

**Original article:** Stefano, nurse on the Mare Jonio, the “children’s vessel”: “On board, tales of violence and torture etched on the skin” by Emmanuel Buttice  
**Source:** AlqamaH.it on Sept 16, 2019

## The children's vessel

By Emmanuel Buttice

16 September 2019

*Stefano, nurse and rescuer aboard the Mare Jonio, recounts his experience of the boat that's been renamed “the children's vessel”. The smiles of the little ones, the fears of their mothers, and the abuses suffered by people who risked dying, first in Lybia, then at sea.*



“It’s a target, it looks empty ... no, actually you can see heads, there’s loads of heads!” The rescue team shouted out when spotting a large rubber raft in the middle of the sea. The closer they got to it, the more the image of the raft shape up. So the Mare Jonio rescue team identified their “target”. “Target” is the English word used to indicate a raft at sea full of men,

women and children. “It looked empty to start with, then the heads popped up, loads of them. People were hiding; they thought we were the Lybian coast guard”. This is the story of a man on the front line in the Mare Jonio – the boat of the Italian NGO *Mediterranea Saving Humans*, which in the early hours of August 28th saved ninetyeight people in the Lybian SAR zone. His name is Stefano Caselli. Stefano is a thirty-one-year-old nurse who has lived in Bologna for over twenty years and collaborates with the association YaBasta Bologna, a collective engaged in advocacy on rights and freedom of movement, social and environmental justice, free and independent information, and defending access routes to real democracy.



In charge of health for *Mediterranea*, he is but one of the volunteers who brought ninety-eight shipwrecked people to safety that morning — including twenty-two children and twenty-six women. “Getting aboard the Mare Jonio came natural to me; I am a nurse, and so many, too many people are dying in that sea. Bringing my work and activism together through YaBasta was completely in line with my chosen path in life.”

**Original article:** Stefano, nurse on the Mare Jonio, the “children’s vessel”: “On board, tales of violence and torture etched on the skin” by Emmanuel Buttice  
**Source:** AlqamaH.it on Sept 16, 2019



“We’d just spent a few sleepless nights: patrolling a sea this wide with just one vessel makes you anxious and gives you a massive feeling of isolation. At around five in the morning, we identified something on the radar that could be a raft, so we sailed towards it”.

Of the ensuing minutes, Stefano recalls the anxiety that gripped the crew, aware that they could have stumbled across people alive or dead, or just a drifting relict. “We got there at around six: it was less dark and we could see the first few heads from our binoculars. That’s when we released the rescue motor boats”.

The rescuers, Stefano at the front with the red cross helmet, approached the raft from the side; there they found ninety-eight people who’d been drifting for two days and two nights, no water or food left. Reassured by the presence of the rescuers, amongst laughter and cries of relief, they

could finally leave the horror of the lager behind. But the memory of it was still vivid: nine fellow travellers had drowned. They'd fallen in the sea and disappeared in the waves during the crossing.

"Once we got there we immediately realised that there were twenty-two children who were between three months old and five years old. Rarely do you see children in such high numbers." Of ninety-eight of them, twenty-six were women, four of whom pregnant. After handing out safety jackets, the back and forth of transporting them to the Mare Jonio began. "First, we took the women and children, then everyone else. A solidarity competition started and the men were a huge help in the transfer". The deck had suddenly turned into a huge crèche; a scene Stefano says he'll never forget. "As soon as the rescue operations were over, I returned to the Mare Jonio and immediately noticed other crew members had two or three children each hanging from their necks, or climbing on their legs. The boat had become an unruly nursery. The mothers, exhausted, had fallen asleep, and the children were playing with the crew. What a beautiful hymn to life."

These people are fleeing places that have been plundered for decades; they would do anything to get on a boat, risk their and their children's lives. "We should think about this: saving humans today has become something extraordinary, because it's something being done by civil society, whilst Europe does not lift a finger. Worse: Europe funds the Libyan Coast Guard with vessels and money. I would rather not be at sea, but it is necessary", says Stefano Caselli. "I'd like to visit these people on the ground, but so long as this situation continues, we'll keep going out to sea. It's time for Europe to change course of action on this issue, radically".

"They all come from countries that have been plundered; they have experienced prison and forced labour, violence, rape, torture, being left with no food or water. Some of them, years of it. They have tried to cross the sea more than once. For one of the lads we rescued in the last mission, this was his sixth attempt. I like recounting their great attachment to life,



**Original article:** Stefano, nurse on the Mare Jonio, the “children’s vessel”: “On board, tales of violence and torture etched on the skin” by Emmanuel Buttice  
**Source:** AlqamaH.it on Sept 16, 2019

something we’d do well to start appreciating again on this side of the world. Their huge desire to fight together, to create communities in solidarity. During the six days we spent at sea together, I learned so much from them. They impart lots of strength and an attachment to life”, says Stefano Caselli.



Confirmation of their stories came from the initial medical examination from the team on board of the Mare Jonio. Stefano and the gynaecologist, Dr Donatella Albini, visited the women first. The women allowed them to without complaining; they were not used to gentle acts of care. “We already knew what to expect, but you could never get used to it. In the near totality of cases, the women came from countries that practice FGM; around seventy percent of them had been abused in many ways. The pregnant women had been raped in the Libyan lager, their pregnancy the outcome of those rapes. The body of these women, and men, bears witness to what happens in Lybia.



Many of them, men and women alike, had never seen a doctor, or had not seen one in years, and were glad to be checked. It was much harder for us



**Original article:** Stefano, nurse on the Mare Jonio, the “children’s vessel”: “On board, tales of violence and torture etched on the skin” by Emmanuel Buttice  
**Source:** AlqamaH.it on Sept 16, 2019

to see those terrible marks on their bodies. On the skins of those people, there are signs of torture and violence, but the psychological and psychiatric effects are not to be underestimated. We recorded all sorts of ailments, from post traumatic stress disorder to attempts of suicide; this is why we evacuated one of the women on the last mission”.

On board you hear all kinds of tales of desperation, death and slavery. Stefano collected them all, and with Dr Albini listened to everyone during their visits. “Half the people had been detained in Tajura, the centre that was bombed last July. Many carried signs of that day: burns, metal splinters in the legs, like war survivors. Many had lost a brother or a friend. Their stories were somehow known to us before we left, but when you look under the garments, you realise how indelible these marks are on the body: cane beatings, cuts, burns, mutilations, violence and tortures of all kinds. Beatings whilst on the phone to their mothers asking for money, forced labour, endless sexual violence. Stories of pure slavery. This is how it works: whoever needs labourers in Libya goes to a prison guard and recruits free slaves. These stories from the other side of the Mediterranean are all documented and signed by myself and our cultural mediator. There is no room for mystifications. People even accused us of inventing diagnoses to let them disembark. I challenge those doctors to come and examine them with me. You cannot make those marks up: they are there, carved on their skin”.

“The children’s vessel”, that’s what they called the Mare Jonio on its latest mission. They were OK, though after two days drifting they were very dehydrated and wet. Many also suffered burns from a mix of salted water and petrol and were in a state of advanced hypothermia. “We immediately took their wet clothes off and gave them thermal blankets; then we worried about hydrating and showering them”. After the rescue it was necessary to keep the twenty-two children under control, as they were running up and

down the deck. “We always bring some toys for the youngest ones, coloured pencils etc., but this time there were not enough for them all. Our whole container area was basically colonised by children. We left them there with their mums, trying to let them out as little as possible, to prevent them getting hurt.”



Colours, games, and many activities for the youngest were organised by volunteers who improvised like nursing school teachers, to bring levity in the children’s presence. “The volunteers”, Stefano explains, “did an extraordinary job with the little ones, they managed to create a small community”. The boat had turned into a nursery, with children climbing



**Original article:** Stefano, nurse on the Mare Jonio, the “children’s vessel”: “On board, tales of violence and torture etched on the skin” by Emmanuel Buttice  
**Source:** AlqamaH.it on Sept 16, 2019

over crew members, or running around the deck. A source of great joy and laughter.



There’s an image that will stay with me from this mission: the transfer of women and children at night, in the stormy sea. A risky operation that caused great dismay in public opinion. On this issue, Stefano Caselli is in no doubt: “this is the natural outcome of the security decrees: they are criminogenic. Not that they make me, an activist, commit a crime; the decree is criminogenic for the state apparatus itself. This is what these images tell us: forcing the Coast Guard into a risky transfer, with a storm, in a highly dangerous sea. I remember the cries of those children that night. The situation was really dangerous, and even the Port Authorities recognised that, though they managed to bring everyone to safety and I am grateful to them for it. It was a bad moment for our country”.



The hardest moment on board in those six days at sea was when, due to a fault, they ran out of water, causing a serious hygiene-health emergency. “Being one hundred and thirty people on a tagboat is not easy. But the real difficulty is relating to European institutions, who act like a rubber wall. The whole system of Europe ought to be rebuilt on new foundations. Sure, we don’t expect to receive medals for what we do, but neither do we expect our boat to be confiscated every time we carry out a rescue. We just want to be left alone to work in peace”.

**Original article:** Stefano, nurse on the Mare Jonio, the “children’s vessel”: “On board, tales of violence and torture etched on the skin” by Emmanuel Buttice  
**Source:** AlqamaH.it on Sept 16, 2019

“For the whole trip, nobody caused any trouble. We explained to them straightaway, step by step, what was to come, so they understood that it would not be easy to find a safe harbour to disembark, whether in Italy or Malta. Europe is obviously ill, because leaving these people at sea after what they have gone through is not normal. We share with them, with our meals, also all news of what happens on land.”

Having disembarked all ninety-eight people, the Finance Police seized the Mare Jonio and fined the NGO three hundred thousand euros. In the meantime, whilst awaiting the outcome of a legal challenge presented by Mediterranea to the public prosecutors, the volunteers refuse to give up and continue on their mission from the sea and from land: “A non-sensical seizure. We challenged the decision and are sure we will be proven right. But these decrees ought to be withdrawn. In the meantime, -- Stefano Caselli concludes – we are fixing the boat. After each mission, it needs some maintenance to improve both navigation and monitoring”.

(Translation by Arianna Bove)