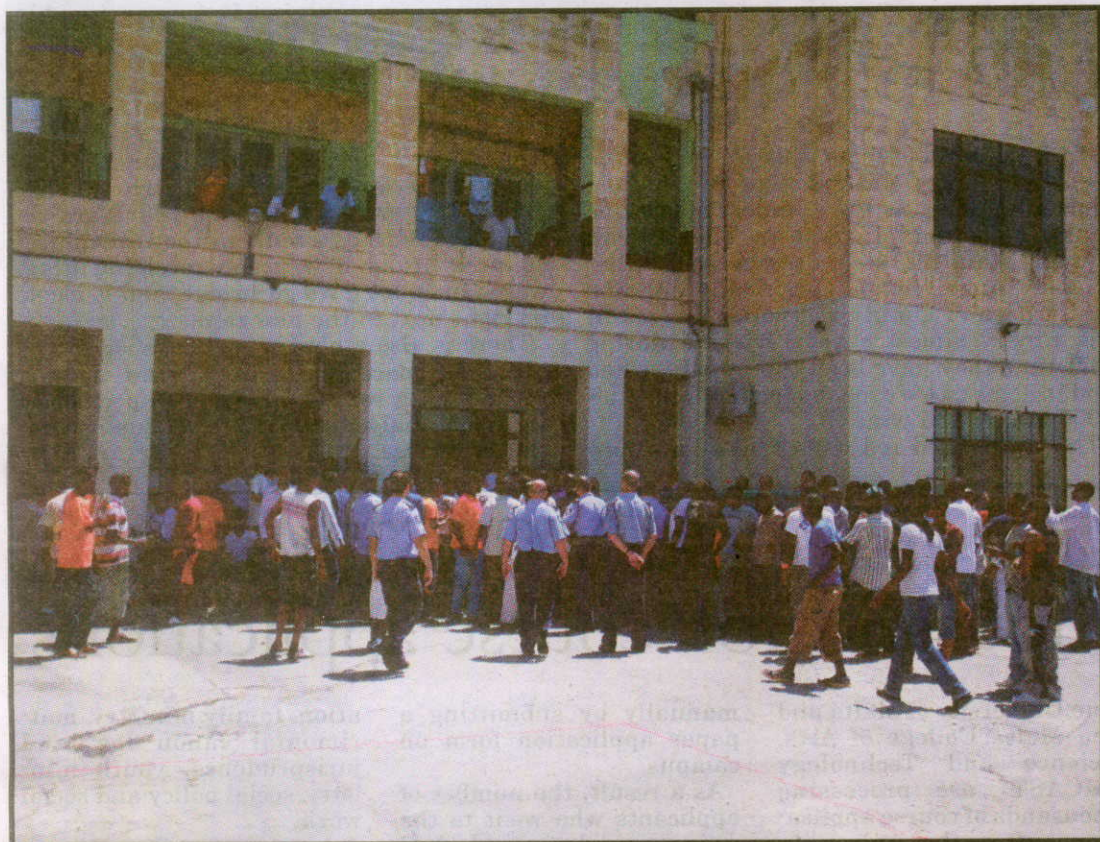




Aircraft leased to AFM by Luxembourg >> Back page



Migrants at the Marsa open centre yesterday called for the removal of Ahmed Bughri, one of the coordinators at the centre, claiming that he is corrupt and that if he doesn't leave the job, they would kill him
Photo Ben Borg Cardona

New controls anger migrants

... If Ahmed doesn't leave, they'll kill him'

FRANCESCA VELLA

Migrants at the Marsa open centre yesterday called for the removal of Ahmed Bughri, one of the coordinators at the centre, claiming that he is corrupt and that if he doesn't leave the job, they would kill him.

The protesting migrants said Mr Bugri had "stupid" ideas for the open centre, but it emerged that one of these supposedly "stupid" ideas involves the setting up of an access control gate, to ensure that only residents of the open centre actually make use of the premises.

Mr Bughri, a Ghanaian who acquired Maltese citizenship by naturalisation, spent a good part of the afternoon speaking to the police in his office yesterday, as migrants protested outside.

Oliver Gatt, general manager of Fondazzjoni Suret il-Bniedem, which runs the open centre, said the trouble started on Sunday evening. A fight broke out when one of the residents was stopped at the centre's access point because he was drunk.

Yesterday, as the migrants queued up to sign for their daily €4.66 allowance, some of them protested noisily over the new controls at Mr Bughri's office.

Mr Gatt said the foundation has long been trying to discuss the possibility of setting up an access control gate.

"A number of migrants from other centres often sleep here, so there is no access control right now. With a proper access control gate, residents at the open centre would have to present an identity card, and this is

intended for the safety of the residents themselves."

Migrants complained specifically about Mr Bughri, accusing him of making business deals by renting out empty beds at the open centre. They also accused him of beating up a migrant.

A number of them said the idea to have an access control gate would diminish their freedom, and commented: "Some of us have had to leave from the open centre in Hal Far. It is bad enough we have no job. What are we meant to do? Sleep on the streets now?"

Recently, two women migrants claimed they had no choice but to sleep in a public garden with their young children, after they were ordered to leave the open centres.

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Local councils just refuse to get a LIFE

NOEL GRIMA

Local councils in Malta and Gozo seem more interested to get easy money by posting a warden or two behind trees to nab offending drivers than in working hard to get EU funds.

So, at least, it seems. MEUSAC yesterday held an information session regarding the LIFE+ funds and only around 20 councils, from the 68 in Malta and Gozo, bothered to turn up. And even many of those who turned up seemed more determined on some kind of a fishing expedition than empowered to work on getting the funds.

These are not crumbs we are talking about. The LIFE+ funds made available by the EU for the 2007-2013 period amounts to €1.7 billion of which Malta has been allocated €2.8 million.

So far, none of Malta's local councils has ever applied for, let alone benefited, from the LIFE+ funds. In comparison, the Valencia region in Spain, which has five million inhabitants and three provinces, has so far attracted no less than €55 million, being the highest beneficiary of these funds for three years running.

Nevertheless, the reluctance or worse of bureaucracy and municipal authorities to attract EU funds is not a Malta-only phenomenon. This was also the experience of Valencia, explained Juan Manuel Revuelta, the man who got Valencia and LIFE+ to meet years ago.

There is a specific manner of applying for the EU funds and all documentation and the rest must be in order, as otherwise funding can be withdrawn, but the amount of funds is such that no local council should want to turn such an opportunity down, certainly not in times of crisis.

On the other hand, it may not be all that easy in the case of Maltese local councils for, despite all recent reforms in their legislative framework, they are still essentially an extension of central government with no real power either as regards local

taxes or planning issues.

Apart from LIFE+, the situation is not all that desperate, Parliamentary Secretary Chris Said emphasized. All local councils and 25 NGOs have applied for EU funds this year. They are also working on the LEADER project, which will be announced today, for which there is €90,000 for each of the three foundations that have been set up.

Dr Said also announced that the government's co-financing fund will also be made available to all NGOs. A special office is being opened in Gozo next month and for the first time it will give advice on EU funding to private business as well as local authorities.

The call for LIFE+ projects opened on 15 May and will close on 15 September. While Mr Revuelta said there is still time for those Maltese local councils who want to join up with Valencian bodies and apply to do so in time for the deadline, Nature Trust's Vince Attard was probably more in the right when he said that a local council must allow around four months to conceive a project and even then has to check with Mepa about timings as these can be crucial.

Maria Elena Attard, the MEUSAC contact person on LIFE+, explained the three strands of these funds, all of which deal with the environment: nature and biodiversity, environmental policy and governance and, with special emphasis on her part, information and communication.

She mentioned some examples of projects that attracted EU funds: a UK cartoon on climate change and BirdLife Malta study on endangered species of birds.

Just as an indication that it is not just lack of information, or sheer unwillingness, but also two very different concepts of how to go about problems, Zejtun mayor Joe Attard spoke about water catchment reservoirs built in his area some 30 years ago but left without maintenance ever since.

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Local councils just refuse to get a LIFE

Continued from page 1

Would a LIFE project provide some help, he asked. Vince Attard later on in the meeting said such an issue could be tackled more by means of a rural development fund in the CAP programme. But Mr Revuelta was more open to possibilities. Other possibilities he could think of on the spur of the moment included legislating for every new building to have rain water collection possibilities, using air-conditioning water for washing machines or toilets and offering a tax rebate to all those who lightened the burden on reverse osmosis plants. Similarly on renewable energy and solar water heaters.

The Valencia unit dealing with LIFE+ funds has no fewer than 52 persons working on its behalf in Brussels, which is probably more than in Dar Malta. Over the years, it has built up the ability to host a number of EU conferences and fairs in Valencia, offers teaming up with local councils elsewhere to do common projects, and even offers training facilities in Brussels.

It is important to remember that LIFE funds are not allocated by the size of the country, Mr Revuelta insisted, nor by the budget available, nor the technology used. What matters most is the political efficiency of the local administrators who go for a project and prepare everything well so that they get the funds.

The first step is identifying the environmental issue facing the locality, then doing some basic research on the issue, preparing the project well and getting as many stakeholders (especially international stakeholders, because these add points) before presenting

the concept.

In his presentation, Mr Attard outlined some possible areas for local councils to tap EU LIFE+ funds:

- an eco-tour of the Pembroke garigue, presented by Nature Trust together with the local council, MTA and FWA, to recreate a military foot-path there;

- a project at Xrobb l-Ghagin to allow people to enjoy this scenic spot, with a dormitory for schoolchildren, a visitors' centre, etc;

- a project to protect hedgehogs as they cross roads;

- creating an eco-trail from Wied il-Qlejgha (Chadwick Lakes) to Wied il-Ghasel and beyond;

- a project on air quality for the local councils of Fgura and Paola, as a result of traffic problems, as well as an education campaign; and

- a waste sorting project, which had the unexpected result of an eight-year-old reporting his own father at school because he would not sort out his waste.

Finally, Mr Attard also revealed some aspects of his organisation's involvement in the controversial Dwejra project. When Nature Trust began to delve into this project, it found there were many stakeholders who worked at cross purposes with each other. For instance there were the boathouse dwellers, the boat trips organisers, and the diving schools. They found out, for instance, that the boathouse dwellers were incensed because many of the people on diving trips used to strip naked and change into diving suits in full view in the Dwejra Square. It was through such meetings with the stakeholders that this issue has now been solved by the creation of a special area for changing.

AN EFFICIENT MEPA PLACING OUR CLIENTS FIRST

WILL MEPA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PUBLIC IMPROVE?

Yes. This is a fundamental dimension of the reform. MEPA owes an explanation to citizens enquiring about concerns they might have on planning and environmental matters. As part of the reform, several actions will be taken to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy.

- MEPA's front desk and customer care service will be strengthened to provide technical support and to handle requests for information.
- MEPA's current practice of 'Silent Fridays' (whereby employees do not answer calls on Friday) will be abolished.
- An extensive customer care system will be developed.
- Internal and external communications will be strengthened.

HAVE YOUR SAY ON THE MEPA REFORM

If you would like further information or to give your feedback on the proposed reform phone **188** or send an email to mepareform@gov.mt

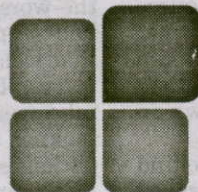
You may also download the document 'A Blueprint for MEPA's Reform' from www.opm.gov.mt/mepa

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