

Article

Blessing in disguise

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The scathing criticism of the conditions in Malta's detention centres for irregular immigrants may be a blessing in disguise for the Maltese government. The problem of irregular immigration, which has grown exponentially since 2002, has put an enormous strain on the local authorities and on the security forces. Although the government is doing its best to house these immigrants, there are certain limitations, and the size of the island is an important consideration too. We do not have wide, open spaces where detention centres can be built. Instead, we have had to house scores of irregular immigrants in makeshift accommodation or in army barracks. Furthermore, we do not have surplus security personnel to take care of them. The government has done its best to address a problem that is too big for it to handle on its own – something the administration is always quick to point out, and rightly so. The visit by a delegation from the European Parliament last Friday turned the spotlight on the conditions these irregular immigrants are living in. The media, who for months had been asking for access to the centres, were given a taster last Thursday, but the EP delegation's access to all areas gave us the true picture of what is happening in Safi and in Hal Far. Addressing a press conference on Friday night, the six-member delegation did not mince their words. Degrading, disgusting and inhuman were some of the adjectives used to describe what they saw. They also criticised the government's policy to detain immigrants for 18 months, adding that this was in breach of an EU directive. Yet, in spite of their harsh criticism, the MEPs insisted that this was not an attack on the government.

They stressed that the government was doing its best in the circumstances and that Malta was paying the price because the EU did not have a common policy on immigration. MEP Stefano Zappala, who led the delegation, said the visit had served to strengthen their opinion that the problem of irregular immigration should not be left to individual countries to deal with. "This is a European problem and the burden should be shared equally by all 25 member states and not only those who are exposed to the phenomenon." The delegation's conclusions, which will be presented to the European Parliament, do cast a dark shadow on Malta, but deep down, the government knows that the visit could not have come at a better time. The delegation's negative report will only strengthen the government's case that the EU has to shoulder part of the responsibility. The government is not trying to shirk responsibility. The EP delegation is the voice that the government needs in Brussels. Malta acknowledges that the problem exists, that it does not have the resources or expertise to deal with the matter, and that the criticism is justified. However, the government's message is also loud and clear: "We are doing our best... if you want conditions to improve, you have to help us." The delegation from the European Parliament has done a huge favour for Malta. The criticism is harsh, probably harsher than many expected. Our faces have been reddened but the country's case against those who insist that irregular immigration is a national and not an EU problem has been given a huge boost. Friday's visit may do Malta more good than 100 council meetings in Brussels. It is up to the government now to take advantage of the situation and use the criticism to obtain much needed help. On a final note, non-governmental organisations were also criticised for doing next to nothing and for failing to make a regular appearance inside the detention centres. NGOs have always been quick to issue press releases condemning the government for not doing more but it is so easy to criticise from the comfort of one's armchair. In Malta, unfortunately, we have too many of them!

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