

As well as Spain's Canary Islands, the Italian island of Lampedusa is an arrival point for thousands of irregular migrants arriving from Africa by boat. Here, IOM's **Simona Moscarelli** recounts the horrific experiences of those lucky enough to survive the journey.

**"D**on't take anything with you! We will provide you with water, food and cigarettes. In particular don't bring any documents. Don't let the Italians identify your nationality." These were the last instructions Lamia received just a few hours before leaving Libya for Italy by boat.

Her journey had started two months earlier in Morocco when she was introduced to a "special agent" organizing "easy trips" to Italy. The agent was in contact with another man, based in Libya, who normally follows up and

Libyans know the Africans are trying to make the hop to Italian shores and that if they are leaving the confines of their safe accommodation, it is because they need to go and pick up the money that will pay for the journey. The trip is essential to the migrants but exposes them to possible violence and robbery.

Lamia was lucky. She and her best friend lived in a house for migrants for a month. One night, the smuggler brought them to one of the isolated beaches at Zuwara where migrants are usually gathered before their departure for Italy. There, Lamia met several other men and women.

"Don't worry about the trip. The boat is big and the pilots are well experienced. In one day you will reach the small island of Lampedusa. That's Italy," she was told by the smugglers.

Thanks to a small but quick *Zodiac* boat, Lamia reached a bigger, 12-metre boat.

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▲▼ Often, IOM and others have to provide immediate medical assistance to those just arriving.

the capsizing. She feels guilty because she is overweight and as a result, it took longer and more people to rescue her.

"They could have saved some other people instead of me," she mourns.

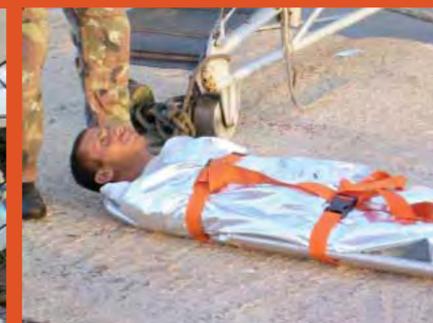
When Fatima and Lamia arrived on Lampedusa, they were in shock. They were taken to what is called the first reception centre and immediately given water, food and clothing. They washed off the unbearable salt water that together with engine oil and urine, was burning their skin.

Mohammad, a 17-year-old Egyptian boy, kept shouting the name of his friend. He wouldn't react to any of the questions asked by the IOM cultural mediator, there mainly to provide legal information to the migrants, but often doing

## The Italian Irregular Migration Experience

# Bella

Photos: Bedros Kendirjian/IOM



takes care of the final part of the trip. Lamia left the equivalent of 2,000 euros with her family in Morocco to hand over to the "agents" only upon her "safe and sound" arrival in Libya. She reached Tripoli by air with her identity card and a regular ticket, together with her best friend.

Once there, she got rid of her identity documents and was put up in a house with other migrants from Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. "Agents", a more polite word for human smugglers, normally separate migrants according to their nationality with different houses for black Africans, Eritreans, Arabs, etc. in order to avoid problems and fights. Some people spend months or even years in these houses waiting for the right moment to go or the money which will allow them to make the final journey to Italy. The migrants are not allowed to leave the house and their day-to-day needs depend on the smugglers who provide them with food and drinks.

Going out, in fact, is dangerous, especially for black African migrants. The

# Vita?

▼ Simona Moscarelli talking to newly arrived migrants on Lampedusa.



But when she saw the *Zodiac* making several additional trips to collect more migrants from the beach, she became anxious. In the end, about 120 people – men, women and unaccompanied children – were crammed into the boat.

By dawn, just a few hours after departure, all the food and water had already gone. As the sun rose, the heat became unbearable. The engine was boiling and to cool it down, the smugglers poured sea water on it, scalding a woman who was too close.

By sunset, the smugglers realized they were still too far from the Italian coast and that they would need additional help if they were to make it. They called a Tunisian fishing boat which arrived with water, milk and some fuel for the boat.

Lamia and the other migrants were relieved, but soon after the sea became rough and fear once again spread among the group. The sight of an Italian naval boat on patrol reassured them, but their thoughts of reaching safety were premature.

A wrong manoeuvre by the pilots and a large wave capsized the boat. Everyone, including the migrants, fell into the sea. Almost none of them could swim.

"One cannot describe what happened during those moments. It was dark, the only light was from the Italian vessel. Everyone was shouting, struggling to reach for a part of the boat to hold on. In an effort to breathe, some of the migrants pushed others down," said one of the survivors.

Rescue patrols arrived immediately but the time in the water seemed endless for the migrants who afterwards reported they had waited "one, two, three hours" to be rescued.

Out of the 120 people on board, the Italian Navy rescued 70 survivors and recovered 10 bodies, mostly women. The bodies were transferred directly to Sicily. Lampedusa doesn't have enough space to bury them.

That was on 19 August 2006. Fatima was one of the three girls who survived

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much more. The centre doctor spent the night trying to reassure and calm him. He wasn't the only one in distress. All the rescued migrants were in a similar state. Many were wailing uncontrollably and nothing any of us could say or do could relieve them of their pain.