

KEY UPDATES AND TRENDS AT THE FRENCH-ITALIAN BORDER

APRIL & MAY 2021



DURING THE MONTHS OF APRIL AND MAY 2021, PROGETTO 20K AND OTHER GROUPS OPERATING IN VENTIMIGLIA HAVE OBSERVED THE FOLLOWING TRENDS – ALL POINTING TOWARDS A FURTHER EXACERBATION OF THE SITUATION AT THE FRENCH-ITALIAN BORDER:

- A sustained **increase in arrivals** from the Central Mediterranean route.
- Covid related restrictions gradually lifted for Europeans, while **racial profiling** and border control have been tightened for non-white people and carried out on Italian soil.
- Continued **evictions** of settlements in abandoned buildings, with private companies sealing off entrances and preventing access to water.
- Continued **evictions** of outdoors living spaces (beaches, under bridges, etc), despite cold and rainy weather.
- An increased number of **expulsion papers** issued.
- Continued pushbacks and denial of the chance to ask for asylum reported by **unaccompanied minors**.
- At least 10 people reported having their **personal belongings stolen or confiscated** (phones, documents and money) while in French custody.
- **A tragic death**, reportedly by suicide, took place in a detention Center in Turin. Moussa Balde (23) had previously been beaten up with iron bars by three Italian citizens in the streets of Ventimiglia, and was detained in **solitary confinement** upon being discharged from hospital despite being in a fragile state.
- One person **drowned** in attempt to swim to France.

FURTHER INFORMATION RELATING TO THE PERIOD APRIL - MAY 2021

In April and May the number of people in Ventimiglia visibly increased, and consistently more than 200 people a day attended the nightly food distribution, with peaks of 350. Such trends reflect high and increasing numbers of arrivals on the Southern shores combined with the loosening of Covid-related movement restrictions. The number of registered pushbacks has conversely been low (generally between 10 and 60 per day). Our volunteers have confirmed that such a previously unseen difference in the two numbers (number of arrivals vs pushbacks) could be due to the new practice of preventing undocumented individuals to access the train station in Ventimiglia. Mixed French and Italian police forces have started to regularly check the documents of everyone approaching trains with migration background appearances already on the Italian territory. Furthermore, we have witnessed a growing tendency to carry out controls on the train from Genova and drop off undocumented individuals before they can reach Ventimiglia, in the whole Liguria region. This local form of French “border externalization” to Italy increases efficiency of controls - previously carried out only at the first French stop in Menton - creating several negative consequences on people in transit from the region. As crossing becomes tougher the average time spent in Ventimiglia increases, people are pushed to take much more dangerous paths to cross the border, an increasing number of people gives up on the idea of passing this border and either tries somewhere else or decides to stay in Italy; smuggler activity flourishes, and civil society monitoring becomes much more complicated. We have collected multiple accounts of people who have walked for several kilometers on the highway during the night or have decided to walk across the mountains for multiple days to pass the city of Nice, on the 3rd of June, one person drowned in an attempt to swim to France.

ACCESS TO HOUSING AND BASIC NEEDS

In Ventimiglia any official sleeping facility for people in transit continues to be lacking. During the months of April and May the abandoned buildings belonging to Trenitalia where people have slept in drastic sanitary conditions for the whole winter have been recursively evicted and sealed. Considering the large number of access points to the buildings, any attempt to keep people out entirely has failed, and police forces pass by several times a week to force people out of those buildings repeatedly. Some private companies have been involved in attempts to seal the doors and windows and clean the place, water pipes have been first closed and subsequently destroyed and every time the buildings have been evicted all the belongings of people in transit have been thrown away without allowing for the time necessary to save what was needed. April was an exceptionally rainy period for the area, with more than 20 rainy days. Nevertheless, police forces continuously moved away people's tents from the beach or from under the bridge where they are most commonly set, condemning many to wet and cold nights on the streets. On two occasions we have been told of tent removal carried out with the use of force, most of other cases by asking to leave, without any viable alternative provided. Some nights, sleeping facilities organized by Civil Society for the most vulnerable subjectivities (such as women, elderly, or unaccompanied minors) have proven insufficient and even those categories had no alternative but to sleep outside. On two occasions in the last month the food provided at the nightly food distribution has proven insufficient to feed everyone, while clothes seldomly match the requests. The need for professional medical assistance was seldomly met during these months and often left to the street support of untrained activists. Any much-needed psychological support is lacking.



(II) LEGAL PROCEDURES

In the last months we have witnessed an increased number of expulsion papers ("must leave the Schengen Area within 7 days or could be sanctioned with a 10 thousand Euro fine and/or detention") issued in Ventimiglia. Those appear to be given for the first time to many found undocumented around the streets of Ventimiglia, who when asked don't immediately consent to asking for asylum in Italy, as they manifest intention to go to France. The paper itself often acknowledges to be given to someone who is not able to understand the language and is unaware of legal procedure, and generally allows for appeal only if within 30 days. Pushbacks of unaccompanied minors with incorrect dates of birth written on the "Refus d'entrée" by the authorities to make them look like adults, occurred daily, with a peak of 14 registered on the 18th of May.



INEXHAUSTIVE LIST OF ABUSES REPORTED TO US

At least 10 people reported having their personal belongings confiscated (phones, documents and money) while in French custody. Several people reported being underfed and too cold to sleep while in French containers/border cells and not being even considered when asking for food and blankets. Some had to sleep on the ground of the fenced garden, without blankets, as the containers were full. Three people reported use of pepper spray in a train toilet, one reported being sprayed directly to his face. A Romanian couple and two French individuals with north African appearances with regular documents were detained and pushed back after they had been asked for documents and Covid CPR test. Bordighera hospital (the closest to Ventimiglia) has denied urgent medical care to people in transit at least three times. An Afghan man in condition of great distress who hadn't slept nor eaten in the past three days reported of having been tied up, gagged and kept in a tent for 48 hours with no food or water by some smugglers in an attempt of extortion.

MOUSA BALDE

On the 9th of May a 23-year-old man from Guinea-Conakry called Moussa Balde was beaten up with iron bars by three Italian citizens in the streets of Ventimiglia. He was hospitalized and released with a prognosis of 10 days. Nevertheless, as he was undocumented, he was immediately transferred to a CPR (detention center in Turin) where he was held in solitary confinement for some days, without a specific reason. Despite calls for support by his lawyer, who reported him to be in great physical and psychological pain, no action was taken, and the man was found dead on the 23rd of May, reportedly by suicide.