

Southern Italian town world's 'only white town' after ethnic cleansing

Authorities remove all remaining immigrants out of Rosarno for own protection after locals unleash bloody ethnic cleansing

Immigrants leaving Rosarno

Immigrants working as crop-pickers wait to be transferred from Rosarno, Italy, after clashes with locals in some of the worst episodes of racial unrest in years. Photograph: Tony Vece/EPA

Rosarno in southern Italy had, by last night, been turned into what one politician termed the world's only entirely white town after a bloody ethnic cleansing that produced scenes reminiscent of the old American deep south.

As bulldozers got to work to obliterate shacks belonging to the itinerant crop-pickers who had fled, the last of more than 1,000 such workers were being removed from the area for their own protection.

After two days and nights of violence that began with the apparently motiveless shooting of two African workers, the number of injured stood at 53, comprising 18 police, 14 local people and 21 immigrants, eight of whom were in hospital.

Some of the crop-pickers had been shot; others had been beaten with metal bars or wooden clubs as local people took indiscriminate vengeance after a riot of Thursday in which more than 100 Africans caused extensive damage in the town to protest at the shootings.

Those who fled included several hundred people who had agreed to be taken to government-run centres after reportedly being given assurances they would not be deported if found to be illegally in Italy.

But Silvio Berlusconi's interior minister, Roberto Maroni, said yesterday that they would, in fact, be expelled. "The law is implemented and nothing else can be done," he told a television interviewer.

A centre for asylum seekers near Bari took 324 immigrants, mostly Ghanaians. The city's prefect said that more than half of those whose cases had been examined had temporary residence permits. The others were destined for internment at a so-called centre for identification and expulsion.

In his traditional Sunday sermon to the crowd in St Peter's square yesterday, the pope said: "Immigrants are human beings, different in culture and traditions, but nevertheless to be respected. Violence ought never to be the way for anyone to resolve the difficulties."

Addressing his parishioners in Rosarno, the local priest, Father Pino Varra, said the immigrants had erred. "But that does not give us the right to beat them, chase them, kill them or drive them

out."

Maroni criticised local authorities for turning a blind eye to the widespread, irregular use of immigrant labour, adding that they had created communities of foreigners that were "bombs primed to go off".

A junior minister in the previous, centre-left government, Luigi Manconi, commented ironically that Rosarno was now "the only wholly white town in the world. Not even South African apartheid obtained such a result." And he asked: "Who now will pick the oranges?"

But, perhaps explaining the crop-pickers' frustration and the eagerness of some locals to get rid of their immigrant workforce, the Calabrian citrus industry has been in crisis due to a fall in prices, according to Antonio Lupini, vice-president of the local farmers association. He told the daily Corriere della Sera that 800m kilograms of citrus fruit were rotting on the trees.

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