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European Council
on Refugees and Exiles

ECRE INTERVIEW

with

Carmen Dupont, Coordinator of Amnesty International's campaign When you don't exist:

“Fences and ditches won't stop people from moving, they will only mean more people will die trying”

2 November 2012. Amnesty International's '[When you don't exist](#)' campaign focuses on holding European governments to account for their treatment of migrants at the EU's external borders. As part of the campaign, Amnesty has launched a new [petition](#) calling on the European Parliament to make Member States' governments answerable for their cooperation agreements with third countries, and supported the film '[Closed Sea](#)', directed by Stefano Liberti. The film tells the story of the migrants and refugees who were returned to Libya from Italy in a manner found by the [European Court of Human Rights \(ECtHR\)](#) to have been illegal. The 'push-back' policy has now officially stopped, but Carmen Dupont, coordinator of the campaign, tells us why this has not solved the problem of human rights violations in the Mediterranean.

Amnesty's campaign 'When you don't exist' concerns the safety of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Europe and at its external borders; what are the most pressing areas of concern within this domain for you?

At this stage in the campaign we are focusing on what's happening to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers at the external borders of Europe. Our concerns are mainly around the lack of transparency and the lack of accountability. We see that migration and asylum policies focus a lot on preventing people from actually reaching Europe and the question for us is, where do human rights stand in this debate? We see that European governments and the EU cooperate with third countries at the external borders but often we don't even know what kind of cooperation it is, let alone do we know that there are human rights safeguards. There's no way of monitoring what is happening to the people who are behind these agreements and these policies.

The campaign is also looking into the detention of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, which has been an area of concern for Amnesty for a very long time. And we also look at what impact migration status has on access to basic services.

How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign thus far, both in terms of raising awareness among the European population and in response from policy makers?

We launched the campaign in June, so we're now only a few months into it. What I can definitely say for now, is that we have had impact in our action that has focused on the cooperation between Italy and Libya on migration control. We launched our [S.O.S Europe report](#) on Italy in June and, on the back of the launch of the report, the secret agreement that Italy made with Libya in April was leaked. Amnesty International Italy then had the opportunity to look into that agreement and make comments

on it in the press and it triggered the whole debate in Italy about how the government is cooperating with Libya. And since there was momentum being created on this issue, we decided to focus the efforts of the whole movement on Italy and Libya for a while. We launched a petition targeting the Italian government about their cooperation with Libya and, in the end, and of course this is due to the efforts of many organisations, the Italian government did officially state in June that push-back policies are not an official policy, which was a major breakthrough.

Of course, this is only a statement and it's very important now to monitor how Italy is cooperating with Libya, and we know that they still are, the agreement is still there and we have serious concerns about its content. So that is definitely something that we will keep raising with the Italian authorities, but also with the EU authorities because we know that the EU is also interested in resuming cooperation with Libya on migration.

One of the main aims of the campaign is also to raise awareness among the European population. We try to use different tools to really take it back to its core and make clear that behind the policies are real people. We are not talking about asylum and migration in the abstract, it's about human beings who are not being treated with dignity at our borders. And that is definitely a long-term project where we will work with other organisations, to really try to build a momentum for change.

“Things have only gotten worse for migrants and asylum seekers in Libya”

Why does the Italian government's treatment of migrants at sea and cooperation with Libya in border control requires particular attention at present?

The cooperation between Libya and Italy has been of concern to Amnesty International for many years. Italy has had a long-standing relationship with Libya and before the conflict broke out, there was a cooperation agenda with the European Union. Our concern is first of all, that it's very difficult to actually monitor what's going on as a consequence of these agreements, as they are not made public.

In the recent April agreement that was leaked, there is one sentence on the need to respect human rights. It's written on paper, but what does it mean in practise is the big question. We have raised this with the Italian government and we don't get adequate responses to our questions of how they actually make sure that human rights are respected in this cooperation.

Also, our researcher on Libya has been there in September, and informed us that things have only gotten worse for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers there. For example, detention centres are not even under control of the government, they are in the hands of militias. This of course raises huge concerns about accountability. It's a context of impunity and we see that people are being exploited, used for labour in these camps.

Our Libya research warns about a climate of racism and xenophobia, which means that foreign nationals are often discriminated against and face ill-treatment, even torture. We really feel that in this context, starting to talk to the Libyan authorities about migration control is very worrying and we don't think that European authorities should engage with Libya on this matter until it can actually guarantee that they will respect human rights.

The campaign is clearly intended to instigate discussion and exert pressure for policy change. Who are you most keen to engage with through your work?

There are many players active in this area. Through our offices in different countries, we try to engage with the national authorities of the European states and raise our concerns. The European Union also plays a key role on this topic and we have now launched a [petition](#) targeting the European Parliament in their watch-dog role. They should make sure that there is some kind of accountability for European governments and institutions for what they do when engaging in migration control agreements and operations.

It's also very important that we build momentum all together, with other organisations and stakeholders. It's very encouraging to see how many NGOs and international organisations are focussing now on externalisation and human rights and border control. We also contribute information to the UN Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights of Migrants who is now doing his research on exactly this topic.

We also want to reach out to the migrant, refugee and asylum seeker communities, reach out to people who also want to add their voice to this campaign as people who have actually lived through this and can share their story to demonstrate that it's actually human beings who are behind the policies.

“The European Parliament has to ensure that European governments and institutions are accountable for what they do when engaging in migration control agreements and operations”

The judgment on the Hirsi case by the [ECtHR](#) has led to the official suspension of 'push-backs' by Italy. Does this mean that the situation has been resolved? What challenges still remain?

In June, the Italian government made the declaration that push-back policies are no longer part of the official policies of the Italian authorities. We have obviously welcomed this statement but it doesn't mean that we no longer have to monitor the relationship between Italy and Libya. There are definitely still reasons for concern. With our [petition](#), we have asked the Italian authorities to no longer work with Libya on migration control until the authorities have demonstrated that they can respect and protect the human rights of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. This goal hasn't been met. We have seen the text of the April agreement and we have not found reassuring signs in there that they're doing everything they can to make sure that human rights are respected.

Amnesty had been very active on the Hirsi case - we [contributed](#) with evidence to the Court - and now we keep monitoring how the Italian authorities implement this judgment. We keep giving input to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe of our concerns around the implementation of the judgment. Our concerns have been taken into account by the Committee of Ministers and they are raising these with the Italian government.

What are the next steps for the When you don't exist campaign?

We have now closed down the Italy-Libya petition and we delivered almost 28,500 signatures to the Italian Ministry of Interior last Friday 19 October

Now we are targeting the European Parliament with our petition. We will work with other organisations, with our members and with the general public to generate support for these calls. We hope we will be able to deliver a large number of signatures to the president of the European Parliament in March 2013.

We will keep doing research and gathering evidence on human rights violations at the external borders of Europe.

A long term aim of the campaign is to tackle the trend of dehumanising this debate, to really make people in Europe realise what impact these policies have on people. Migration has existed in all times, and people will keep moving, we've done that for centuries, and if you build fences, if you dig ditches, it's not going to stop people it's just going to mean that more people will get hurt, more people will die. It's important that we get that message out there.