

Locked up

Stories from immigration
detention in Europe



This is a joint publication of Arsis Association for the Social Support of Youth, Move Coalition, ASGI, Meldpunt Vreemdelingendetentie and PICUM.

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Some names have been changed for privacy reasons.

Introduction

This booklet aims to amplify the voices of people who are held in immigration detention across the European Union and who often remain unheard. It includes stories collected in recent years in Belgium, Greece, Italy and the Netherlands by non-governmental organisations [Arsis Association for the Social Support of Youth](#), [Move Coalition](#), [ASGI](#)¹ and [Meldpunt Vreemdelingendetentie](#), part of Stichting LOS. Through these testimonies, we hope to shed light on a practice that is often unknown, and contribute to a better understanding of the impact that immigration detention has on peoples' lives, their mental health, and on the people who surround them.

Each of the sixteen stories told in this booklet tries to give a glimpse of what more than [100,000 people](#) experience in countries across the European Union every year.

Immigration detention is used by European Union Member States for three purposes: to prevent entry to the territory, to carry out return/deportation procedures, and during asylum procedures. Nonetheless, there is broad evidence of both the [harmfulness](#) and [ineffectiveness](#) of immigration detention.

Immigration detention is an administrative practice. This means that, unlike detention for criminal reasons, it does not require criminal charges nor a trial. In addition, the period of detention is

¹ The stories from Italy have been drawn from ASGI (2021) [The Black book on the Pre-Removal Detention Centre \(CPR\) of migrants in Turin – Corso Brunelleschi](#).

often prolonged while the person is already in detention. The period can be prolonged several times, meaning that when someone enters detention, they do not know when, and if, they will be released or deported.

Detention isolates people from their communities, with severe impacts on their lives. According to [international](#) and [European](#) law, the right to liberty is a fundamental human right which may only be restricted in exceptional circumstances. Even short periods of detention leave strong marks on people's futures, [increasing](#) their vulnerability to harm.

Despite broad and uncontested evidence on the harm of detention, the European Union is increasingly pushing for [more restrictive](#) migration policies, which will lead to an increase in immigration detention, including of children, even though [international bodies](#) have indicated that immigration detention is always a child rights violation, never in their best interests, and should be ended.

By telling the stories of people who are, or were, detained across the European Union, we hope to shed some light on this inhumane practice and contribute to its end.



Hélène *Detained in Belgium*

I left my beloved country Rwanda because of all the troubles happening there. All my family was killed. I was under a lot of emotional stress, and I developed a bad case of ulcers, which I could finally treat in Belgium.

I had been in Belgium for seven years when I got unexpectedly detained because I didn't have the right papers to stay. I spent six months in a detention centre. It should be called a prison, really.

It was so stressful, so inhumane, to be kept there without knowing how long I would have to stay.

My ulcers came back. I was in so much pain. I had a lot of migraine attacks too because of all the stress.

I received some medication for my ulcers and found a lawyer who helped me submit the right paperwork to get me released. I now work as a cleaner in Belgium.

I pray every day that people looking for protection are treated fairly.

Nadra

Her husband was detained in Belgium

I flew the horrors of the war in Afghanistan when I was 16. I got a residence permit in Belgium and met an Afghan man who was seeking asylum. We married a couple of years later and I got pregnant with our first baby. I was working and studying for my bachelor's in social work. We looked forward to living a normal life, just like everybody else.

Then my husband got detained, for no other reason than being undocumented.

It was an immensely stressful period. I had so many roles to fulfill. I had to work full-time, meet the lawyer constantly and save money to pay him, study and visit my husband at the detention centre. I had to be strong for him. And I had to do all of this with a big pregnant belly.

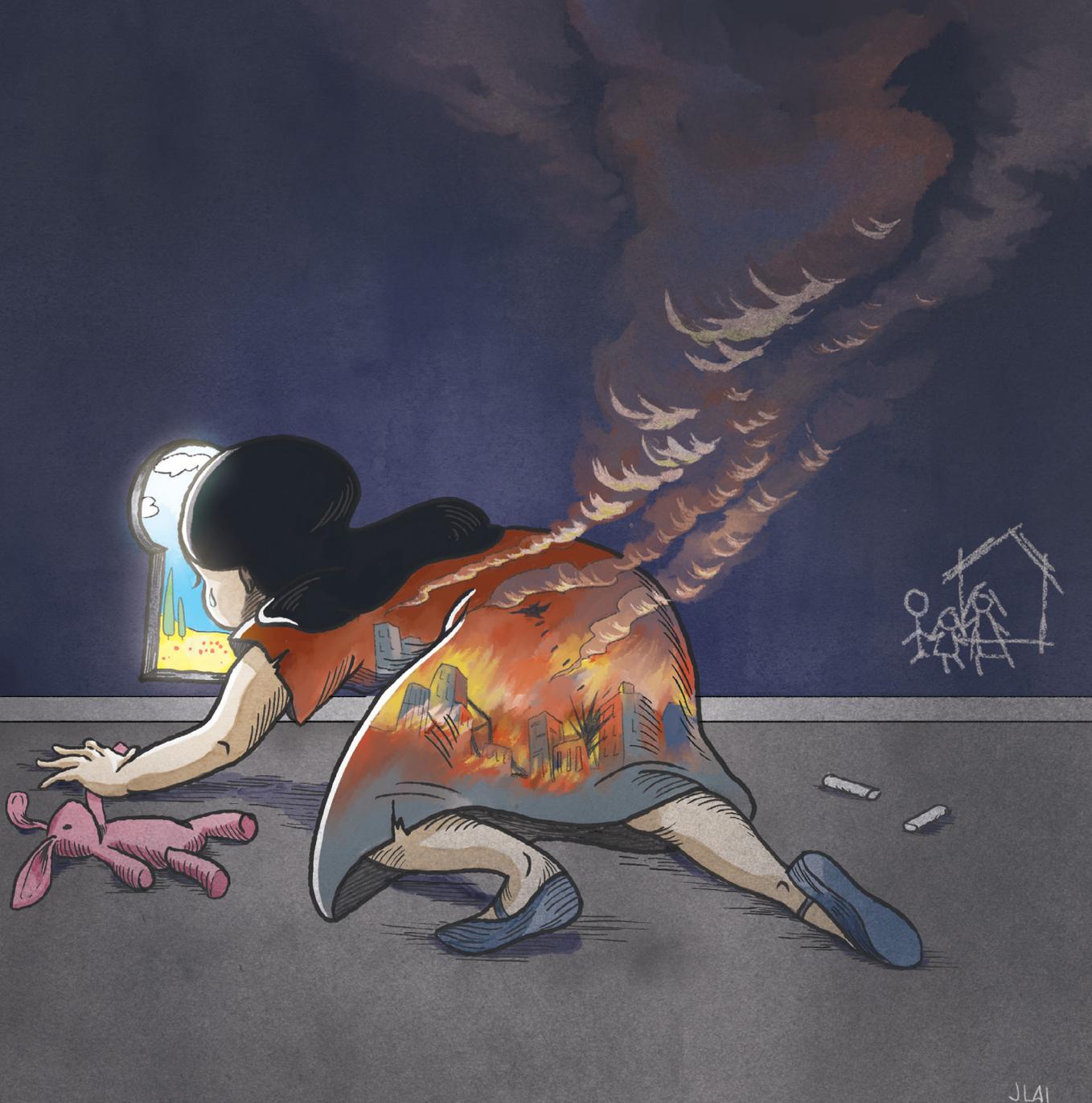
I sunk into a depression. But I pushed on. I cancelled my studies. I talked to the media about the cruelty of keeping an innocent man away from his almost-delivering-wife. I met often with the lawyer. After four months of hopelessness and desperation in detention, my husband was finally able to get a residence permit.

He was just in time to attend the birth of our daughter.

I never want to have so much stress in my life again. We both still suffer from the trauma of that time. I learned to recognize the signs of depression in myself, and my husband struggles with recurring nightmares from the time he spent in detention.

We just want a normal life, like everybody else.





Ali *Detained in Greece*

I just turned 18. I come from Afghanistan. I arrived in Greece three years ago, when I was 15. I had to leave my country because I come from the Khazara tribe, which is constantly under threat by the Taliban. I left for my safety.

In Greece, I was detained twice.

The first time was when I entered Greece three years ago. I stayed in a hostel for one month, but I was sent to a detention centre² after that. They put me in a cell, alone. There was no window, only one bed and one toilet.

There was nobody to talk to. I felt like I was going to forget how to talk. I was writing lyrics of songs and poems on the cell's walls to comfort myself. It was the only thing that could make me feel a little bit better.

*I couldn't even communicate with my family.
They were anxious. They thought I was dead.*

The second time was one year ago. I had lost my ID and the police stopped me and directly put me in their car. I thought there was something wrong with me. I didn't expect to be detained again. Nobody knew what would happen. I was more scared this time. I was afraid to be deported or sent back to Turkey.

Children shouldn't go to jail. Children are the world, and these inhumane laws ruin their innocence.

² This interview refers to the Greek [practice](#) of detaining children in small and overcrowded police stations under the "protective custody" regime. This practice finally [came to an end](#) in 2020.

Hamid

Detained in Italy

*Hamid's story was shared by his lawyer in Italy

Hamid is a young man from Tunisia. He arrived in Lampedusa, Italy, with a painful gunshot wound in his leg.

*He was detained for 202 days
before he could receive proper surgery.*

During his detention, Hamid was in constant pain. He couldn't even walk properly anymore. He needed a wheelchair or crutches to move, but he wasn't allowed to use those in the detention centre, being forced to be sitting or lying all day long. He needed help from other detainees to use the toilet.

He applied for international protection and was called for an interview, but he was unable to attend as the management of the centre didn't provide any means to accompany him. The response from the centre was that it was too difficult to transport him in a wheelchair. He had to wait a whole month for a new interview.

During his detention, the medical staff from the centre operated him to extract the bullets from his leg. The operation was carried out in the centre ambulatory, a place unfit for surgeries. His lawyer requested the entry of a surgeon and an in-depth check at a hospital, but the request was never answered.

The injury on his leg got worse. Hamid was constantly shaking and couldn't control his movements. After his lawyer's multiple requests, he was finally sent to a hospital. The doctor revealed the presence of several bullets in his leg and the need for surgery.

After 202 days, Hamid was finally released and placed in a reception centre for asylum seekers.





Rashid Detained in the Netherlands

I came to Europe with my family six years ago to seek a better life, but my asylum request was denied. I've been in immigration detention twice, this time for four months.

My wife was pregnant and nearly due when I got into detention.

I would have been able to deal with it if it was just me who was feeling bad and experiencing all this. But I'm not the only one, I have a family that's also suffering because of this.

I'm not allowed to attend the birth. Every day, my wife cries for me and tells me she wants me next to her.

I am nothing right now. I can't do anything. I was planning to help and do things for my wife, but I can't do anything now. It makes me feel so angry.

If I'm sent back to Afghanistan, my wife will have to stay here alone with our child. How will she do that? She would have to do everything by herself. A pregnant woman can't really do that, when they're in their eighth or ninth month of pregnancy.

Detention is a punishment for us.

Marouan

Detained in Greece

When I came to Greece, I wasn't even 18. I was living in the street and trying to survive on my own. One day a group of people approached me. They told me that I had to register at the police station so I could go to a centre and stay with other children my age.

When I went to the police station to get registered, the police officers took me to a detention centre. They told me that I would only stay for a few days, but it was longer than that. They put me in solitary confinement: they told me that I had to stay in isolation for 14 days because of Covid-19 measures. They took all my belongings away.

*I was going crazy in the prison cell all by myself.
I was overthinking about my life every single day.*

All the bad experiences were revisiting me. They were vivid as if I was living them again. I thought that I was being punished. I started screaming and crying but no one was there. I lost track of time and it seemed like years had passed.

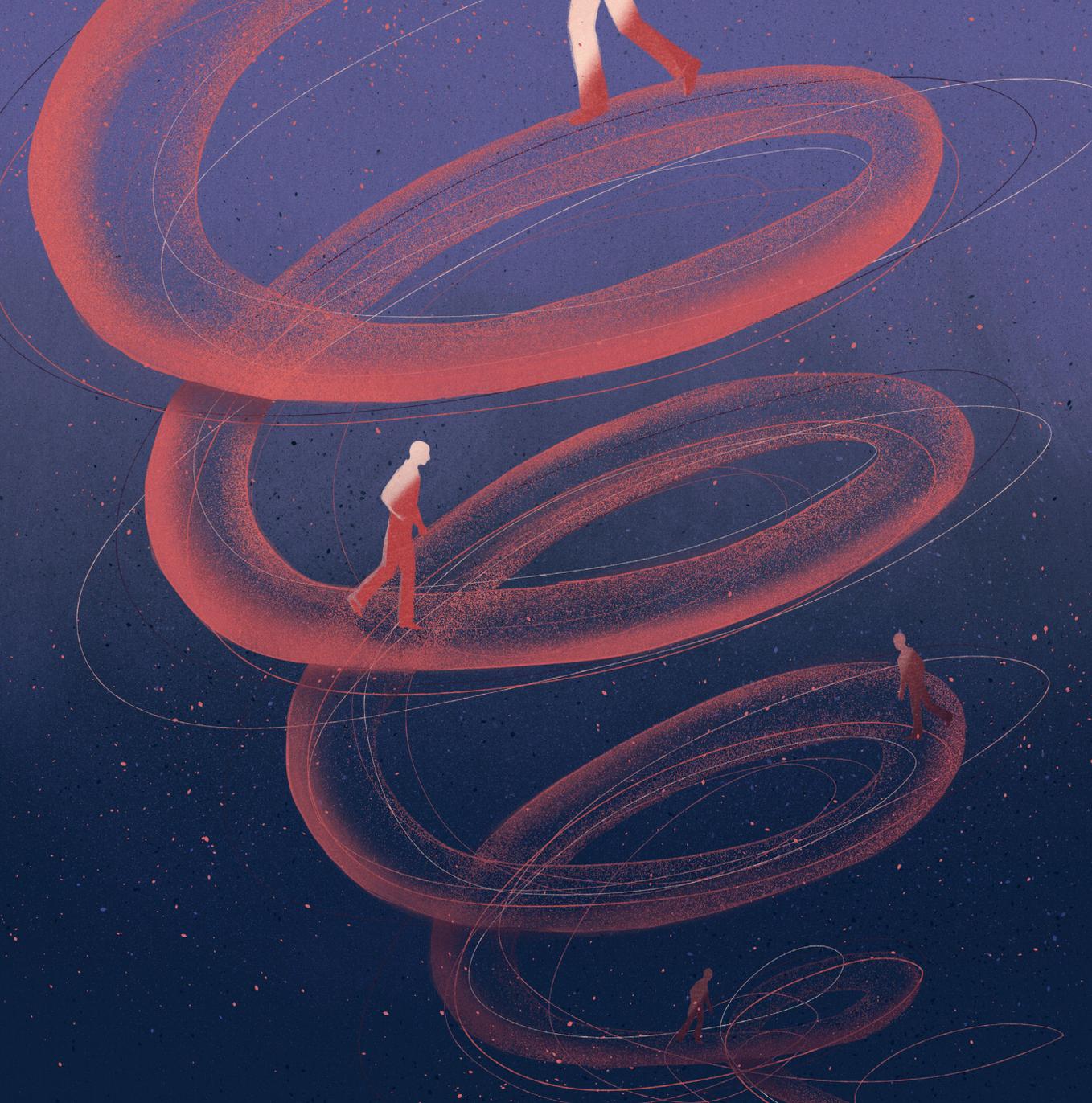
Fourteen days later, they released me from isolation and transferred me to a cell with more people. Nobody in the cell could speak Arabic. I couldn't understand anything. It was hard. I was afraid to lose my sanity or to get hurt by others. Police officers weren't checking on us. I felt so lonely and unprotected. As days, weeks and months were passing, I was feeling desperate. I was going crazy.

I left my country for a better and safe life, not to live in a prison. I started to believe that I would spend my whole life in prison. I couldn't bear it anymore. I lost hope. I decided to end my life.

I tried to kill myself several times, but I got saved every time. They took me to see a psychiatrist. Only after that I was finally placed in a safe house.



Illustration by © Jessica Lai - [@jesscplai](#)



Armando *Detained in the Netherlands*

I've been in the Netherlands for 20 years and for the past 17 months I've been in immigration detention.

I suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If you already have psychological issues, it will only get worse there. It's not good to spend the whole day in a cell.

If you've been in immigration detention for a long time and you don't get the medical treatment you need, your medical problems will only worsen.

Before being detained, my psychological problems were under control. But now I'm back to square one.

I was suicidal, but I didn't show it. In detention, if they find out you're suicidal, they can put you in solitary confinement.

Even when you're out of confinement, you'll start worrying about that and start dreaming. Sometimes I would wake up startled from these dreams. My cellmates used to get scared by that.

Salman

Detained in Greece

I come from Pakistan. I came to Greece with my older brother because our father was living in Athens.

When we reached Athens, I got stopped by the police. They took me to prison. They took all my belongings. I was scared. Police officers were nervous all the time. They couldn't even understand what my name was.

They told me that I was not in prison, that I was there for my protection³ because I was a minor. They told me that it would last for a short period until they find me another place.

I was worried. My brother didn't know what had happened to me. Nobody knew.

In the centre, I was with other boys. They were dangerous. They were the kind of people my mum used to warn me to stay away from. I was afraid that they would hurt me.

I felt lonely and scared.

Once they beat a boy up in front of my eyes. I couldn't do anything to help him out. The police officers didn't care. It was very difficult to deal with all of that by myself. I was in constant fear for my life and safety.

One day, riots happened in the centre. There was fire all over the place. That's when they finally transferred me to a shelter.

³ This interview refers to the Greek [practice](#) of detaining children in small and overcrowded police stations under the "protective custody" regime. This practice finally [came to an end](#) in 2020.





Yahia Detained in Italy

*Yahia's story was shared by his lawyer in Italy

Yahia arrived in Lampedusa from Tunisia during the COVID-19 pandemic. He suffers from blood cancer and had three surgeries.

When he arrived, he had to spend several days in the ship in quarantine. The doctor at the ship communicated that Yahia needed a further diagnostic and follow-up, but when they disembarked, he received an order of removal and was sent to a detention centre in Turin.

All he wanted was to see a doctor.

He said repeatedly to the judge that he suffers from leukaemia and needed a treatment, but the judge didn't request an in-depth medical check.

Instead, the chief doctor from the centre issued a certificate saying that Yahia was suitable for detention.

He had to ask his doctor back in Tunisia to send his medical files to show them to the judge. Even though the medical files said that Yahia required regular examinations and treatment, a whole month passed waiting for a medical check.

Finally, he underwent a blood test, and was released on medical grounds after being detained for 49 days. He was left on the streets of Turin, even though he didn't know the city and he had no money. He had to spend the night at the train station before he could find the reception centre for asylum seekers.

Omar

Detained in the Netherlands

I come from North Africa. I've been in the Netherlands for four years and I've been stuck in immigration detention for four months.

In the detention centre, there are screens placed in the visitation area due to COVID-19, between the detainees and their visitors. It's hard to see my girlfriend and our daughter behind the glass.

When I see my girlfriend I'd like to have some contact with her, but I can't. I can only see her behind that glass.

I haven't seen my daughter for four months. She's 18 months old now. I know she still knows me, but she would cry if she saw me behind that glass.

I've never even seen my newborn son. I don't have pictures with him when he was little.

When he'll be ten or fifteen, maybe he'll ask why there are no pictures of us together. What am I supposed to tell him? That I was detained? I feel really sad for my daughter, my girlfriend and my son.

The guards respond really late when I need help. One night I suffered from bad hyperventilation. I vomited, struggled to breathe and really thought I would die. Only after two hours someone came to check on me, even though I had asked for help multiple times.





Noel *Detained in Belgium*

I left Cameroun fleeing persecution for talking frankly about the government's violations of human rights.

I came to Belgium believing it was a humane country, but here I was detained for twenty-one days without having committed a crime.

The police handled me harshly and put me in an ice-cold cell for almost a day, without anything to warm me up, in the middle of a cold winter. I looked for a lawyer to help me get out. I almost went mad in the detention centre.

I heard so many stories of bad treatment. Stories from people who fled inhumane governments and persecution, only to find another inhumane government here.

They might not get physically tortured anymore, but being detained without knowing for how long is a mental torture.

I stayed sane by doing small jobs in the centre, like cleaning the toilets. Even after 'only' twenty-one days of detention, I still regularly check my doors at home and make sure they aren't locked and I'm really free to walk out whenever I want. This still gives me a lot of stress.

I'm now working as a health care worker in Belgium. One day I'll write a book about Belgium's inhumane government with all the stories I collected in the detention centre.

Sabar

Detained in Greece

I come from Pakistan. I've been in Greece for the last 11 months. I'm now living in a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee minors, but before this I was detained under the "Protective custody" system⁴.

The conditions there were unbearable for anyone to live in. At the beginning, I had no idea why I was held there. Some children told me that it was because I entered Greece without papers.

I wasn't allowed to call my parents. We didn't have mobile phones and we had to save money to buy one. The bedroom was cold and dirty. Sometimes, when kids were shouting and asking for help, policemen would scream back at them and hit them badly.

I don't understand how this place is supposed to protect children.

There was nothing that was giving me hope. I didn't know anything about the laws in Greece. I had no idea when I would be released.

Those were horrible times. I hope no one experiences something similar. I'm afraid I'll never manage to forget those days.

⁴ This interview refers to the Greek [practice](#) of detaining children in small and overcrowded police stations under the "protective custody" regime. This practice finally [came to an end](#) in 2020.





Yassin *Detained in the Netherlands*

I came to the Netherlands five years ago. Since then, I've been detained in immigration detention four times.

You see the same people there every day, the same stress, the same questions.

*When will you get out?
How long will you be there?
When are you going to court?
Will they extend your permit?*

Every day is the same: it gets hard psychologically, you get angry, angry with everyone. I couldn't take it anymore. They were not being transparent: deport me or let me be free.

It's like a cat and mouse game: they'll let you go and then keep chasing you. Once you're free, the paranoia starts. Every time you exit a door, you look behind you. With every police encounter you already know what to expect.

I was afraid that one day I might do something crazy. I kept calm, but I didn't know what was going to happen. I'm just a human being, it's too much pressure.

Here we're not treated like humans. Not even like animals, animals are treated with more respect than us in the Netherlands.

Abdalla

Detained in Greece

I'm a 16-year-old boy from Kuwait. I arrived in Greece in 2017 alone. I travelled alone because I didn't have anyone to support me. I was detained for 8 months.

For a while, I stayed at the Diavata Camp, near Thessaloniki. Then, I was transferred to the Pre-departure Detention Centre in Paranesti, where I stayed for 8 months.

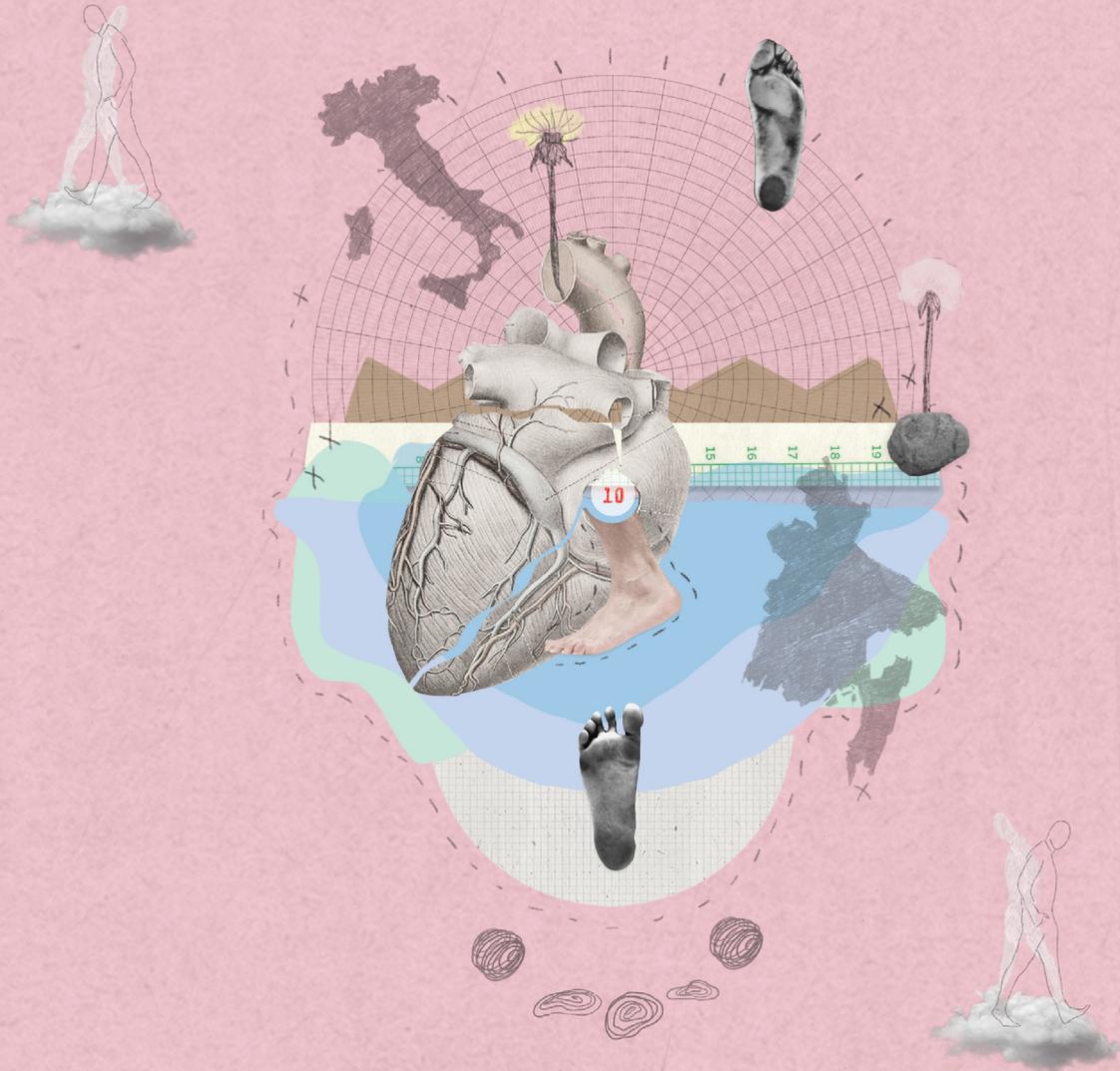
The conditions in the detention centre were really bad. We had no access to medical care.

My cellmates and I went on a hunger strike to protest against the inhumane conditions in the centre.

It lasted for 10 days. Our calls were left unheard. During that period, I was feeling terribly bad to the point that I was harming myself.

After 8 months of detention, the result of the age assessment test confirmed that I was a minor and I was finally transferred to a shelter for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers.





Hossain *Died in detention in Italy*

*Hossain's story was shared by his lawyer in Italy

Hossain was born in Bangladesh. Since his arrival at one of the pre-departure detention centres in Italy, he was placed in solitary confinement.

One of the centre's psychologists issued a certificate of suitability for detention, even though Hossain was showing symptoms of mental health disorder and physical illness.

In his interviews with the psychologist, Hossain was always confused, disoriented. He would walk barefoot, either silent or repeating the same words again and again, and sleep on the floor.

*Hossain died of a heart attack in the cell
where he had been kept for almost five months.*

For some time he had not even been sleeping in his room, but on the floor of the tiny courtyard next to it.

Moussa

Died in detention in Italy

*Moussa's story was shared by his lawyer in Italy

Moussa was born in 1998 in Guinea. He came to Italy to seek asylum.

One day, he was victim of a racist violent attack by three men in the street. He had to go to the hospital, but immediately after leaving he was taken to the local police station.

He was never recognised as a victim of a violent and racist crime, and was sent instead to a detention centre so he could be deported.

In the centre, they placed him in solitary confinement without any psychological assessment.

Moussa spent around 10 days confined in a detention centre in Turin, Italy. He was kept in a room with bare walls, scarcely illuminated by the sun.

The only contact with the outdoors was a tiny courtyard of a few square metres fenced in by railings and enclosed by a canopy. He could only see a tiny piece of sky.

Moussa was 22 years old when he took his life in the darkness of the isolation cell in 2021.



Further readings

For more information on immigration detention and what can be done to end it, see:

ARSIS (2020) Unaccompanied minors: national framework of hosting and protection services (the example of Safe Zones) [[ΑΣΥΝΟΔΕΥΤΟΙ ΑΝΗΛΙΚΟΙ Εθνικό πλαίσιο υπηρεσιών φιλοξενίας και προστασίας \(το παράδειγμα των Ασφαλών Ζωνών - Safe Zones](#), in Greek].

— (2021) Social work on the street for the protection of unaccompanied minors [[Κοινωνική Εργασία στο Δρόμο για την Προστασία των Ασυνόδευτων Ανηλίκων](#), in Greek].

— (2018) [Stories of people from the other shore](#).

ASGI (2021) [The Black book on the Pre-Removal Detention Centre \(CPR\) of migrants in Turin - Corso Brunelleschi](#).

Border Criminologies, University of Oxford. [Landscapes of border control. CPR Torino](#).

— (2021) [The Arab Spring's Fall in Italy's Detention Centers](#).

HRMLC (2018) Emergency exit: Health protection of detainees in Turin's C.P.R. [[La tutela della salute dei trattenuti nel C.P.R. di Torino](#), in Italian]

IUC (2019) [Betwixt and between: Turin's CIE. A human rights investigation into Turin's immigration detention centre](#), edited by U. Stege, M. Veglio, E. Roman and A. Ogada-Osir.

Meldpunt Vreemdelingendetentie (2018) [European Borderscapes & the Illegal\(ized\) Migrant](#). R.I. Timmerman.

PICUM (2020) [More detention, fewer safeguards: How the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum creates new loopholes to ignore human rights obligations](#).

— (2020) [Talking points on Non-Detention of Migrants: Some Facts and Figures](#).

— (2021) [FAQ Migration Policies, Detention and Return](#).

— (2021) [Preventing and Addressing Vulnerabilities in Immigration Enforcement Policies](#).

— (2022) [Immigration detention and de facto detention: What does the law say?](#)

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