The Adriatic: a "Sea of Tears"

Increasing death toll of refugees trying to reach Italian coast

Andy Niklaus
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Practically every day, refugees are found dead at Europe's borders: stranded Africans on Spain's southern coast, drowned Romanians in the river Oder, suffocated Tamils and Chinese in buses at the borders of the Czech Republic and Britain. This devastating situation can also be found at the borders of Italy, particularly along the southern Adriatic coastline of Apulia. Reports on the arrival of overcrowded ships transporting Kurds, Albanians, Iranians, Iraqis and Chinese are featured in the press nearly every day.

According to official police reports, 25 people died on the Apulian coast in the last 6 weeks alone. One can only surmise how many more refugees have died searching for a better life. More than 16,000 refugees have come to the Italian mainland this year alone.

Fleeing from poverty, civil war and persecution, tens of thousands of people try to reach Western Europe via the Balkans from southeast Europe, the Caucasus, China, South East Asia and the Middle East—most of them along Italy's 7,000-kilometer-long coastline. Increasingly, the refugees are no longer brought onto land, but are thrown overboard from inflatable boats before reaching the Apulian beaches. Most of the refugees are Kurds, Turks and Albanians. But, because of a new agreement between Italy and Turkey and Albania, they are now being sent back.

Recently, there have been increased attempts by Chinese refugees to reach Europe. The reason for this is changes in asylum policies towards Chinese in the USA. According to Europol, the pan-European police agency, several thousand Chinese are waiting in Belgrade and other Eastern European cities for a sea passage to Italy. One Italian smuggler gang that was recently flushed out by the police had been taking its victims by air from Beijing to the Ukraine or Yugoslavia. From there, the immigrants were smuggled into Italy. This was also the route to Europe taken by the 58 Chinese who suffocated agonizingly in a truck container en route to the English seaport of Dover in June.

The age limits of the refugees have also changed during recent months. While during the past years they were mainly older people, today a third of the new arrivals are children.

Because of the worldwide refugee crisis, trafficking in human beings has become a highly profitable business. Smuggler gangs extract profits not only from the refugee trade, but also from extortion, kidnapping and torture. According to experts, profits from human trafficking now exceed those of the narcotics trade. In some cases, up to US$30,000 are demanded for a passage from Asia to Europe.

A refugee from Turkey, for example, has to pay US$6,000 to reach his or her destination in Central Europe. The German news agency *Dpa* reports that Kurds have to pay again for further transportation once they arrive in Italy. “A 'luxury smuggle' in a car costs up to US$1,500, the second category—40 to 50 people in a truck—can cost as much as US$1,000. The couriers demand up to US$500 per refugee for mass transportation in a freight train. Sometimes, the Kurdish refugees are on the road for as much as four months.”

In Italy, Amato's center-left coalition government reacted to the events along the Adriatic coast by imposing even greater restrictions on the right of asylum and by granting increased powers for the police. During a parliamentary debate on the sinking of a coast guard ship on the Apulian coast in late July, the

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opposition, Berlusconi's right-wing Forza Italia, demanded that government vessels be ordered to open fire on smugglers' boats. Smugglers seeking to avoid arrest rammed the coast guard ship, causing it to sink. Two financial police officers, the ship's captain and two Kurdish refugees were killed.

This incident also resulted in friction between Italy and Albania. The Italian government says that the Tirana authorities are responsible for the fact that most refugee boats start for Italy from the Albanian coast. Italy demanded that the Albanian government stop the boats before they set out to sea. Failing this, the Italian government threatened to reduce or cut off all financial aid to Albania. It also demanded more powers for the Italian police unit stationed in Albania.

In early August, representatives of six Adriatic Region countries—Italy, Croatia, Albania, Bosnia, Greece and Slovenia—met in Rome to discuss joint efforts in the fight against crime and illegal immigration. There had already been a meeting before that in May in Athens to discuss security in the Adriatic and the Ionian seas. Under the pressure of the coming Italian elections, Prime Minister Amato issued a decree setting up a new committee in Rome for the coordination of immigration policy.

Some of the refugees who succeed in escaping from the refugee internment camps make their way to the industrial regions of northern Italy. There, the refugees have to sell their labor at an even lower cost than the numerous low-wage legal immigrants. Most of them only get jobs in the construction industry, farming or restaurant business under brutally exploitative conditions. Another section of them, mainly young women, sink to prostitution.

According to press reports, the Italian manufacturing industry requires more than 100,000 additional workers each year, particularly in the case of mid-scale enterprises in northern Italy. Like their counterparts in Germany, Italy's Employers Federation has demanded that the government allow more foreign workers to enter the country. The government granted work permits to 63,000 immigrants this year. But this quota intended for the entire year was already reached by the middle of the year, and is now to be increased by another 40,000 permits.

In the industrial north of Italy, all of the regions and many cities are governed, in addition to Berlusconi's Forza Italia, by the separatist Lega Nord, which propagates xenophobic slogans and sympathizes with Jörg Haider's right-wing Free Democratic Party of Austria.

As in Germany, foreigners are regularly mistreated and beaten to death by right-wing thugs. A few months ago, an employer in the town of Gallarte near Milan poured gasoline over a young Romanian building worker and burned him to death because the worker had demanded a wage increase.

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