



## Viewpoint

### In support of the Amnesty International report [1]: Other stories of violence in the hotspot system

Alessandra Sciarba  
(November 2016)

I have picked up a sheet of paper on which I had written, in one go, a series of notes which I had not even re-read yet, until today. Less than a year ago, it had been put away without even knowing what to do with them, after a round of consultations with friends who are legal experts and lawyers.

Who should I give it to? With what evidence could I support those words? There wasn't any way to use them, even though each of them had the weight of a boulder.

When you are told that people have suffered various types of violence and have been subjected to electric shocks by the Italian police, it is difficult to know what to do with this information, especially if the people who are telling you about this will never file lawsuits because they are terrified and only want to flee as quickly and as far away as possible.

Publishing that story which was written down makes sense, for what it's worth, while the *prefetto* [government envoy in charge of security] Morcone [the current head of the interior ministry's department for civil liberties and immigration] comments on Amnesty International's "Hotspot Italy" report by defining its contents as "stupidities" because, he claims, "Amnesty puts together its reports in London and not in Italy".

It is not my role to recall the statute of this organisation, according to which each individual national branch cannot deal with what happens in its own country to guarantee the independence which has always been a characteristic of Amnesty International. I will settle for repeating something which is clear and evident for anyone who has come across Amnesty's work in any way, that each of its reports results from lengthy and careful investigations in the territory which is being examined, in close contact with all the institutional and social actors which may contribute to developing a coherent and truthful portrayal.

Beyond all this, however, I am instead an Italian researcher who has been living and working in Italy for many years, and who has been dealing with migrations and human rights for years, meeting several dozens of migrants and collecting their accounts. In the last year, specifically, like other colleagues who work on these issues, I have tried to accurately investigate the implementation of the hotspot approach in the field, collecting interviews and documents.

When I read the "Hotspots Italy" report, which I knew was due to be published because I was part of one of the groups that was interviewed to produce it, I was speechless because I recognised exactly the same details which I knew so well, which I had not specifically spoken to Amnesty about and which, in general, I had not found the way to make known more widely.

By doing so today, I will omit any detail which may in any way lead to the people who I will now talk about. This was what they wanted then, and it must be respected up to the end, even now, when I don't know exactly where they are anymore.

*A.S. is a youth who comes from X. He is X years old. He arrived in Lampedusa on the day X of the month of X of 2015 and was held in a hotspot for several months because, alongside others, he refused to be fingerprinted. We met him on the island, during a research work on hotspots, on day X of month X, and we can therefore bear witness as to his presence in that place on that date. Like we can, so can the workers from another association which was present in Lampedusa and operated outside of the hotspot, who witnessed our meeting.*

*On that occasion I spoke at length with A.S., but he was already frightened then. He did not want to sign a power of attorney document for a lawyer, nor to complain in any way about his lengthy detention. I left him my contact details, and asked him to give me some news once he had been transferred. Which he did.*

*On day X of month X A.S., alongside other 4 youths, was taken from Lampedusa to another place in Sicily, in a place which he was unable to identify, but which was so isolated that, after being abandoned in the surrounding area by the police, he had had to walk for several kilometres before finding an inhabited centre.*

*A.S. told me that he and the others had been made to hand over their fingerprints using force. He told us that sticks which discharged electric shocks had been used on them. He also said he had suffered other forms of violence about which he was very ashamed. A.S. also spoke for his friends, as he was the only one who could speak English and who could communicate with me and with the other Italian people who wanted to hear him and tried to support him.*

*We spoke several times while he was on the coach which he had taken from Sicily (precisely, from Agrigento) towards Milan. He cried. I begged him to stop and to get some help, saying that we had lawyers and doctors and that we would have protected him. That we could have reported what he had been subjected to, that we should have immediately obtained medical reports about his injuries and signs of violence, and that he could also have chosen to file complaints later on.*

*But he was too scared and had too strong a will to flee.*

*He answered that the Italian police had threatened him of serious consequences if he had turned to a lawyer and had sought help from anyone.*

*I immediately called the Naga [centre] in Milan. I asked them to go to the coach stop where A.S. and other youths who had suffered all of this alongside him would have arrived and to try to understand the situation, to convince them to have medical reports produced and, in any case, to try to calm them down and allow them to rest.*

*Although they found them and brought them to a reception centre to allow them to sleep there at least for one night, not even the Naga operators were able to convince them to stay and report what had happened. A.S. and the others left Italy.*

This is where the notes I took myself straight after these youths' flight from Italy end.

A few days later, a volunteer from the Naga, Maria Chiara Coppola, told me about her meeting with them in Milan in this way:

*I am happy that A.S. has written to you, let's hope they will manage in some way to reach a place where they may find a bit more peace. If you were to receive any further news I ask you to please keep us updated as well!*

*I am writing to tell you about our meeting the other day; while their presence has only been a quick passage, the testimony they left us stays and has the weight of a boulder.*

*When we went to pick them up the other day they were all very tired, they almost seemed resigned but they were heading forward, always looking down. Only A.S. spoke any English, but none of them tried to tell us anything with his help. Instead, A.S. had a compulsive need to tell us things, he continued to tell me that later he would have told me everything about himself, but for all that time, he didn't say anything. When we reached the hub which was to host them for the night and we bid them farewell, that's when he asked to talk.*

*It was a tale which went on by fits and starts, interrupted by crying, not linear.*

*He told me that he spent 4 months in Lampedusa, because he and others did not want to be fingerprinted; they should have been transferred to Sicily, but this was never done.*

*For four months, he underwent blackmail, threats and violence in order for him to leave his fingerprints. I did not understand where all this happened, he spoke about the barracks but I did not understand where he slept and was living.*

*He said he was like in prison although in fact it was not a jail.*

*He told us of various abuses, of systematic violence in order to obtain his fingerprints. If they asked for clothes, because they didn't have any more and it was cold, they were not given any because they didn't hand over their fingerprints. They faced insults and threats like "fuck off", "animal", "you've come to my home and now I can do what I want with you", "if you tell the the lawyer I'll beat you to death, you'll pay for it".*

*These threats really scared him: he said that he confided everything to me only because you told him he could trust me, but he did not want me to tell anyone, because the police would have made him pay for it, even here in Milan, they could have arrested him to make him pay for it.*

*Violence was used often and they often used to beat him up.*

*However, the last time was the worst: he bled from his nose, and he was dragged from around the collarbone, they grabbed him by the neck. He told me they used electric shocks. He is not sure about it but has the feeling, and a vague memory, that when they gave him an electric shock he was so weak, and almost unconscious, that they may have fingerprinted him.*

*When they took them to Sicily they left them in the middle of the countryside, and they had to walk for 12 hours to reach Agrigento. He did not tell me who they were with and how they arrived there.*

*He was frightened and worried, because he knew that in that moment the same thing was happening again to his friends.*

*I did not ask him any questions while he was telling me this, we were meant to meet again a few days later to speak better about things.*

*I don't what more he told you: this is what he felt like talking about on that evening.*

*Do you think there's something we can do?*

*Witnessing this kind of complaint has shocked me a bit. I admit it, but now I would like to be able to do something.*

Apart from talking with me and Maria Chiara, A.S. also spoke with another operator from the association which is active on Lampedusa, who was present in the moment when I had met him on the island. With her, who prefers to stay anonymous for the time being to safeguard the work of the association with which she was working, the youth had established a strong relationship of trust: she had been overwhelmed by his story of violence and terror after they were removed from the island. And this is how she tells it:

*A.S. left Lampedusa sure that he had succeeded. With hope in our eyes, we bid each other farewell, hugging, before he boards the ferry to Sicily. He has struggled a lot in order for him and his friends to be allowed to leave their fingerprints where they would later have chosen to stay and apply for international protection. But two days later he called me, early in the morning, from a different number. He told he was unable to call me earlier, that they had taken everything away from him, that he had learned my number by heart, that he was on a coach travelling to Milan. I asked him how they were and at first he told me he did not want to talk, that he can't bear it, that he will leave Italy. I insisted, I asked him why. He started crying silently and said they had forced him to leave his fingerprints, that they had hurt him. I asked him to tell me in detail what they had done to him, I told him it was important for him to share this. He answered that they had struck them and started telling me something about a stick, but he started crying aloud and could not manage to speak. I cried as well. With difficulty, in between sobs, he told me that they were subjected to blows as well as other types of violence and that they were then left far away from inhabited centres, but he didn't know*

where. He contacted me several times during the journey and I tried, as did other people he trusted because he had already met them on Lampedusa, to convince him to stop in Milan and not to resume his journey straight away so he could rest and take some time to decide whether to get a doctor to visit him, whether to file a complaint. He agreed to stop to rest but refused to lodge a complaint about what happened because he was extremely frightened by the threats they had received from the police.

Martina Tazzioli, another researcher who had met A.S. with me on Lampedusa and later found him again in Marseilles five days after he had passed through Milan, saw, on his body and those of the youths he was with, including a 15-year-old minor, some of the signs of violence which could have confirmed the truthfulness of all those accounts:

*A.S. arrived with four other compatriots including a 15-year-old minor. A.S. told of the torture he was subjected to by the Italian police in Sicily, showing the marks which were left on his body: signs of blows and burns on his upper and lower limbs, and on his chest. The taking of fingerprints, according to what they told, happened as they were blocked on the floor with their hands tied on their stomach and their face against the floor. Alongside others, we were unable to have them visited by a doctor, nor to make them meet a lawyer, because all five of them feared being sent back to Italy and they asked us to keep them invisible, because they feared leaving any trace of their passage.*

Obviously, the dozens of testimonies collected by Amnesty International which were courageously published brought back to all of us, word by word, this story which a few of us had managed to piece together.

And the time has come, in support of the “Hotspot Italy” report and against the attacks to which those who drafted it are being subjected, to piece this sequence of testimonies together again. All the people I have mentioned can confirm the coherence of the accounts, these youths’ desperation, their terror. At that time, many of us wondered what to do, but if the victims did not want to report these events and have medical records about them drawn up, we had been unable to do anything other than swallow their outpourings and let them go.

The fact remains that, a long time ago, A.S. told exactly the same things which the Amnesty report denounces. He almost always did so in real time, straight after leaving Lampedusa: he had certainly not had the opportunity to meet others who could have influenced him by telling him of similar stories, as sometimes happens.

It is not possible for testimonies collected by different subjects in different places from different people (the story of A.S. is not among those reported by Amnesty) are so congruent without them containing at least a significant portion of truthfulness.

It is very saddening that it is precisely the Prefetto Morcone who has dismissed the “Hotspot Italy” so quickly. I recall very well when, in the month of January of 2016 this very prefect had, instead, listened to the alarms arising from many associations which were criticising the practice of issuing thousands of deferred refusal of entry orders in the hotspots (and especially in Lampedusa) which were effectively seriously violating the principles of the right to seek asylum. On that occasion, a circular which he produced himself took the many complaints which arrived seriously and specified that the possibility of requesting international protection was a universal right and that Italy does not have a list of safe countries on the basis of which someone may be excluded from the procedure *a priori*.

It is obvious that it is far easier to file complaints against illegal practices when you have hundreds of decrees issued by a *questore* [police chief in a given city] to file appeals against, and that, in front of similar documents, the institutions no choice but to admit their existence. Telling stories of violence for which the only evidence are the testimonies of those who have suffered them is a far more complex and delicate matter.

But what should Amnesty have done, after collecting dozens of testimonies which were coherent and identical?

Keep quiet, pretend nothing was happening? I should not have done it either, for so long, in relation to the story I had come across, even though for single researchers or for small associations it is even more difficult to find a way to report facts of this kind, without any material evidence, and even just to make oneself heard.

This time as well, like in the Amnesty International report, we are only reporting some testimonies, albeit coherent, precise and credible ones. We have no medical records nor images to prove anything.

But on what basis can the Prefect Morcone or anyone else deny, *a priori*, the truthfulness of all these stories?

Moreover, the violent acts which were told often occurred outside of the actual hotspots where, as the Prefect himself stressed, UNHCR is present as well (something which did not prevent the issuing of deferred refusal of entry orders). They are different spaces of containment which are difficult to identify and appear to have served as places for the implementation of the hotspot as an approach; an approach which has as its main and declared objective that of identifying and expelling, certainly not that of implementing the right to seek asylum and human rights in general.

Instead of demeaning and insulting Amnesty International's work, every dignified institution of a country which claims to be democratic should, first of all and now, make an effort to shed light on this matter.

[1] Hotspot Italy (AI): <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2016/nov/ai-hotspot-italy.pdf>

*Translation by Statewatch*

*This article was originally published in Italian in the website L'altro diritto. Centro di documentazione su carcere, devianza e marginalità. "A sostegno del Rapporto di Amnesty International: altre storie di violenza del sistema hotspot", by Alessandra Sciarba, 2016*

<http://www.altrodiritto.unifi.it/ricerche/asilo/hotspot.htm>

Statewatch does not have a corporate view, nor does it seek to create one, the views expressed are those of the author. Statewatch is not responsible for the content of external websites and inclusion of a link does not constitute an endorsement.