Union use them as a buffer zone. Those facing the consequences of EU border policies are primarily the migrants themselves. The hardships and risks they face in their lives are rarely, if ever, taken into account when policies directly influencing them are made. Such consequences can vary from being stuck in transition for a number of years - living with little or no rights and in sub-standard conditions, to people actually losing their lives attempting to cross into Europe in extreme conditions.

Whilst the countries in the north-west region of Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Senegal and Mauritania) have all ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, to date Mauritania is the only country in the region that has established national asylum laws and a

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<sup>1</sup> Bakewell, O. and de Haas, H. (2007) 'African Migrations: continuities, discontinuities and recent transformations', in L. de Haan, U. Engel and P. Chabal (eds) *African Alternatives*, Leiden: Brill.

<sup>2</sup> Andrijasevic, R. (2006) 'How to Balance Rights and Responsibilities on Asylum at the EU's Southern Border of Italy and Libya', Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford.



local system.<sup>3</sup> In the rest of the cases, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is left with the task of determining who is in need of refugee protection and ensuring that their basic rights are guaranteed. The downside of this situation is that refugee status granted by UNHCR is not always automatically recognised by local governments, and there is still a lack of awareness by many government workers and police officers at the grassroots level of the rights that should be guaranteed by refugee status. The right to work is one of the most fundamental of rights which is breached, making it hard to talk about meaningful protection except for the right to be protected from forced deportation. At the same time, much needs to be done to establish strong and effective national systems which focus on identifying the most vulnerable including

those in need of protection and victims of trafficking in mixed migration flows.

Despite the variety of reasons migrants have for living in a particular country, they often share a common situation in their host country. They have commonalities in their legal status as well as problems in accessing mainstream services and the labour market. Livelihood security has been defined as employment security, housing security and ability to solve a crisis. Having a legal status is linked with the ability to access secure employment whilst the right to redress in a court of law plays an important role in one's ability to solve a crisis.<sup>4</sup> Irregular migrants are generally regarded as second-class human beings by the local population, invisible and without a voice. The psychological resilience and level of vulnerability of the

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR 2012 Regional Operations Profile - North Africa

<sup>4</sup> Mazzucato, V. (2007) 'The role of transnational networks and legal status in securing a living: Ghanaian migrants in The Netherlands'. Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford.





Families at the JRS project in Casablanca

© JRS Morocco

individual has a deep impact on their ability to cope in this new environment.<sup>5</sup>

JRS set up the 'Observatory' project in order to better understand the human consequences of EU border and returns policies affecting North and Western Africa. Through field visits, interviews with migrants themselves and other relevant stakeholders such as service providers, JRS attempts to provide a window of awareness into the lives of people and the conditions they live in. The hope is that such experiences will be taken into account when decisions are made and that persons being affected by policies will have their voices heard by those making the decisions.

Previous research on the situation of stranded migrants in Morocco and Algeria resulted in the publication of a report titled "I Don't Know Where To Go" – The Experiences of Migrants Living in Algeria and Morocco' by JRS Europe in September 2011. Thanks to generous financial support by the *Fondation Assistance Internationale*, we were able to organise a

new mission to these two countries during which JRS researcher Andrew Galea Debono did numerous interviews with migrants and stakeholders and provided updated information.

The author and JRS Europe is grateful to the following persons and organisations for supporting this report: JRS Morocco and the SAM project; Caritas Morocco projects in Rabat and Tangiers; Le Groupe Antiraciste de Défense et d'Accompagnement des Étrangers et Migrants (GADEM); Caritas Algérie; Rencontre et Développement (CCSA: Comité Chrétien des Services en Algérie); The office of the Italian Refugee Council in Algeria; Fr Thierry Becker, Père Blanc; The Jesuit Community in Algiers; Dr Nicolette Busuttill of JRS Malta; Fr Josep Buades Fuster SJ; and especially to all of the migrants and refugees who shared their lives with us.

We dedicate this publication to the memory of the thousands of men, women and children who have lost their lives at the closed borders of Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (2009) 'Not Criminals – Médecins Sans Frontières exposes conditions for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers in Maltese detention centres', Brussels Operational Centre: Brussels.

# MOROCCO

## AUDREY'S STORY

**A**udrey once lived a normal life in Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast with her husband and three children. She worked as a secretary for a large company and also part-time with an NGO, whilst her husband worked in a big petroleum company. At the same time, she was politically active and also found time to volunteer with organisations helping abandoned women. When a brutal conflict broke out following the presidential elections in late 2010, hundreds of people were killed and several thousands were forced

to flee from their homes.

“Shots were being fired in the streets and violence was all around us,” she recalls. “Armed people started entering houses, specifically targeting politically active persons. My family were also targets so we stayed indoors for a number of days hoping to remain safe. After some time, our food finished so I was forced to leave the home in search of food and drink as we had started to starve. I took my two daughters with me and left my husband and son behind. When I got back home, I saw the door open and bullet marks all over the house. I knew that something terrible had happened and ran inside. My husband and son were lying on the ground. I was desperate and started to scream for help. My little daughters were crying next to me. We managed to get a



A typical day at the JRS project "SAM", Service Accueil Migrants, in Casablanca  
© JRS Morocco

doctor to try and help them. My husband barely survived and is now disabled but my son, who was only 8 at the time, never woke up again.”

Despite surviving, Audrey’s husband fractured his spine and must wear a back support for the rest of his life. He also has a huge scar on his arm, having been slashed with a machete. Audrey gathered her strength and took her injured husband and two surviving children overland to Ghana. In order to cross the border, they changed their identities and dressed in a way that they would not be recognised as they left their neighbourhood. To make matters worse, her husband could hardly walk. They were recognised as refugees and lived in a UNHCR camp for about 10 months but eventually were forced to flee again as tensions rose within the camps themselves. They undertook a long and tough two week travel towards Algeria. At times, they had to walk for long distances in the desert to get from one place to another despite her husband’s disability.

Audrey and her family eventually arrived in Morocco, having heard that it was a country that respected human rights. She needed a safe place to look after her husband who struggles to move and cannot work. At the age of 27, Audrey must single-handedly look after her husband and two daughters. She feels that all she does is suffer and cannot forget the death of her little son. Since their recent arrival in Rabat, the family lives in one small room and an NGO helps

them by paying the rent due to their very difficult situation. This will give them time to settle down and begin to fend for themselves. Audrey currently has no job but it will be difficult for her to look for work whilst also taking care of her husband and children. It is also impossible for her to get a work permit and there are frequent raids by the police on migrants, deporting them beyond Oujda on the border with Algeria. On arrival to Rabat, they applied for asylum with UNHCR and now have asylum seeker certificates whilst their case is pending. They hope to get refugee status in the long run and to get support from UNHCR.

Audrey has a lot of regrets. “If I had not been involved in politics, my husband would be ok today and my son still alive. I feel guilty about it. But since when is being active in politics a crime?” she asks.

Many women find themselves having to cope on their own in very difficult circumstances, often having to look after families depending on them. For this reason, JRS set up a small project for such persons living in Casablanca called the Service Accueil Migrants (SAM). The project includes capacity building, language courses and other activities for women, a nursery for their children of various ages and partial support to set up small income generating activities. It also provides social outreach and emergency support to those in need. Information on needs and obstacles they come across are gathered and used in collaboration with other organisations in order to advocate for change.



## REASONS FOR FLEEING

**D**espite travelling along similar routes, there are a number of different reasons which cause people to leave their countries of origin. The several migrants interviewed all had a particular motive which compelled them to undertake a risky and difficult travel.

### HELPING THE FAMILY TO SURVIVE

Losing her father, the bread winner in the family, meant that Mirabel had to find a

way to support her seven siblings. “My sister died of appendicitis because we couldn’t afford to get her the necessary treatment.” Poverty can kill as much as war. Once her father died two years later, Mirabel had to go abroad to help the rest of her family survive by sending them back the money she would try to earn.

### UNEMPLOYMENT

Isaac used to work as a second-hand shoe salesman in Ghana but one day he lost his job and he could no longer



The fence that divides Morocco and Ceuta, Spain  
© Andrew Galea Debono

maintain himself and cover his basic needs and those of his family. He had a friend who had managed to go to Europe and started an import /export business between Europe and Ghana. Isaac wanted to try and do the same thing.

### **DOMESTIC WORK**

Fatou arrived from Senegal having been offered a job as a hair-dresser and hoped to send money back to her family. She soon found out that, in actual fact, they wanted her as a domestic worker under extremely tough conditions. She refused to accept and ran away but has not yet found the means to go back home. Many other women accept such work conditions out of despair.

### **CONFLICT AND PERSECUTION**

Having lost her father when she was very young, Esther fled from both war and religious persecution in the Ivory Coast. When the conflict broke out in 2011, her uncle was killed and her husband fled, leaving her to fend for herself and her young daughter. Despite being badly injured herself during the war and still bearing massive scars all over her body, Esther found the strength to escape with her daughter. Brunelle fled from the violence that erupted after the elections in Congo-Brazzaville in 1997 where tens of thousands of people were killed. She is so traumatised by what she saw that she will never be able to have the strength to go back.

Conflict can displace people of any age. Olivia was 61 when she was forced to flee from Ivory Coast due to the conflict in

2011 which claimed the life of her husband. She had already lost her two children during the previous conflict in 2002. On the other hand, Flora was only 17. Before the war she used to go to school in Abidjan like all other children of her age. Once the war broke out Flora and her sister, who is just one year older than her, fled from the country to look for safety.

### **POLITICAL PERSECUTION**

Deborah's husband was in the army but after political turmoil in the Democratic Republic of Congo she was forced to flee. Her husband had gone to work as usual one morning but when trouble broke out he phoned to tell her to take the children and run away. At the time, he was working for a General who had fallen out with the rest of the military powers. After that, he disappeared and she never heard from him again. Along the travel, she was beaten and raped by armed men near the border between Benin and Niger. She does not know who those men were but still to this day she is traumatised by the violence she suffered.

### **FAMILY REJECTION AND ILLNESS**

Abby was sent away from Nigeria by her husband and his family. It was only when she was in Morocco that she realised he had infected her with the HIV virus. He initially kept their daughter with him but once he died of AIDS, she arranged for her daughter to join her in Morocco. They both have access to the necessary medication and treatment which they would probably not have access to in their own country of origin.

## A TRAUMATIC JOURNEY

"We had been walking in the desert for days abandoned by the smugglers who were trying to escape from the Algerian police. The police knew we were in the middle of the desert and when they caught us, they threw sand in the little water we had and left us there. We had no more food or water. We walked and walked to try and reach a town or settlement but did not know where to go. Those who were weaker started falling down. We kept on walking, me and my friend. But then even we ran out of strength. My friend

fell down and never got up again. He died there. And soon after, I fell too. I knew this was the end for me. I closed my eyes and lost consciousness. I thought that I was going to die right then".

At this point, Fabrice, a 37 year old man from Cameroon, broke down in tears. It took him several minutes to regain composure and continue his story. He too would have died like so many people before him had he not been spotted and picked up by a nomad who was passing through the desert. He took Fabrice to a military camp in Niger where he was nursed to health. He only regained



A view of the fence dividing Morocco with Ceuta, and Europe  
© Andrew Galea Debono



consciousness inside the camp itself and it took him several days to recover.

**"So many people die in the desert. You cannot even begin to imagine. They just die there and their bodies are covered by the sand. The world forgets they ever existed. But I will never forget my friend or the other people who I saw die around me."**

*Fabrice, from Cameroon*

Many persons risk their lives in the desert, at the mercy of smugglers and bandits, often walking for days with little food or water.

Two years later, in 2006, Fabrice took another risk. He tried to swim two kilometres at night from the shores of Morocco to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. It was a custom that those who knew

how to swim would pull along with them a person who didn't. Fabrice was asked to help a pregnant woman who had a tyre around her waist to help her float. When they were far from the shore and approaching Ceuta, the tyre around the woman got deflated and she started to drown. Fabrice tried his best to save her and, in the struggle to survive, the woman passed out. He carried her and swam at the same time, desperate to save her life and that of her unborn child. The commotion of this struggle for survival was spotted by members of the Spanish Guardia Civil who approached them and dragged them on board their boat. "Instead of taking us to safety and helping the woman recover, they took us back close to the shore of Morocco and threw us in the sea. I was pleading them not to throw the woman in. I told them she was pregnant but they did not seem

**Swimming to Ceuta from Morocco is fraught with risk, but it is one of the few options many migrants have to get protection**

© Andrew Galea Debono



to believe me. She was still passed out when they threw her in the sea. I got hold of her in the water and started to swim to shore. The Moroccan police on the shore spotted us and ran into the water to help us swim to land. We managed to survive but the woman lost her child.”

Many people rarely stop to consider what sort of despair can induce a human being to undertake such risks. What situations are causing people to leave everything behind and take a huge chance with death? Such forms of desperate migration are the symptom of larger problems which are often ignored in favour of more short term solutions such as push-backs and repressive border control. Human life is not always the main priority when policies are made, but when listening to the traumas faced by people such as Fabrice, one starts to question current priorities.

A psychologist providing support to migrants in Rabat observes that the majority of migrants she comes across suffer from some form of psychological distress, generally traumatised by events that happened in their countries of origin – in the worst cases they have suffered through war and violence such as those fleeing from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or Ivory Coast. Other traumas can also affect these people – such as exile, racism, rejection and problems they face along the travel. Once they leave their countries of origin, they often suffer from exclusion in countries of passage and on arrival to their final

destinations. Many women are victims of sexual violence on their travel towards Morocco and even once they arrive. There are generally two overland routes to arrive in Morocco: through Oujda on the border with Algeria and through Mauritania in the south. From what she is told by the people she has talked to professionally, women using the route through Algeria are more at risk of being raped.

The effects of trauma vary from person to person. Some victims of sexual abuse or other traumatic experiences have difficulty to regain confidence throughout their daily lives. The resilience of the individual makes a difference in the way they react. Support networks can help people overcome their traumas, but these communities are very poor, with few resources, so they also need external support to be able to move on in life.

Emerson from Sierra Leone started to visit the office of an NGO in Tangiers to overcome his drug addiction, which he had used as a coping mechanism to forget the traumas of war. He finally told himself: “The war is over. It’s time to live a normal life”. He prayed for the strength to be able to overcome his problems. The NGO sent him to hospital for help and, slowly, he started to get over his drug problem and put his life together again. When a friend of his got sick and died, Emerson decided to go one step further and make a difference in other people’s lives. He wanted to help others as he too had been helped in the past, so he started to help the NGO as a volunteer.



## A DREAM SURROUNDED BY A FENCE

**O**n approaching the Spanish enclave of Ceuta from the closest Moroccan town of Fnideq one can immediately notice high fencing with barbed wire extending to the sea and protruding out of the coast. The Moroccan police seem fully equipped and focused on ensuring that nobody escapes into Ceuta as several security vans and guards crowd the Moroccan side of the border. A high double fence with barbed wire surrounds the enclave and climbing over has become almost impossible. People like Fabrice risk their lives trying to swim or paddle on a small boat at night to enter the Spanish territory. Those who are

caught at the border are usually roughly handled and sent back to Morocco, and generally deported to the border with Algeria.

Those few who eventually make it to Ceuta are not greeted by riches or an easy life, but at least they hope that finally they will have their basic rights respected and more prospects to build a life than they had before. Once people are in Ceuta, they can apply for asylum. They are transferred to the immigration holding centre (*Centro de Estancia Temporal de Immigrantes, CETI*) but not all are then transferred to mainland Spain, with cases of people stuck in the tiny territory of Ceuta for over a year and even longer. This situation has led some migrants to call Ceuta a “sweet prison”.



Approaching Ceuta by road from the Moroccan town of Fnideq  
© Andrew Galea Debono

## LOOKING FOR PROTECTION IN MOROCCO

Due to its geographical location, Morocco has historically been a route for migration and in more recent times has become a refugee-hosting country. Until the last few years, it was generally considered as a country of transit. Nevertheless this notion is changing as more migrants and refugees are ending up staying in Morocco for longer periods of time. Morocco ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention soon after it came into force and is also party to all other major international human rights instruments. To date, however, there is still no specific local asylum law in place meaning that UNHCR decides who is entitled to refugee protection in the country. According to Moroccan Government sources and independent researchers, Morocco hosts more than 10,000 irregular migrants of sub-Saharan origin. At the beginning of 2012, UNHCR statistics showed that there were 615 asylum seekers and 736 persons recognised as refugees.<sup>6</sup> These figures do not take into account those in need of international protection or who are in a particularly vulnerable situation but, out of fear or lack of awareness, do not approach UNHCR to apply for asylum.

Morocco set up a local Office for Refugees and Stateless People (*Bureau marocain*

*des réfugiés et apatrides*, BMRA) which was meant to ensure that the rights of those recognised as refugees are respected. However, this office has not really been effective and has stopped functioning since 2004, meaning that all refugee-related duties fall into the hands of UNHCR. The recently established Moroccan National Council for Human Rights (*Conseil national des droits de l'homme*, CNDH) is starting to become more active on issues concerning asylum and can provide support for people detained in airports in Morocco.

The CNDH has a consultative status and also does research on the harmonisation of international human rights laws with local legislation.

The Moroccan law courts have the main task on ensuring that general human rights and migrants' specific rights are respected in the country. Law 02-03<sup>7</sup>, which is similar to the French migration law, is a specific local law regulating the entrance and stay of foreigners in the country as well as irregular emigration and immigration, whilst other domestic laws are also applicable depending on the specific case at hand. Law 02-03 gives a number of rights to migrants such as the right to a lawyer, to contact one's embassy and to be notified regarding imminent deportation. However, there is little awareness about this law amongst local authorities and it is often not respected. When notifications according

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR 2012 Regional Operations Profile – North Africa

<sup>7</sup> Loi n° 02-03 du 16 ramadan 1424 (11 novembre 2003) relative à l'entrée et au séjour des étrangers au Royaume du Maroc, à l'émigration et l'immigration irrégulières (Bulletin Officiel n° 5162 du 20 Novembre 2003).

to law do take place, documents are at times only given to the migrants in Arabic meaning that they do not understand what they are signing. People are at times deported directly to the border without going through any of the legally necessary formalities.

Local NGOs are starting to create awareness on Law 02-03 and other rights which migrants and persons with international protection should have access to. Access to rights such as civil status and marriage are also lacking. For example, it is impossible for irregular migrants to get married since they would require government authorisation. By making such an application they would face deportation. Marriage is also complicated for refugees since they are sometimes asked to go to their embassy to get certain documents despite the fact that they are persecuted in their country of origin.

In a 2009 court decision,<sup>8</sup> a Moroccan judge recognised that refugees are not irregular in the country. Such decisions are very important in creating a precedent and legal understanding on asylum but they are also very rare. Nevertheless there are still a number of obstacles to be faced by refugees and migrants such as discrimination in front of the law and a lack of coherent and straight forward access to basic rights. Access to basic services such as healthcare and education differs from city to city, with access to certain services better in one place and

really poor in another. The access to and quality of services for migrants generally depend on the attitude of the staff in a particular institution. There does not seem to be a nationwide approach to such access to services for migrants.

Whilst public hospitals in Tangiers generally accept migrants without documents and persons are not asked to pay for urgent interventions, there are some worrying exceptions which show the need for a more coherent approach. In 2010, a migrant woman gave birth in a hospital in Tangiers and was sent home after two days. When the mother and baby got sick soon after, the woman returned to the hospital with the child but was turned away. The baby eventually died and the authorities asked her to register the death. As she was doing this, the police told the family that they were irregularly in the country so they deported them. The husband, the sick wife who had just lost her child, and their young children were all deported to the wasteland on border area with Algeria.

The lack of a recognised legal status, as well as ethnic and linguistic differences, mean that refugees, like other migrants in Morocco, find it hard to establish sustainable livelihoods. The issue of racial violence against sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco is also very serious and widespread. There are frequent reports of violent attacks on migrants, at times even leading to death, but police rarely take action to punish the attackers.

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<sup>8</sup> Jugement du Tribunal de Première instance de Rabat du 27 juillet 2009, n° 1013,-dossier n° 1116/69/21.

## NO ACCESS TO WORK, FORCED TO BEG

Lack of access to work is one of the main problems faced by migrants in Morocco, leading to a number of other problems such as housing. Many are forced to beg in order to pay their rent and those who do manage to earn enough to cover the month's rent live in very tough conditions, often in crowded rooms in poor neighbourhoods far from the city centres. Small rooms can cost up to 1000 Moroccan dirhams (90 euros) which are not easy to gather for those without work. Water and electricity can cost another 300 dirhams (27 euros). It is not feasible for organisations assisting migrants to provide direct support for paying rent except in very extreme cases.

The electricity of the little room in which Doris lives was recently cut off since she could not afford to pay even the most basic bills. She must fend for herself since her husband abandoned her and their child. She looks for jobs everyday but still has found no fixed work. Even when something does come up, she is only offered about 50 dirhams (4,50 euros) for a whole day, which is not enough to cover the expenses for herself and her young son. Her only constant source of income is to beg in the streets and hope in the charity of local people. "I cry whilst begging. I feel so humiliated asking for money in the streets. At times, things get so bad that I must even beg for water in my neighbours' houses."

People newly arriving to a Moroccan city often find themselves living on the street as happened to Nora, a pregnant woman and her three children. They stay in this situation until they are usually helped by someone from the migrant community and supported until they are back on their feet. Once they do find somewhere to live, the poor housing conditions lead to a precarious hygienic situation and resulting illnesses. Winter months are particularly difficult due to the lack of heating or protection for the cold.

Some families are forced to live apart due to their economic situation and the cost of rent in the bigger cities. Emerson cannot afford to live in the same city as his wife and daughter. He lives in Tangiers to try and find work to support them, sharing a small room with three other people to share the costs of the rent. His wife and daughter live in Fes where the rent is cheaper but finding a job is much more difficult.

When begging on the streets, Michelle is sometimes insulted by Moroccans who tell her to go and work - but she cannot find a job despite trying. "When I look for work, I am asked if I have documents and when I say no, they tell me there is no job for me. Sometimes I'm stopped by the Moroccan police and I use all the money I would have just earned to pay my way out of trouble and avoid being sent to Oujda. I am then left with nothing".

Destitution is a major challenge for the psychologist supporting traumatised migrants in Rabat. For those suffering



### Homelessness and destitution is a reality for many migrants in Casablanca

© Andrew Galea Debono

from trauma and other psychological problems, it is particularly difficult to recover when they have nowhere to sleep. Social stability is essential for them to start their psychological recovery, otherwise there are no foundations upon which to build a new life. Sometimes even simply having a small room can make a big difference in one's sense of security and stability.

Most destitute migrants such as Mirabel say that their biggest wish is to be able to stop begging and to become

self-sufficient. Doris from Nigeria feels that stopping to beg would restore her feeling of dignity. Those with children to look after have a second wish: to be able to offer a better life for their children – better from the one they are offering them now and from what they ever had. They know that this is going to be very difficult while they are stuck in Morocco. A lot of Moroccans are poor themselves and it will not be easy for the government to start focusing on migrant needs while there are so many other social problems to overcome.



## FEAR OF POLICE RAIDS: BEING SENT TO NO MAN'S LAND

In the past, police raids on migrants generally took place before big events such as visits of prominent persons to the country or a particular city. Since the beginning of 2012, raids have become more frequent and have started taking place in many more cities than before. Methods used during these raids have also become more extreme including an increase in the violence used during such police operations and arrests taking place from migrants' own homes. A person

reportedly died whilst jumping out of a police van after being picked up in a raid. The situation has not been this bad since 2009 with organisations providing support to migrants estimating that an average of about 20 to 150 persons per day have been deported to the Algerian border near Oujda in recent months.

When executing the raids, police do not always distinguish between sub-Saharan migrants with regular documents and those without. There have been cases of persons with refugee status and migrants on a student visa who have also been picked up during police raids and deported to the border with Algeria simply due to the colour of their skin.

Algeria on the far left, and Morocco on the far right; the space in between is a no man's land

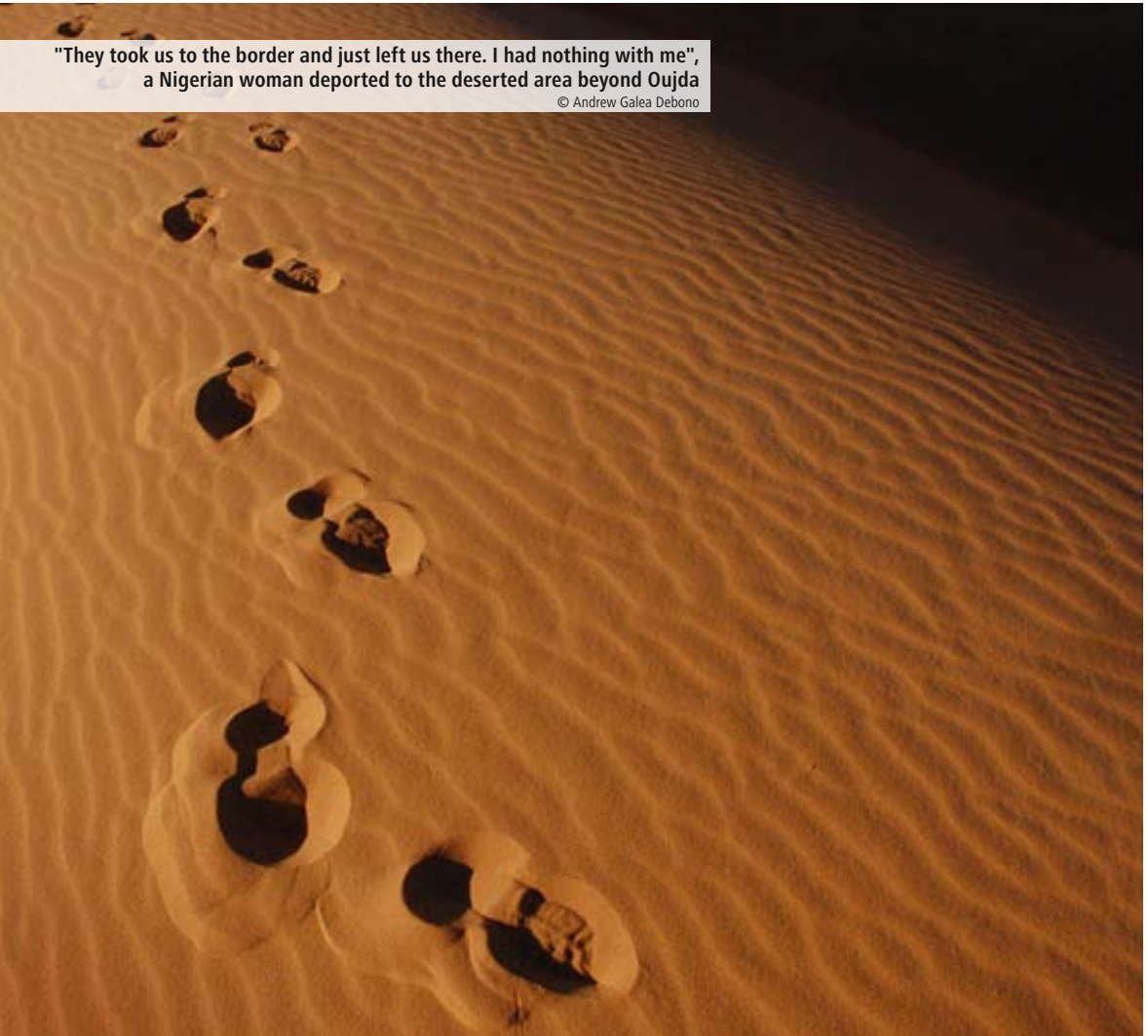


UNHCR and other organisations try to intervene as soon as possible when a person with refugee status is deported. However, at times, due to raids taking place at night, it is too late to stop the deportation and the refugees are given help to come back to the city they were deported from once they are in Oujda. By then, the inconvenience and trauma would have already been suffered.

Migrants picked up in raids generally have their mobile phones confiscated and are not given any chance to contact their families. Linda from Nigeria remembers: "I was taken straight to the police station and had no chance to go back home first to pick up anything or inform my family of my deportation. I was kept in a room with other people who were all waiting to be taken to Oujda by van. They then

"They took us to the border and just left us there. I had nothing with me",  
a Nigerian woman deported to the deserted area beyond Oujda

© Andrew Galea Debono



took us to the border and just left us there. I had nothing with me”.

Life around Oujda is very hard for migrants who are stuck there. Linda tells how “people live in the open in make-shift shelters and it is hard to find food and water.” Some people live on the University Campus which doubles up as a migrant ghetto at night. Stella recalls that police would harass migrants who try to work in the streets, taking them to the police station where they are kept for some time. “I used to sleep outside in the fields surrounded by many other migrants who were doing the same thing. There were many people from sub-Saharan Africa here. During the day, I would beg on the streets to gather enough money to go to Casablanca.” Emerson describes how the police would approach groups of migrants as they slept in the open at around 5am and would burn any possessions the migrants left behind as they fled. Emerson and other migrants would approach the few organisations working in the area for blankets and other basic necessities once they had nothing left.

Samuel from Cameroon was deeply affected by his experience in Oujda. “The police would try to catch us and throw us back across the border into Algeria. One time I was running away from them with a friend, when he fell and broke his leg. They just left him there as he shouted in pain”. By that point, Samuel was traumatised and became suicidal by all he had been through and seen, including sexual abuse suffered by both

men and women. Professionals working with migrants in Morocco believe that sexual abuse is very frequent in this area. Assailants are often local persons and gangs roaming the area to prey on vulnerable migrants passing through or stranded there, but also police officers on both sides of the border.

The increase in raids does not only affect those who are deported but also other migrants living in the cities. Fatou’s husband was supporting her and her two children but he was caught in a raid and deported. The police had simply picked him up with another 24 people and had left them in a deserted area on the border with Algeria. He managed to make his way to the town of Oujda but to date cannot afford to return back to Casablanca and cannot predict when he will be able to gather enough money to do so. It is currently very difficult for Fatou to be able to afford the rent for herself and their two children until he returns, but she does get some financial help from friends in the meantime.

These indiscriminate raids mean that migrants are afraid to leave their homes and be seen in public. This fear renders finding work even more difficult. Abigail from Nigeria says that whenever she hears news that there are raids by the police, she doesn’t go outside and stays inside with her daughter even if they have nothing to eat. “We prefer to remain hungry than to take any risks.” Such fears are very frequent and many migrants choose to stay indoors unless it is really necessary for them to go out.

## BI-LATERAL AGREEMENT WITH SPAIN

**O**n 4<sup>th</sup> September 2012, Spanish newspaper El Pais and other media outlets reported that Spain and Morocco had agreed to divide responsibilities between them for a group of 70 sub-Saharan migrants who found their way to the little Spanish island of Isla de Tierra, off the Moroccan coast.<sup>9</sup> Eight minors and two mothers were identified as vulnerable persons and taken to the Spanish enclave of Melilla, whilst the rest of the group was handed over to the Moroccan authorities. Such an approach does not seem to have taken into account any protection needs of those sent back to Morocco, nor the fact that the level of protection afforded in Spain and Morocco differ enormously.

The Moroccan authorities declared that the migrants will be deported to the border with Algeria as has been their policy in the last few years. This approach by the Spanish and Moroccan authorities is based on a bi-lateral agreement dating back to 1992 regarding the readmission of irregular immigrants.<sup>10</sup> According to the agreement, the Moroccan authorities have the responsibility to identify and eventually repatriate the migrants to their countries of origin or to the country they left immediately before entering Moroccan territory. A number



of NGOs have argued that in practice no real identification took place, nor were any attempts made to repatriate the migrants to their countries of origin. Instead they were left to their own devices in the no man's land on the border with Algeria. Knowing the policy of the Moroccan authorities, it is fair to

<sup>9</sup> [http://elpais.com/elpais/2012/09/04/inenglish/1346759075\\_903935.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2012/09/04/inenglish/1346759075_903935.html)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/1992/04/25/pdfs/A13969-13970.pdf>





question the Spanish participation in such an agreement.

As part of the EU-Morocco Association Agreement which came into force in March 2000, the EU Commission was mandated to start negotiations on a readmission agreement with Morocco.<sup>11</sup> These negotiations are on-going but the

Moroccan government seems reluctant to accept it. The agreement would possibly also include people only passing through Morocco in transit, implying that EU countries sending persons back to Morocco would not need to prove their nationality as long as they can prove that the person was in Morocco prior to entering the EU.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://eeas.europa.eu/morocco/association\\_agreement/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/morocco/association_agreement/index_en.htm)



## NO WAY FORWARD, NO WAY BACK

**B**efore undertaking his journey to Morocco, Samuel - a 37 year old man from Cameroon - had no idea of the suffering he would face along the route and the terrible things he would see. A victim of abuse along the way, he now suffers from severe depression and is being followed by a psychologist provided by an NGO. "If I had known all this before, I would have never left home in the first place despite all the difficulties

I had to face there. I miss my family a lot and wish they were around to give me the moral support that I need at the moment. I feel that I have not met any true friends here who I can open up with and get the support that I need."

Samuel has asked about the possibility of getting help to return home but, at the moment of conducting the research, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) did not have enough resources to help people return home through their assisted voluntary return (AVR) programme. Funding for the AVR projects



Tangiers looking at Europe  
© Andrew Galea Debono

ended in June 2012. There were about 1000 people waiting for AVR including around 60 very vulnerable persons, causing a big psychological impact on those who feel stuck and need to move back. Samuel is worried about his current state of mind and does not know how he will be able to cope if he stays here for much longer. He feels so bad that at times he has hallucinations.

Meanwhile, he has difficulties finding work and feels it is particularly difficult to get a job if he does not have documents. His only priority in life at the moment is to

find a way to get back home and be with his family. Despite all his troubles, Samuel says that if Jesus supported his cross, he must survive too. He prays that all those in his situation would be able to go back home, just like he dreams of doing.

“I hugely regret having abandoned my family” he says in sorrow. Meanwhile, he remains stuck in Morocco with no strength to move forward and no means to go back home.

A number of people like Samuel find themselves stuck in Morocco for a number of reasons. The most common one is financial. Most people have spent all they had to reach here and can barely earn enough to survive, let alone to save up enough to go back home or to pay for the expensive and risky travel to Europe. Others are afraid of being considered as failures by their families if they go back home empty handed. Even those who decide to go back home and have enough money to do so, may be reluctant to undergo the same life-endangering route they used to reach there. There are many bad memories along the borders they crossed and in the vast and harsh desert areas. Moving forward is also impossible. Europe and its respect for human rights is geographically close but is almost impossible to reach due to the tight border security and the costs and risk attached to any attempt to get there. More and more migrants realise that they are in Morocco for a long time, and yet there are practically no foundations for integration. They feel condemned to live as second class citizens, or “as animals” as Samuel describes it, for a number of years to come.



# ALGERIA

## NOWHERE ELSE TO GO

**D**aniel, an engineer who fled from Cameroon with his family due to his political beliefs, ended up living in Algeria after his dream to reach Europe turned into a tragedy. "We crossed through Algeria and entered Morocco at the border near Oujda. The smugglers left us at the border and we had to walk for four days carrying our daughter who was just one year old at the time. It was night-time when we boarded a boat near Oujda to cross to Spain. We had no real driver and after about 5km, the boat flipped over and everyone fell into the sea. Many of the passengers didn't know how to swim and eleven people drowned. It was a shocking experience. Thankfully, a fishing boat was passing by and heard our cries for help. We were picked up and taken to shore where an NGO gave us food and dry clothes. The Moroccan police then took us to the border with Algeria and left us there. We were traumatised by this boat incident and realised how close we were to dying, having seen our own friends drown in front of us. We decided not to go back to Morocco and head to Algiers instead. Once we arrived in Algiers, we were stopped by the local police and deported to the south to Tizawati, an abandoned place in the middle of the desert beyond the Malian border. We stayed there for six months

until we made enough money to move back north to Tamanrasset, the closest town in Algeria, and eventually returned all the way up north to Algiers, about twenty-six hours by bus away."

Life in Algiers is not easy for Daniel and his family. "We cannot go back to Cameroon until the regime changes. Meanwhile I do some small jobs and look for work when nothing comes my way. My wife also looks for work but it is even more difficult to find work for a woman. There is no integration process here so I could never find work as an engineer. We used to live in a small apartment but three months ago we could not stay there anymore since we could not afford to pay the rent. We are currently hosted by a friend, sleeping in his kitchen, but I doubt we can stay there much longer since our friend is also having financial troubles. I don't know where we will go after this."

Daniel's story is not an uncommon one. Like him, many people cross through Algeria in hope of safety and a better life. And, just like him and his family, many end up staying in Algeria for a long time once they realise that reality was different to what they had imagined. Serge, a young man passing through Tamanrasset, had just returned from Casablanca and was trying to head back home to Cameroon. "Morocco is even more difficult for migrants to live in than Algeria. Working there is very difficult and getting to Europe is too risky and almost impossible." He tries to tell this to others who are still at the beginning



Algiers, city centre  
© Andrew Galea Debono

of their travel, but they don't listen. Everyone believes that their luck will be different. They also barely listen when told that about one person in every ten who tries to cross to Europe by boat drowns. "It will not happen to me", says one young man who still dreams of crossing over to Europe. "God is with me and will protect me". Few are ready to let go of their dreams even in the face of harsh realities faced by those who tried the same thing before them. For others, going back home would be a great humiliation even if staying means remaining in an exile of misery for a few more years.

Not all sub-Saharan migrants see Algeria simply as a country of transit. Despite a high youth unemployment, the economic potential in Algeria and its thriving construction industry means that it is also becoming seen as a prospective country

of destination. Olivier from Ivory Coast was in a refugee camp in Togo with his family, having escaped from the civil war. "My mother told me to go up to Algeria to try and support the family through the money I could earn there. She had seen other young people do the same and thought I should follow them," he explains. After eight months living in Algiers, he has not managed to find the regular work he was hoping for. His dream to become a professional footballer is fading away but he is keeping his eyes open for opportunities to further his studies with the help of an NGO. Olivier is trying his best to improve his situation but knows that not all is in his own hands: "The war and political situation in my country caused many problems and made it impossible to make plans for the future." His main dream is to be able to go back home some day when there is peace and stability in his country of origin.



## PROTECTION WITHOUT INTEGRATION

**A**lgeria, just like Morocco, has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention but has not yet put in place a domestic law of its own. This brings about a situation where the national authorities are not always capable or ready to fulfil the duties it has towards persons with international protection. The current laws on migration are very strict and deny migrants the right to work in the country, even if they have refugee status given to them by UNHCR. Jonas, a 26 year old asylum seeker from Chad, explained:

“I imagined that Algeria would offer a strong protection for refugees and asylum seekers. Indeed I do feel safer here than in other countries, but at the same time asylum seekers are still made to feel like illegal immigrants.”

Those recognised as refugees are under the protection of UNHCR and are given documents and important rights and assistance such as support for accommodation. Importantly, an asylum seeker certificate and the refugee document generally allow one to access free healthcare services and protects people from being forcibly sent back to their countries of origin or to the border

An abandoned building in Boush Bouk, Algiers, home to migrants who have nowhere else to go

© Andrew Galea Debono





with Mali. Nevertheless, due to the local laws in place it is still very difficult to find work and earn a livelihood.

The government of Algeria estimates that there are about 165,000 Saharawi refugees in camps in the south west of the country. The figures of refugees with UNHCR status from other parts of the world is much lower. At the beginning of 2012, there were 335 persons with refugee status and around 800 asylum seekers.<sup>12</sup> This number is bound to rise with a number of Syrian asylum seekers arriving in the country due to the war in their country. Nevertheless, many people in need of international protection seem to prefer to continue their journey to Morocco and apply for asylum there or attempt to cross to Europe by boat.

Whilst access to healthcare is generally good, especially when migrants are accompanied by staff from humanitarian organisations, access to education is more complicated. Children of undocumented migrants are not able to attend school, whilst children of asylum seekers and refugees face language barriers until they learn Arabic. Some NGOs try to help migrants access private schools until they learn the local language or until public schools become more accessible.

Currently, there are not many undocumented migrants with children of schooling age. Many economic migrants leave their children of schooling age back in their countries of origin whilst others

with young children express an interest in moving on from Algeria once their children grow older.

Racism against sub-Saharan Africans is wide-spread in Algeria as was widely expressed by most people who were interviewed. This is also reflected in the reaction of the police when a migrant files a complaint. Moses from Nigeria shares his experience in this regard: "It is clear that many Algerians don't really like sub-Saharan Africans. It is not easy for us to live here. If we ever have a problem with an Algerian person, the police always take their side. "Nadege from Cameroon expresses that" in general I feel that the human rights of migrants are not respected. For example we do not feel confident to make a police report if anything happens. We therefore feel as if we are not protected."

Olivier from Ivory Coast shares an experience he had where he and a friend suffered a racist attack: "Things are more difficult due to the colour of my skin. People tell us 'go back to your country'. Recently I was on a bus with a friend and an Algerian man told us to go away. My friend got upset but I tried to calm him down. As I was doing that, I was attacked by four people and badly beaten up. I went to make a complaint with the police but they told me they could not file such a complaint. I think racism is a big problem here. It is sad to see people refusing to sit next to me on the bus just because I'm black or tell their children not to stay next to me. It's very de-humanising."

<sup>12</sup> 2012 UNHCR country operations profile - Algeria

## CROSSING THE DESERT: A TRYING AND TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

For most migrants, the journey to Algeria is difficult and dangerous. They cross through the desert for several days, at the mercy of smugglers and at risk of facing bandits. Moussa from Mali remembers his experience: "We spent two days and nights in a little jeep with thirty people squashed on board. If someone had fallen off the jeep we knew that he would have been left in the desert and died."

Some die along the way due to the climatic conditions. Arnaud from Cameroon describes his ordeal: "The smugglers left us about 60 km away from Tamarasset in the desert and we had to walk for days before we finally reached the town. One of the men who was walking with us died from dehydration. We tried to save him, giving him mouth to mouth respiration but he gasped one last breath and just died in our arms. I will never forget him. With us we also had a woman with a little baby. We were worried that the baby would die. Thankfully one man eventually stopped and gave us some water, saving the baby from dying from dehydration".

There have also been reports of police taking advantage of vulnerable migrants, asking for bribes and inflicting other forms of abuse. Henri, an 18 year old migrant from Cameroon, claimed that he

felt more afraid of the police than anyone else. Women are at a high risk of being sexually assaulted throughout the journey, especially in the border area between Algeria and Morocco near Maghnia. These traumatic experiences often add up to other traumas suffered in people's country of origin, especially when they were fleeing from war and persecution.

An Algerian NGO worker tells the tragic story of a 26 year old woman who was raped along her journey and contracted AIDS. When she was hospitalised in Algiers, she was also diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. When it was clear that the girl had very little time left to live, the NGO and Algerian government with the girl's consent mobilised all their resources to get her repatriated to her country of origin as soon as possible so that she could die surrounded by her family. "We managed to obtain the clearance for assisted voluntary return in record time. Everyone wanted to help her when they heard her story. The day we got the clearance to send her back, we ran to hospital to give her the news. She had just died - we were too late," he recalls sadly.

Looking into the eyes of someone who has just spent a number of days in the desert, finally arriving in Tamanrasset in the south of Algeria, one can really sense the deep wound that such an experience can create. JRS researcher Andrew Galea Debono met four young migrants who had just arrived from Cameroon, looking for help to get urgent medical assistance. One of them was only 15 years old.



**The desert in southern Algeria**  
© Andrew Galea Debono

All four looked dazed and in really bad shape and all were ill. The 15 year old had a large wound on his head, having bumped his head on the roof of the overcrowded jeep he was travelling on. He seemed frightened and confused. "I have no one here," he said quietly, too shy and suspicious of everyone in this new environment to say anything more about himself. "I suspect I may have contracted yellow fever along the way," says Paul, another of the new arrivals. Despite being in very poor health, the passengers of the jeep were left about 50km from the town and told to walk the last part. The smugglers do not want to risk getting caught by the authorities so migrants are left in the middle of the desert with almost no food or water.

The four men had just arrived the night before and had slept on the floor of a little room belonging to a migrant they just met in town. They were still shaken and dusty from the travel, not even having had the chance to wash themselves yet. "All new arrivals look just

like that," says Idriss, a migrant who has been living here for several months. "I probably looked just like that when I arrived. They probably need at least two more days just to recover their strength."

The following day, Paul was accompanied to the health clinic to do some tests. The healthcare staff treated him in a friendly manner especially when they saw that he was accompanied by two other people who could speak Arabic. His tests would be ready in a few days. For now all he and the others could do is regain their strength and get oriented in the town. They may be stuck here for much longer than they imagine. Once they get better they must meet people who can help them settle down and find a place to rent, and possibly a job. Whether down south in Tamanrasset or in the northern cities of Algiers and Oran, migrants tend to live with others from their own nationality. In Tamanrasset, this is particularly obvious with little ghettos of various nationalities being formed and creating communities unto themselves.

## NO RIGHT TO WORK: THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

The denial of permission to work is one of the greatest problems faced by migrants and refugees in Algeria. Many end up working irregularly, meaning that they do not earn as much as locals and are not protected by contracts. At times, employers take advantage of this and do not pay them for the work they have done. The migrants cannot go and report this to the police since they were not working legally and could end up in trouble due to their general status in the country.

Olivier from Ivory Coast is one of many migrants who find work in the construction industry. "This kind of work is very tough and physical. I get very tired but it is all I can find. I really need to rest sometimes since my body will be aching. Some people choose to do bad things in order to earn money, but I refuse to do the same. I don't want to go to prison – I prefer to work hard."

"At times, people are arrested for not having valid documents or for working irregularly. But how do they expect us to survive? This is how things are here," says Ismail from Ivory Coast in a dejected voice. Difficulties in getting work lead to other serious problems such as homelessness.

"We often live in abandoned buildings, hoping that the police will not catch us. If you do find somewhere to rent, you usually have to pay a one year rent deposit – at about 15,000 or 20,000 Algerian dinars (146 to 195 euros) per month for a tiny room. This is a lot for us without work. Without documents we also cannot have regular rent contracts."

*Ismail, Ivory Coast*

Squatting in unfinished buildings such as in the neighbourhood of Boush Bouk is a last resort for those without work or for the newly arrived to Algiers. Andrew Galea Debono visited one of these unfinished buildings and spoke to those living there. Matias, a 32 year old man from Equatorial Guinea and Jean, a 22 year old man from Cameroon who dreams to be a footballer, were sitting on a bed in a crowded room where people gathered to watch the TV set. There was nothing else for them to do. The room had no finished door and had to serve as a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom. It is one of the better rooms in the neighbourhood, having all four walls.

Matias has been living here for two years with his partner and two children: "It's hard to find a job, and when I do, I find it in construction. I can get between 600 and 800 dinars (6 and 8 euros) per day of hard work. When we don't find work, we share what we have with other migrants from our community."

"The winter is tough," he continues. "It can get really cold here and it is hard to





Migrants squatting in an unfinished building in Boush Bouk, Algiers  
© Andrea Galea Debono





**Boush Bouk, Algiers**

© Andrew Galea Debono

keep the cold from coming in. These buildings are not finished. We buy gas tanks to warm the place, all pooling in some money to be able to afford it. The solidarity between us is what helps us afford to buy food on a daily basis even when we don't find work. On the other hand, we have no access to water and electricity since these unfinished buildings were never connected to the lines. We need to get barrels of water from elsewhere whilst we try to connect to the electricity lines by informal means."

The battered furniture in the building was donated to them by generous locals who would have otherwise thrown them away. Matias and his family have been here for a longer time and have managed to get themselves organised, setting up something that resembles a home. New arrivals, on the other hand, face a much tougher situation, often just sleeping on the bare floor of the shell buildings. This is the dark corner of what is otherwise an upscale neighbourhood, creating a stark contrast between the beautiful finished houses of the locals and the small

degraded area where the migrants squat. The difference in social status between the locals and migrants causes quite a bit of tension adding to the barriers of nationality, culture and race that already exist between them.

Clothes hang on the fences along the road and from the roofs. Some enterprising persons accepting this new area as their temporary home have actually set up satellite dishes and connected them to a TV - a group effort which the community benefits from. When people don't manage to find work, at least they can watch TV to pass the time.

During the day, most people are at work or looking for work, whilst on Friday (the local weekly day of rest) one can generally find most of the community here. Some have been here for a long while, whilst others are just passing through – either to try their luck in other cities closer to Morocco and Tunisia, hoping to cross the border and eventually planning to cross into Europe, or moving to safer neighbourhoods in Algiers much further from the centre.

## RAIDS AND EXPULSIONS TO THE SOUTH

Until recently, Boush Bouk and other migrant neighborhoods around Algiers and Oran were often targets for police raids. People caught in these raids would be detained and then expelled to the south just beyond the border with Mali. "I've been deported nine times to the south during my time in Algeria," says Matias. "But in the end I always come back up again," he adds with a smile. "It's not easy but that's the way it is. Down south the police are quite rough with us. Here in Algiers, they treat us better."

No one used to be spared from these raids and deportations. Cecile, a woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo, was once deported with her two very young children. They were picked up by the police from her room in Boush Bouk. "In detention, they make you sleep on the floor and the toilets are filthy and awful. You could get sick and die in there," she says.

"You are taken to the extreme south and dumped in the desert on the border with Mali. We were abandoned and had no food or water. There was no one there where we were left," says Cecile.

When the Algerian police left the migrants in the desert near Tizawati, Tuareg smugglers would invariably turn up and offer to take people back to Algeria for a price. Not everyone can afford it and some get stuck there for a while.

Cecile remembers: "To come back to Algeria, we got on a small truck with about 25 people on board driven by Tuareg smugglers. They left us about 15km from the closest town so we had to walk the rest of the way in the middle of the desert. I had my children with me but other people helped me to carry them. Such a long walk in tough conditions damages your feet. I have heard of some people getting lost when walking through the desert, sometimes they get lost for about three days, and sometimes they die."

Since the conflict in Mali escalated a few months ago, the raids have practically stopped and no one is sent down to the south at the moment. Nobody knows if the deportations will start again if the situation in Mali calms down, but at least for now migrants across Algeria can enjoy this moment of truce with the police. Meanwhile, the Malian conflict is having a negative repercussion on the security around Tamanrasset where many migrants still live. People providing assistance are reluctant to venture outside the town as kidnappings and violence are known to take place in the surrounding areas as the Malian rebels spill over into the south of neighbouring Algeria. Tamanrasset is hosting less migrants than before due to the temporary halt of deportations to the south and migrants no longer seem to be living in the rocks around the town. Nevertheless, the area has become a more dangerous place, and residents here fear that if Algeria gets involved in the Malian conflict, Tamanrasset will no longer be a safe place to live.

## IN THE HOSPITAL, A DIFFERENT FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

Julien was looking frail and without energy as he lay down in a hospital bed in Oran one evening. AIDS was taking its toll on this young man. He had only found out about his illness recently after returning to Cameroon and was now trying his best to stay alive. Three friends were by his side, bringing him moral support and also food and water. Whilst the care in the hospital is good, with medication generally provided for free, and the staff generally kind to migrants, things like food, water and clean sheets are not always given by the hospital and must be brought by family and friends.

"I came to Algeria two years ago, thinking it would be better for finding work than in my own country. How wrong I was!" Julien exclaimed with a sad smile. "I found no work as I had hoped for and things got really tough for me here so I eventually went back. Once I got to Cameroon I got really sick and had no access to healthcare there. I decided to come back up to Algeria where the healthcare system is good and can be accessed for free. There is no such thing in Cameroon and I was afraid that I would die abandoned over there. I feel well looked after here and I get free medication which is keeping alive which I could otherwise not afford." He picks up a box of medicines.

"See these medicines? This box costs 30,000 dinars (292 euros). It's expensive but I was given these medicines for free."

In some hospitals, sub-Saharan migrants are treated well, but in others they are not treated as well as locals. It is not the case in this hospital. Julien is very happy with the way he is treated here. His friends have brought him clean clothes and some warm soup. "I am thankful to be getting the medical support I need and for the friends who come to take care of me and keep me company." His friends also find things to be thankful for. "I am grateful for having had a safe journey from Cameroon and for keeping me and my friends safe here too," says Maurice. But he adds: "I feel that we are just existing here." When asked if they plan to stay in Algeria in the future, they all laugh. Julien's friends know that Europe is just a distant dream, but they do not plan to stay in Algeria for all their lives. "We don't yet know where we will go, but we surely will not stay here. All migrants want to leave here in the long run. No one wants to stay. We cannot work or do anything much here."

Meanwhile Julien is in a different situation. He is happy to have access to the healthcare he needs and just wants to overcome his illness. At the moment, survival is all that matters. Any other dream has been put on hold – perhaps indefinitely.

## AN UNCLEAR FUTURE

**W**hen asked about the future, most migrants stuck in transition say that they have no idea what they will do or where they will go. Jean, the young Cameroonian living in Boush Bouk, left his country in search of fame and glory as footballer in richer Algeria. Many young men from his country do the same but most do not find success and end up in small towns getting paid almost nothing. They all share the same dream and almost all invariably come to the same harsh reality that their dreams will not come true here. Nevertheless, Jean wants to hold on to that dream. But where can it come true? "I don't know where to go next, and when I will move on. I need time to reflect," he says. "Everything is unclear for now." What about going back home? "That would be a defeat for us. Accepting that our dreams may never come true. We'd go back as failures and it would be humiliating. I want to hang on a little bit longer and see what happens."

His older friend, Matias, agrees and adds: "I have no future that I can see at the moment. I need to think of where to start but I have no idea from where to begin planning." Meanwhile his two children play around in the crowded cluttered room in the unfinished building they live in. One of them is two years old whilst the other is only a few months old. They were both born in Algeria and both have regular birth certificates. "It is important for them to be registered", their father points out. When they get older, if the family is still here, they will need to get

enrolled in a school, but first they must learn Arabic. There is still time for that. They are still young.

Agnes, a 40 year old woman who fled from an abusive marriage in Cameroon would choose to go back home once she recovers psychologically and economically. "If I could change one thing in my life, I would wish to have a more stable lifestyle. I do not like to live day by day and not be able to plan for the future. I still do not know how long I will need before I am ready to go back home. I speak to my children by phone sometimes. They ask me to go back home because they want to see me. It is so tough."

Jonas, fleeing political persecution in Chad shares his doubts: "I don't know which country I will live in and what I will do in the future. I will hopefully work in a job that I studied for, and perhaps also study new things. If the regime in Chad changes, I would go back home even tomorrow."



**Fr Jan Heuft, a White Father, counsels a migrant departing from Algeria**  
© Rencontre et Développement

## IDENTIFYING THE MOST VULNERABLE AND AT RISK

The south of Algeria is a difficult place for unaccompanied women. Frequently lacking access to work, their only way to pay for their rent and food is to concede themselves to a man for protection. Some women chose to give themselves to just one man instead of prostituting themselves, an agreement that is looked upon by the community as a 'marriage'. Any insinuation that such a relationship is exploiting the vulnerability of the women is received with anger by many men in the migrant community. The lack of organisations working with migrants means that exploited women have nowhere to run to and that basic services are not available to them. There are no safety nets and few have the strength to cope on their own.

Grace, a woman from Cameroon living in Tamarasset for five years, has managed to avoid becoming a victim of such exploitation. She set up a small informal business selling African items and has taken care of her own needs. She realises that she has been lucky because migrating was always her choice and she was always in control of her own life. She is aware that many other migrant women are not so lucky. "When I left Cameroon, I was dreaming to reach Europe but my plans changed somewhere along the way. I realised how difficult it is to reach Europe but now I want to focus on helping those around me. Life can be very tough here so I feel that my mission is to







African migrant woman begging on a street in Oran, Algeria  
© Andrew Galea Debono

help those in need.” Without any structures of support and with the possibility of facing much opposition from her own community, it will not be easy for her.

Oran, like Tamanrasset, is a place where many migrants find themselves confronted by difficult situations. Many migrants find themselves by choice or by despair working in illicit businesses. Many people live in crowded cardboard houses in slum areas where illness is widespread. Migrants have a number of different reasons for being here: some are trying to get to Morocco as a stepping stone to Europe, others are fleeing from persecution in their home countries, or have settled here to make some money, whilst a number of women are possible victims of trafficking. Many choose to live in Oran to be close to the border with Morocco, especially since the route to

Libya is closed due to the troubles there. Oran also tends to be less risky than Algiers with regards to police raids, though recently they have stopped due to the conflict in Mali.

Some people such as Joshua from Nigeria manage to pull themselves out of a life of crime. “I was involved with types of business activities that I am now ashamed of. A lot of the migrant community here is involved in illegal activities such as selling alcohol on the black market, prostitution and theft. A couple of years ago, some of us discovered God in our lives and decided to change our ways. We started off as a group of three or four people, praying together but now we are over 100. We try to open the eyes of those in the community who are still involved in harmful activities. It is not easy to change to an honest life since there is not much access to honest work. Some of us sell

### The port of Oran, Algeria

© Andrew Galea Debono



African clothes or African food to other migrants. Others look for manual labour. But it is not easy to find work, especially since we are not given work permits.”

One major risk with mixed migration flows is that persons in a vulnerable situation and therefore most in need of support may not be identified and helped. This leads to a possibility that the most vulnerable people do not find access to meaningful protection and support, exposing them to high risks of being exploited by others. It is very hard for NGOs to register and work in Algeria. For foreign NGOs it is practically impossible to be here officially due to bureaucratic limitations such as not being able to open a bank account or having a phone registered to their name. This means that non-governmental support given to migrants is very limited, and outside Algiers is almost non-existent except for a few religious communities. To make matters worse, working with migrants is particularly difficult since it is illegal to provide assistance to persons without regular documents and this is punishable by a number of months in prison.

Such limitations make it more difficult to consistently support those who are particularly vulnerable such as children, abused women, victims of trafficking and those with physical or psychological problems, in order to ensure that they are not abandoned to their own fate. Lack of access to the basic community support

structures that locals can rely on may result in these vulnerable people falling into the hands of those willing to exploit them.<sup>13</sup>

Trafficking is a complex issue on which there is little or no expertise in Morocco or Algeria despite the need for special care when dealing with it. The complexity is such that it is not always clear to those finding themselves in the system that they are actually victims of trafficking. Young women like Bridget from Nigeria talk about “a woman from my own country who was willing to pay for my journey up to Spain”. She was told that she would have to pay back around 2000 euros on arrival but claims not to have been told how she was expected to find the money. “I heard of friends leaving the country and decided to follow them, thinking this might lead to better things.”

Victims of trafficking often find themselves surrounded by people who are part of the racket and are afraid to speak out. Humanitarian workers also expose themselves to danger when dealing directly with the issue, especially if they know that they will get little or no protection if those involved in the trafficking retaliate. Due to the difficulties in dealing with trafficking along the route, it is important to tackle the issue from its origin and look at the institutional aspects of the issue. Meanwhile, victims of trafficking remain invisible to all – but right in front of everyone’s eyes.

<sup>13</sup> Williamson, K. (2004) ‘AIDS, Gender and the Refugee Protection Framework’, RSC Working Paper Series. No.19. Oxford, United Kingdom.

# CONCLUSION

## A SHIFT IN RESPONSIBILITIES

The European approach towards border control has shifted responsibility for the protection of those in need to lie solely in the hands of the countries at their borders, countries which at times lack the resources or willingness to provide such protection. The authorities and organisations providing support for migrants in Morocco and Algeria face a number of challenges due to the increase in number of people getting stuck there for a long period of time. This situation has also created complicated dynamics for the migrant and host populations, both still coming to terms that Morocco and Algeria are increasingly becoming countries of long-term stay rather than of transit. Indeed, migrants find themselves facing the possibility of living several years in countries where they have very few rights and where they are looked down upon by the local population. It is, therefore, evident that neither Algeria nor Morocco can be considered safe places for forced migrants who are in need of protection.

Meanwhile people keep on risking their lives despite being aware of the danger of the sea crossing towards Europe and the amount of lives at lost attempting the crossing. As recently as 25<sup>th</sup> October 2012, the Spanish newspaper El Pais

reported that the Moroccan authorities recovered 14 bodies from the water of the Alborán Sea. The boat left from Nador on the Moroccan coast in the middle of the night and 70 people are believed to have been on board. Only 17 people were rescued, meaning that many more people are probably dead.

To these tragedies the EU and its member states respond by further closing their external borders and intensifying cooperation on migration management – preventing immigration to Europe – especially with the Moroccan authorities.

The Spanish-Moroccan agreement of 1992 on the readmission of irregular migrants has already been referred to above, and the European Commission is currently negotiating a similar agreement with Morocco on behalf of the entire EU.

Refugee protection does not rank high on these agendas. Yet it is important that long term durable solutions are sought that first and foremost ensure the respect for human rights of forced migrants. The responsibility to find such solutions should lie with the international community as a whole and should not be a game of shifting responsibilities onto others due to their geographical location along the migration route. The protection of human lives must be higher up on the list of political priorities, even when dealing with the lives of those stuck in transition.





Migrants' shoes outside the abandoned building they call home, Boush Bouk, Algiers  
© Andrew Galea Debono



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO THE EU INSTITUTIONS AND MEMBER STATES

- To set up mechanisms that effectively identify persons in need of protection and ensure that the necessary protection is granted.
- To ensure that readmission and other cooperation agreements with third countries, be they concluded by the EU or a Member State, contain a human rights clause protecting the fundamental rights of all migrants including their economic, social and cultural rights.
- To monitor forced returns to countries with which readmission and other cooperation agreements are made in order to ensure that the human rights of returnees are protected.
- To immediately stop forced return to a third country if the human rights of migrants are not effectively protected.
- To ensure independent oversight of border actions by FRONTEX and national authorities to ensure that human rights and access to asylum are respected.
- To provide UNHCR and other organisations with financial and other support, and to ensure that their projects are adequately funded.
- To undertake the resettlement of vulnerable persons with international protection stuck in North African countries as well as in Mauritania and Senegal.

## TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS OF MOROCCO AND ALGERIA

- To implement the treaty obligations they have already agreed to, most notably the 1951 Refugee Convention, in order to protect the rights of the migrants and refugees in their territories.

- To grant a safe residence status to all persons who are recognised as being in need of protection, either by the national authorities or by UNHCR.
- To implement laws they have already enacted or to amend the national legislation in order to ensure the respect and fulfilment of all human rights, including the social rights, of all migrants be they legally or irregularly staying in their territories.
- To put into place measures, controls and awareness raising necessary to ensure that rights are respected in conformity with the international laws signed by the Moroccan and Algerian governments.
- To put into place legal oversight of government actions in respect to the treatment and respect of the rights of migrants.
- To allow local and foreign NGOs to register and perform their work to provide support to migrants and refugees.
- To ensure that police and army actions do not jeopardise the lives and safety of migrants and that officers abusing migrants are caught and punished.

## TO INDIVIDUALS OF GOODWILL CONCERNED WITH THE RIGHTS OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

- To contact national authorities and ask if they have readmission or other cooperation agreements with Morocco and Algeria. Send a copy of this booklet. Point out concerns to national authorities that governments acting on their behalf might be sending individuals to countries where their human rights are not respected in practice and from where they might be returned to persecution.

**"You are taken to the extreme south and dumped in the desert on the border with Mali. We were abandoned and had no food or water. There was no one there where we were left."**

*Cecile, deported from Algeria  
with her two children*



An abandoned building where migrants live, Boush Bouk, Algiers

© Andrew Galea Debono

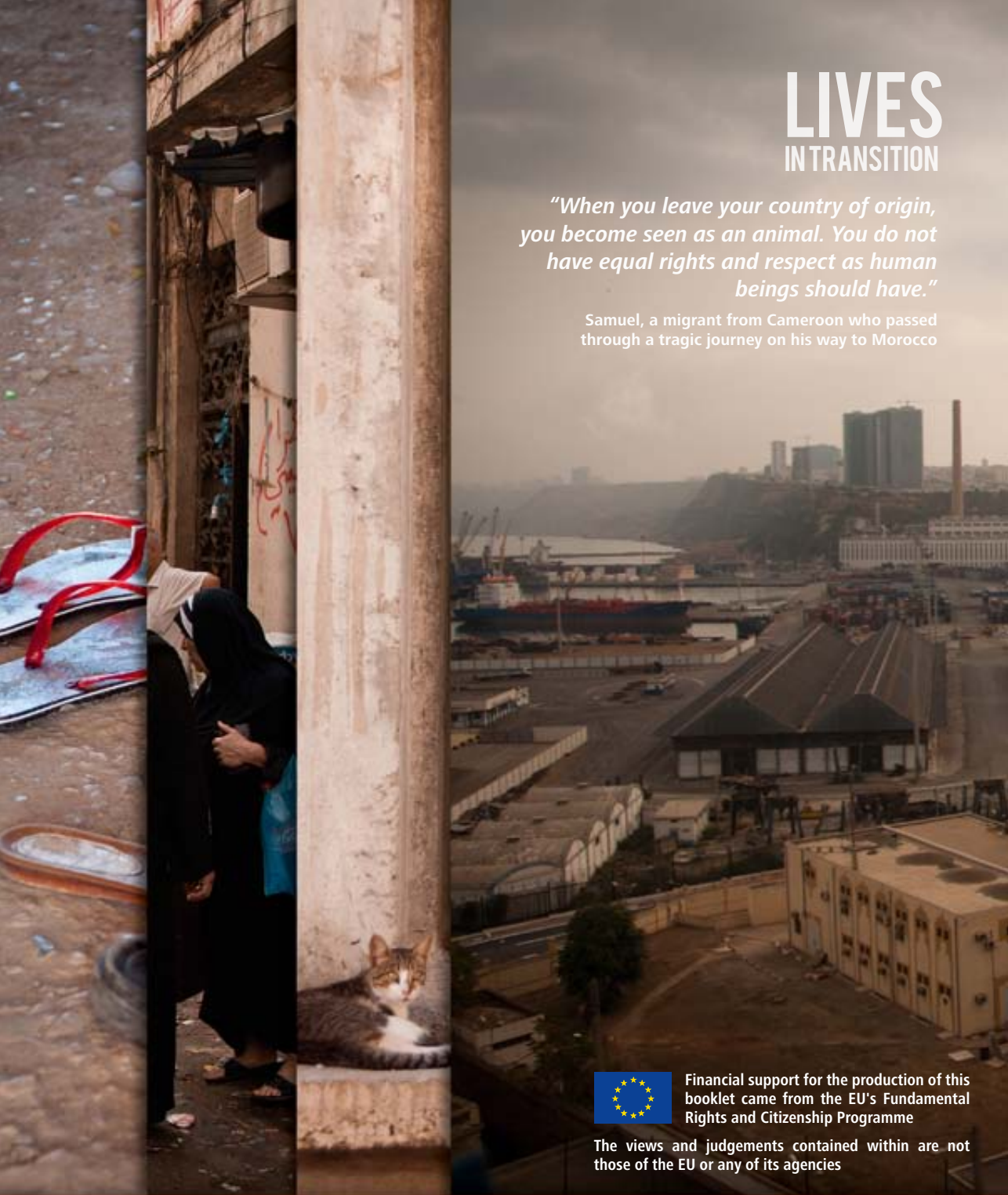




# LIVES IN TRANSITION

*"When you leave your country of origin, you become seen as an animal. You do not have equal rights and respect as human beings should have."*

Samuel, a migrant from Cameroon who passed through a tragic journey on his way to Morocco



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