

## **JRS Malta**

### **Personal testimony**

#### **Berhe, originally from Eritrea**

"I never planned to leave my home. I prefer to live at home, but the political situation and the conflict made it impossible. I thought about Europe, but didn't know how to get there. Eventually I crossed the Sahara tried to reach Italy from Libya 3 times. The first two times our boat started sinking and we had to turn back; the third time we entered Maltese waters and we were made to land here. In all I paid \$2000 trying to reach Europe.

It was a shock to arrive in Malta, because I knew that Eritreans had been deported before from here, and I knew that there was no future here because it's small, and it's an island with limited resources. My group insisted to be allowed to continue to Italy but instead we were taken to a detention centre. We thought we were heading for a peaceful world and it was a shock to be locked up. But on the other hand at least we are living.

We had to remove our clothes to be searched and after they took all our personal belongings, we were taken to detention. I was separated from my girlfriend, who went to a different camp, and we only managed to make contact again after a month. There was no information at all. The other immigrants already in detention tried to help us fill in forms and follow procedures, but we didn't understand what was going on. Eventually, we went on hunger strike and then the Assistant Police Commissioner came to speak to us and there were some improvements, but even he couldn't help us fill in our forms, because they are so technical. I had to act as an interpreter for the group and I tried to help people - we sat in groups and tried to understand the forms together. Sometimes we'd get tired and give up, then try again another day.

Our only outside contact was from NGO volunteers. Fr Pierre came to pray with us and give us some hope and other volunteers came to play with the children and they became our friends. But contacting relatives abroad was almost impossible. We had access to the phone in the evenings, so we couldn't phone different time zones easily. And when my cousin in Canada tried to call the authorities and ask for me, nobody knew my name, because we only have an identity number in detention.

I waited 9 months for an interview - it's so horrible just waiting. And after the interview I waited another 5 months in detention. Then I got temporary humanitarian protection. Now I have a job and my colleagues help me to integrate with society here. Not a lot of immigrants have this opportunity. Even so, because I'm black, I think some people here consider me as a lesser human being; they don't see me as a person who has dignity. I try to talk to them and challenge them and show them that I respect them.

I spent 14 months in detention. I feel I have lost 14 months of my life."