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## Refugees: Centro Astalli refugee service, increased requests for food and shelter due to pandemic. Italians seeking assistance for the first time

All in the same boat. Many refugees have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, just like the Italians, primarily in the catering and hotel industry. Many have been denied access to unemployment benefits and returned to ask for food and financial support at Centro Astalli's soup kitchen in Rome. An average of 210 daily meals were distributed in 2020. Also Italians asked for help for the first time in years. Over the year 2020, Jesuit refugee service Centro Astalli supported over 17,000 people in its eight local branches (Rome, Bologna, Catania, Grumo Nevano, Palermo, Trento, Vicenza and Padua), including 10,000 people in Rome. Demand for services such as soup kitchens, showers, food parcels and medicines is high throughout the country. It is estimated that 3,500 people were availing themselves of the soup kitchens in Rome (including 2,198 asylum seekers or subsidiary protection holders), over 30% of whom are homeless and in serious distress. A total of 54,417 meals were distributed in the capital alone. These are just some of the figures and situations described in the 2021 Annual Report of Jesuit Refugee Service "Centro Astalli", presented today. The report outlines a situation whereby "long-term effects of the migration and security decrees, along with migration policies of closure - if not outright discrimination - that marked immigration and asylum legislation until the end of 2020, have aggravated insecurity, exclusion and illegal conditions."



Over 2,600 people turned to the day centre in Palermo whose soup kitchen, with monthly food parcels, was opened to Italians in need. A night shelter set up in Trento for winter emergencies was transformed into a low-cost housing service with a help desk for homeless asylum seekers. The Centro Astalli in Bologna was provided with an area for the construction of a new night shelter for asylum seekers and refugees. 34,000 arrivals in 2020 but declining asylum applications (28,000). The year 2020 saw an increase in the number of arrivals of migrants by sea to Italy (34,000), after a two-year downward trend (23,000 in 2018 and 11,000 in 2019). On the other hand, asylum applications in Italy declined during the same period: 28 thousand (down from 43,783 in 2019). During a year of support for forcibly displaced migrants, the Astalli Centre, in the wake of the pandemic, recorded "more barriers to obtaining effective protection, greater social discomfort and increased marginalisation of refugees."

**Numerous cases of instability have deteriorated into extreme poverty.**

Local office regulations and practices turn bureaucracy into "a prospective bureaucratic bottleneck" hindering the safeguarding of rights. In addition, the health crisis exposed "the shortcomings of the healthcare system and local welfare", undermining "protection and support measures for the most vulnerable members of society, including refugees."



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. The border closures to foreign nationals in 90 countries due to the pandemic, the lack of search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean by governments and the European Union, restrictions to NGO interventions, "did not stop the illegal influx of migrants. It just served to mask its consequences", observed Centro Astalli. Over 11,000 migrants were rescued or intercepted in the Mediterranean in 2020, returned to Libya and detained there in "unacceptable" conditions, according to the United Nations. In addition, there were more than 1,400 confirmed shipwreck fatalities in 2020. **Victims of violence and torture.** Another sensitive area concerns the victims of torture, intentional violence or sexual abuse, admitted to the SaMiFo health centre for asylum seekers and refugees, as many as 1,471 in 2020, 763 more compared to the previous year. The Centre offers expert medical services and new screening and treatment programmes linked to countering the Covid-19 pandemic, including antigene and serological tests. Refugees reported being tortured, as well as indiscriminate beatings and abuse in Libya. In 2020, SaMiFo also documented the violence inflicted by law enforcement in the Balkans and those caused by refoulement at the Italian-Slovenian border.



states Centro Astalli's report, which documents that 36% of those who requested assistance at Centro Astalli's outpatient clinic in Palermo were not registered with the National Health Service, "due to problems with their residence or immigration status." This makes it much more difficult to motivate people to commit themselves to integration programmes: "many are desperate to find any kind of job (even illegal or underpaid), to avoid the risk of losing their residence permit." **The pandemic has put a heavy strain on refugee families in particular.** The situation of large families and single parents is extremely critical. They remain in refugee shelters for a long time (at least 12 months), and after leaving the shelters, families suffer a precarious situation owing to the lack of informal, parental or friendship support networks. The autonomy support service assisted 178 single mothers (54% of all mothers) in 2020. Ongoing support is also needed for unaccompanied immigrant children.

