

## ***Letters of hope***

*A lot of you have written to the young people. You can only imagine the joy that they have reading your letters.*

Last May, I returned to the prison after two months away. Alan, a spokesperson for the young people, edges his way up to me and says "... so, the letters, did you forget?" The way he smiled at my response was like a gust of wind in the sails of their expectations, their dreams, their hopes. We agree to go through letters the following week. The urgency of the young people means that it is advisable to plan in advance: avoid the risk of jealousy or disappointments, keep the promise that the letters will be delivered directly to their hands, to make sure that those who want to see me afterwards will be able to do so, and to avoid thefts.

I arrive on the agreed date. I get them to come and see me, one by one, in a room that is serving as an office. They are well behaved, silent. Their eyes dart around, they fiddle with their hands, their shirts are ironed for the occasion. No words could match this eloquence.

They leave quickly, efficiently. Each only has one idea in their head, to disappear with *their* letter, to discover *their* correspondent. It's the only subject of conversation for the following months. Courses have been forgotten, the pandemic of dysentery has been forgotten, the hunger has been forgotten. Some return, twisting their pencil and paper, asking me for my advice on their choice of words. Others hide their responses and hand them over with an air of mystery. Still others ask me questions about the people behind the lines that their eyes have pored over again and again.

*When I get back to Europe, I realise that I have twice as many letters with me as last time. So, do I have new volunteers to answer them?*