

So free

We are so free. In Madrid we board the train to Sevilla where we rent a car to take us to Algeciras. From here we board a ferry to cross the straits of Gibraltar – that narrowest of waterways separating the continents of Europe and Africa. At the harbor in Ceuta, an autonomous Spanish enclave on the African coast, three flags are flown: the city flag, the Spanish flag and the EU flag. My Spanish colleague Gonzalo Boye and I take a taxi to a nearby border check point. The taxi journey proves a lot more interesting than expected: it turns out that Ismael, our taxi driver, witnessed the events of 6 February of this year when 15 refugees died attempting to cross the border. We've come to Ceuta to try to reconstruct exactly what happened on this day. Ismael shows us the place where the unarmed migrants attempted to swim to the Spanish controlled Tarajal beach in an effort to reach the territory of the European Union. The refugees called out “España, España” while the Spanish border guards responded with rubber bullets, driving the refugees back out into the sea where 15 of them drowned. The refugees were “Negritos”, according to the taxi driver, a Spanish citizen of Moroccan heritage who lives close by in the notorious Muslim neighborhood of Príncipe, a place police officers will only enter if accompanied by reinforcements. Ismael is shocked by the way Spanish officials treated the refugees. He tells us that there were Spanish boats out in the water that could have saved the drowning refugees. But he doesn't want to go to the police and make a statement, he feels no good would come of it for him.

We are surprised by the scenes greeting us as we arrive at the border. The beach where the incident occurred is not in the least remote. It's right in the town, easily visible from the street. It's early in the morning, roughly the same time the refugees attempted to cross the border. Half a dozen taxis are waiting for the hordes of Moroccan women, dressed in colorful traditional garb, who come to Ceuta for low-paid work as cleaners or domestic help. There can have been no shortage of witnesses to the drownings but nobody has been asked to give evidence as this would undermine the ever changing official version of events provided by the Spanish authorities. At first, officials denied using rubber bullets, later they claimed they fired the bullets to show the migrants where the border was. An utterly absurd explanation: the border is marked on the beach at Tarajal by a clearly visible fence. The fence extends far into the sea, so that even at night, there could be no mistaking where the border lay.

A local lawyer gives us a USB stick with a copy of the investigation files. When we ask if a genuine investigation is underway she simply laughs and shakes her head. Her answer doesn't surprise us, given the response of the Spanish authorities to date. 15 lives lost with nobody willing to take responsibility. It will take a lot of work to get this investigation to move forward. Our task now is to ensure the events of February 6th do not go unpunished and that Europe takes heed of the obligations it has towards the refugees.

For now we take the ferry back again and head towards Madrid, but not before stopping in Jerez to enjoy a lavish lunch. We are so free.