

Dublin regulation leaves asylum seekers with their fingers burnt

Refugees are deported back to the first EU country they entered, often Italy or Greece, which have the worst welfare provision

- [Harriet Grant](#) and [John Domokos](#)
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Awet spreads his hands out and shows us his scarred fingertips. "He burned his fingertips so he could apply for asylum like a new person," explains his friend.

A group of men are gathered in the back room of a large squat on the outskirts of Rome, talking about their struggle to beat the European asylum system. They explain that it is common for asylum seekers to burn their fingers, so the fingerprint record of their entry into Italy is destroyed.

Awet mimes placing his hands on a hob. "But after five days ... [he holds up his hands to show that the burns have healed] normal," he says, clapping them together with a disappointed sigh.

The Anagnina squat, in a disused glass-fronted office block, looms large over the surrounding industrial estate. The building is home to around 700 migrants and refugees, including families, from four trouble spots of north-eastern Africa: Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia.

The satellite dishes on the front of the building are redundant and many of the windows have been smashed. Children's toys scatter the dimly lit corridors. Beds consist of simple mattresses or cardboard on the floor, and there is no hot water or heating. Electricity is sporadic, and there are only a few toilets for the hundreds who live here.

As the other men lean in around him, keen to describe the impossibility of building a new life in Italy, Awet waves his green refugee card that shows he came from Eritrea. "Italy is bad. No work, no house, nothing."

Like all the others, he soon left and travelled to Norway, but when it was discovered that he had already been fingerprinted in Italy he was deported back. Awet clutches a tattered Norwegian identity card as he talks.

Under EU law, asylum seekers have to remain in the first European country they enter. This is known as the "Dublin" regulation after the 1990 summit at which the original system was adopted (coming into force seven years later).

For many European countries including the UK, Dublin is a key tool in a regime of tough border controls, allowing refugees to be deported back to Europe's southern border countries where they first entered the EU. Countries such as Italy and Greece, with minimal welfare provision for refugees, receive the most Dublin returns each year because so many of the asylum seekers who land there do not wish to stay.

To the men in this hot, dark room and to thousands more who attempt to beat the system each year, Ireland's capital city is a dirty word. "Dublin is a virus," Awet says. "Yes, Dublin is like Aids."

The rest all nod – they too have been fingerprinted in Italy, and know they will never be "cured". Sitting in a circle, they list the places they have tried to start afresh: Norway, England, Switzerland, Sweden, England again.

David, 21, arrived here four years ago, travelling overland from Ethiopia, through Libya and across the Mediterranean. "I told them I was 17, they gave me €200 and told me to go anywhere I liked. They put me in the street. So I came here."

Finding no work, David decided to travel on to the UK. "There they gave me a one-bedroom flat, I started at Bedford college, I learned English and they gave me £55 a week. I was happy." He smiles sadly. "Then they found my fingerprints." As soon as he was 18, David was deported, and returned to the Anagnina squat: "I felt sad, I cried." He says life is not possible here in Italy: "No, no life here. Just living."

These homeless refugees are part of a legal and diplomatic battle currently being fought all over Europe. Italy, which like Greece is struggling with the twin pressures of the financial crisis and a large increase in north-African migrants from this year's uprisings, says the Dublin regulation is adding to its burden. Removals to Greece, meanwhile, have been suspended across much of the EU because of the severe conditions there, pending the outcome of a test case in the European court of justice.

Human rights lawyers in Britain are also trying to stop asylum seekers being sent back to Italy. They say the lack of support and housing in Italy is leaving thousands, at all stages of the asylum process, living in dangerous and unsanitary squats like Anagnina, or on the street.

The Dublin regulation was introduced partly to avoid "asylum shopping", wherein people like David and Awet might be drawn to better welfare systems in countries such as the UK and Norway. Critics of the Italian system say welfare is crucial to help integrate refugees, and the lack of welfare in Italy is an urgent problem.

"We speak about legislation but forget to translate this into a life," says Laura Boldrini, spokesperson for the UN refugee agency UNHCR in Italy.

"Refugees don't know the language, they may be traumatised, they are lost and don't know what to do – rebuilding a life is not a joke. International protection becomes a box with no key; to open it you need integration."

The British government is, nonetheless, fighting hard to keep the Dublin regulation in place, and in a case before the high court next Tuesday, the Home Office will argue that Italy is a safe country, with enough support available for all those in the asylum system.

It is midnight at Termini station in central Rome, and the streets are still busy with tourists and late-night drinkers. But it takes only minutes to find some recent arrivals to Italy who have struggled to settle.

Siako and his friends are lying on pieces of cardboard at the back of the station. They stand out from the other homeless who sleep, often passed out from drink, all along the street, because they are young, clean and smartly dressed. Many are listening to music on headphones. But Siako, 23, is

fizzing with anger. He jumps to his feet, pulls out his refugee accreditation and unfolds it, shaking it in the air. He waves his arms around, pointing at his sleeping friends: "He has documents, he has documents – over there, they all have documents. But we all sleep on the street.

"Frankly, in Africa, if someone had told me that Italy was like this, I would have said he was lying. If someone said that even when you have the legal papers you still sleep on the street, I would've said that's wrong, that's not possible. You must see it to believe it."

As he talks, a van pulls up and hearty-looking Americans get out and pass round bags of sandwiches. The men take them without smiling. "We came from Ivory Coast to escape the war, through Libya," Siako explains. "And now we are sleeping on the street."

His friend looks up and says, "I was crying here yesterday, thinking about my papa at home dying. Italian people walk past and they think I'm crazy. Everybody is going crazy here because they have no home."

Siako's story is typical: he was given accommodation in a camp at first while his claim was processed. But once he was recognised as a refugee, he was on his own. Unlike in the UK or other northern European countries, in Italy there is almost no integration for refugees once they are given protection, and no welfare support. Many refugees describe a life that is a constant struggle for basic survival, walking for hours across Rome to get food at handouts from churches or NGOs.

Dr Lê Quyên Ngô Đình is a director at Caritas, one of Rome's biggest refugee charities. She says the introduction of the Dublin rules changed the pressures on Italy, but the country has yet to change its system in response. There are reception camps that offer a short and limited initial stay to nearly all asylum seekers, but only 3,000 spaces in the official integration accommodation that follows. The interior ministry says there have been 10 times that many asylum seekers so far this year – plus the number of Dublin returns arriving at Rome airport alone has increased significantly – to between 10 and 20 a day.

"Ten years ago, Italy was a transit country, but since Dublin we have seen an increase in people staying here," Lê Quyên says. "And this is a big problem for Italy. The system is the one that worked 10 years ago; 3,000 beds was enough then, now it is not enough."

"If you get one of those, you get good care. But if not, you are on the street ... You have the rights, but because the Italian welfare system is so weak – they are just rights on paper."

Christopher Hein, director of the Italian Refugee Council, says that court cases such as those being brought in the UK over conditions in Italy are a distraction, when what is actually required is a wholesale reform of the Dublin regulation. "I am not here to defend the Italian non-system of reception. But I sometimes feel this distracts from the real issue, which is the Dublin regulation itself."

Along with other refugee groups across Europe, Hein is working to have the Dublin system abolished.

"Human beings, a big percentage of whom have suffered violence and persecution in their country of origin or on the journey – they are just pushed from one place to another like a package ... They are being re-traumatised by Dublin."

Hein wants a common EU asylum policy that would allow asylum seekers to choose the country they want to go to. It would, he says, allow refugees to join up with family and community support networks, and enable them to build a life, and work. "This would be far less costly for the social budgets of member states because it would facilitate integration."

One community that is drawn to the UK in particular is Afghans. Behind the last platform at Rome's busy Ostiense station, around 80 Afghans including several children live in a squalid, makeshift camp. They sleep in donated tents, holes ripped in their sides to release some of the suffocating summer heat.

There is a small standpipe for water and a few temporary toilets have been placed outside. Children run through piles of debris as commuters wait for trains on the other side of a chainlink fence.

Arif, a journalist from Afghanistan, was deported from the UK three weeks ago. Arif says he left his country with his life in danger, passing through Italy to get to the UK, where he has a brother. "But I knew I couldn't claim asylum in the UK because of my fingerprints".

Arif lived with his brother in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, and worked illegally in a fast-food restaurant for four years. He says he didn't want to, but the Dublin system drove him underground. British immigration officials raided the restaurant last month and he was deported.

Arif says the British authorities told him that "everything in Italy would be OK". But after 20 days he has been offered no accommodation despite asking for help from the Italian authorities, and has ended up homeless and back at Ostiense station.

"I'm tired, tired of everything. I want to stay with my family in England, but because of Dublin I have to sleep here," he says, pointing at the tents under the railway bridge.

At the camp's gate, a group of young boys gather. Feroz, 16, has recently arrived from Afghanistan by boat, landing in Rimini.

He angrily tells us about his new neighbours, some of whom, he says, have already been sent back from other European countries. Others are very young and need help in Italy.

"This guy here is 12 years old. The government are deaf, they can't hear people. I want to ask other European countries: where is the help?"

He points at another friend, caught in the classic Dublin trap: "What can he do? He is 18, his family are in Sweden – but his fingerprint is in Italy."

Some names have been changed to protect anonymity