

The human face of immigrants

LORENZO DI PIETRO toured Africa to divulge the atrocities of asylum seekers. **Charles Mifsud** interviews the renowned Italian journalist.

An expression of surprise and awe swept across the faces of the European Parliament members as they toured an exhibition of photos by Lorenzo di Pietro.

Di Pietro managed to capture photos of irregular immigrants as they transited deep from the Sahara Desert to Libya on the way to Europe.

In a dangerous trip in Africa, Di Pietro took photos of immigrants that are not a mere documentation of people fleeing their countries. His photos give a face to many human beings who are otherwise just considered as numbers. His work unfolds stories that dig deep into the tragedies of migration.

His photographic exhibition of his trip to Africa was presented to the European Parliament last September. One of the photographs in the exhibition won the first prize of Cannon Club Italia for the 2010.

Di Pietro began to work as a journalist in early 2008, leaving behind a promising career in information and communication technology. A keen observer of human affairs, he has reported on social issues, migration and Africa.

He currently covers international affairs and investigative news for the weekly news magazine *Il Punto*. In television, he has collaborated with Rai and served as a political news analyst for Gold TV and Tele Vita.

In 2008 he founded the news agency Iris Press, and served as its editorial director until 2010.

His most significant work was in Niger in 2010, where he interviewed the leader of the Touareg guerrilla fighters and investigated migrants' travels crossing the Sahara and those sent back from Libya.

Di Pietro followed the route to the city of Agadez in Niger, a landlocked and extremely poor country.

Agadez is inhabited by desert nomads called Touareg who for many years waged guerilla warfare. Once a key passage of medieval caravans trading in western Africa today, Agadez has become a starting point of the journey across the desert towards Libya.

Thousands of immigrants flood in from other parts of Africa to strike a deal with the passeurs, or the people who drive the trucks across the desert to Libya.

"Here reality falls wretchedly short of ideals," explains Di Pietro.

Most of the immigrants, already robbed by border police, are asked to pay their fee to cross the desert. Women who do not have the money have to revert to prostitution to secure a safe passage across the desert.

In Agadez, immigrants have to live in ghettos. The adjoining blocks of mud walls of the ghetto are often ringing with the languages from diverse African cultures. And yet one can find solidarity across the cultures as often happens in times of need. Many immigrants are ready to share the little money they have for the safety of others.

Di Pietro remembers when he was introduced as a Polish doctor to some immigrants living in a ghetto by a local friend. He did not tell the immigrants he was Italian not to alarm them.

"With these people it was like meeting aliens in close encounters of the third kind," Di Pietro recalls.



An immigrant shows his identity pass. Photo: Lorenzo di Pietro

The truck drivers who escorted the immigrants to Libya often returned back to pick up the belongings of the deceased migrants

The immigrants had no idea what Italy was like, or where they were heading. All they were seeking was a second life to run away from the miseries. But this was as elusive as a mirage in the desert.

There are several reasons why immigrants flee their home country. Crops are perishing as vast fertile areas dry up; there is political instability and sometimes even religious persecution in many countries.

However, the ordeals of these immigrants do not end in Agadez. Across the desert in Libya they have to face more problems. Most immigrants were caught and ended up in jail and tortured by Libyan police.

Di Pietro recalls the story of a pregnant woman who was raped by Libyan soldiers.

Other immigrants were just pushed back to the desert with no money to return home and left to die in the scorching sun. The passeurs or truck drivers who



Lorenzo di Pietro (left) with Charles Mifsud. Photo: Kevin Casha

escorted the immigrants to Libya often returned back to pick up the belongings of the deceased migrants.

Not all passeurs are bad people, Di Pietro insists - they are often immigrants themselves who offer this service to make a living.

Di Pietro also remembers when he was invited by a passeur to his home and introduced to his family.

After being asked to switch off all his electronic equipment, Di Pietro's portable GPS equipment accidentally surged into life with a voice giving geographical details of his whereabouts.

Agitation and panic ensued in the passeur's home until Di Pietro calmed all the members of this family and explained to them there was nothing to worry about.

Di Pietro recalls the story of a Catholic immigrant who had to flee Nigeria with his sister after his father, an influential politician, was murdered. In the desert his sister died after having been knocked on the head with a rifle by the border

police. The migrants eventually ended alone in Italy and had to be treated in hospital to overcome the traumatic experience.

Lack of information about such immigrants was only exacerbating the problem in Europe. Italy was giving some \$200 million in aid to Libya to build infrastructure to block migrants from fleeing to Europe when this money could possibly be used for humanitarian aid to these people. In an attempt to stop the flow of immigrants from Africa to Europe, Italy and Libya had also signed a controversial pushback agreement in 2008.

Recently this agreement was renewed with the Benghazi transitional council, even though it still did not have the control of Libya at this point.

Still, Di Pietro believes the responsibility of these immigrants should not lie solely on countries like Italy and Malta, especially since the strife is also related to the fact that European countries had colonised a number of African

countries in the past. Turning to the Arab revolution, Di Pietro said the developments are a result of Arabs tapping into communications.

Di Pietro, in fact, intends to use his expertise as an engineer to try to construct a radio network in Africa connected to the internet. He believes that this way people in Africa will remain connected to their relatives in Europe.

"I always had a love for social issues and politics to help mankind. This journalistic career is my second life," Di Pietro explained.

He said he wanted to educate women in Africa because they can bring a change in politics there. Only recently he completed a documentary with Giuseppe Carrisi of Rai International about African women forced into prostitution.

Di Pietro was invited to Malta by the president of Malta Professional Institute of Photographers Kevin Casha to discuss photojournalism and its impact on society. He also visited immigrants at the Hal Far detention centre.