

Rome, 15th February 2022

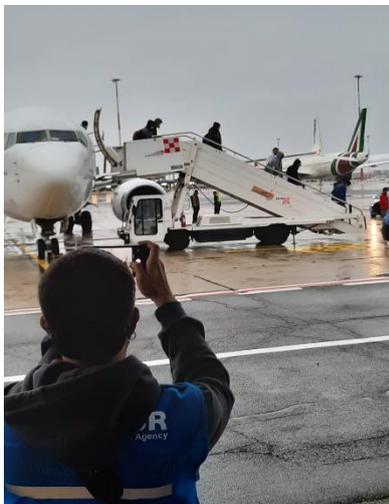
Dear friends

Until I heard the whine of the engines below my feet, I did not quite dare that I would be returning to Scotland for Christmas in December. Yet, against the odds, I was able to board a flight home, armed not only with the usual passport and boarding pass but also, in compliance with the regulations then in place, two negative Covid tests (the requisite LFT on the day of travel and an earlier PCR for peace of mind), a Passenger Locator Form, a vaccine certificate and a Green Pass. This was to be followed on arrival by the Day 2 PCR test and self-isolation until a negative result was received. In my luggage, lest Italy should change its mind about who should be able to cross its borders over the course of my stay, were my Italian identity card and residence permit, just in case I should need to demonstrate a “compelling reason” to return. In short, as anyone who travelled during the post-lockdown period will know, there has been considerably more to organize – and to fund - when flying than was the case two years ago.

Yet, as I was reminded by a friend also travelling that night, we have been enormously privileged to be able to fly anywhere. Folk can’t – or won’t – travel as they used to. There is a philosophical struggle to be had for each of us in deciding how to balance the risks generated by the pandemic with the deep-seated need to connect with those we hold dear. These struggles carry significant consequences for individuals, economies and societies – not to mention our souls. We do, however, have agency. We do, however, have choice.

You’ll know where I am going with this for that’s certainly not the case for asylum seekers. Their decisions about travel may indeed involve a careful analysis of risk but, in contrast to ours, are framed by “a well-founded fear” which deprives the decision-making process of real choice. They do not have the luxury – for luxury it is – of opting to stay put.

For that reason, it is a huge relief to Mediterranean Hope that we were, at the end of November, able to restart our humanitarian corridors programme. People whose journeys to Europe had been suspended since March 2020 were finally able to board the flights they longed for. The corridor from Lebanon is in full swing once more and, added to that, are new pathways for those fleeing Libya and Afghanistan. Rather than being a barrier, the “extra admin” and expense of pre- and post-flight Covid testing, and post-arrival quarantine are the building blocks currently required to enable these programmes to function. They are, simply, a means to an end.



For the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, to which the Mediterranean Hope project belongs, it is a privilege to be one of the few civil society organisations trusted to host people being evacuated from Libya by the Italian government. Italy's relationship with Libya, its former colony, is complex. Much better known to the public is the financial and logistical support it provides to that country in shoring up the "coastguard services" which, increasingly successfully, intercept the boats overloaded with migrants which leave north Africa for Europe. The cargo of desperate people is unceremoniously returned to Libya where they are likely to be detained in conditions which most of us cannot begin to imagine. International organisations such as Amnesty and UNHCR have been explicit in their condemnation of the failure by those in power in Libya to safeguard even the most basic human rights of the migrant population in general and those detained in particular, repeatedly stressing that it is not a "safe country" to which people should be pushed back. Yet, for a raft of political reasons, the practice continues to be supported. Against that background, the Libyan evacuation programme, however small its scale, is all the more significant.

In January I was delighted to catch up again with some of the young people who were on the flight from Libya which my colleagues and I met at Fiumicino Airport in November. This time, the circumstances were quite different. I was visiting their new home in Scicli, a beautiful baroque town in southwest Sicily. There, they are being supported to build new lives by our staff at the Casa delle Culture reception centre. Established in 2014, for me this place truly embodies the double meaning of the Italian word "accoglienza" which, in a migration context is often translated into English as "reception" but, in ordinary parlance, means "welcome". The Casa delle Culture goes well beyond reception. It is all about welcome.

I was joined during my visit by two English volunteers who are working with us this year. Bill and Karen (both aged 60) have a lifetime of experience behind them in community building, counselling, facilitation and art. That extraordinary mix of skills is being put to good use in a number of different ways, not least of which the development of "art labs" which are providing, variously, opportunities for growing skills and confidence, self-reflection and fun for those whose recent experiences have been far from straightforward. It was an education to participate in one of these labs with people who, only a couple of months ago, were trapped in Libya and have endured significant trauma; a real joy to watch people slowly relax, to see expressions including scepticism and bewilderment change to amusement and concentration. We hope to curate some of the work produced in an exhibition called "Hear My Voice" later this year but that is, in a sense, secondary to the impact which these labs have already had on the participants themselves.



It's regrettable that Bill and Karen have to return to the UK every three months for three months in order to be compliant with the post-Brexit limitations on free movement. This kind of personal interaction simply cannot happen during the "remote" periods. However, Mediterranean Hope is tremendously grateful to these gifted individuals for all of the valuable work that they are doing and, indeed, for their willingness to teach our staff how to deliver such workshops themselves. This is a real legacy.

As the foregoing shows, the Mediterranean Hope team continues to be creative, committed and practical in the support it offers to folk on the margins and it is good to be able to share some snippets of the wonderful work which is being done. It goes without saying, I hope, that the entire team remains deeply appreciative of the support – practical and prayerful – which you offer and without which it could not continue to work as it does.

Let me conclude this letter by asking, if you are willing, for your prayers. These, and all of the support and encouragement you offer, are very much appreciated.

- for those in power, faced with complex interests to balance, to be clear-sighted about what is right and to be influenced in all their decision-making by that knowledge;
- for those in communities which feel threatened by strangers to recognise the humanity in all of us and to dare to offer welcome;
- for those who feel themselves to be “at the bottom of the heap” to know love, compassion and safety.

Every blessing

Fiona



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