

Italian government takes tougher line on refugees

Martin Kreikenbaum**25 July 2003**

Two ships packed with refugees on their way to Italy capsized on June 16 and 20, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 250 people. The response of the Italian government to this tragedy, however, has been to vilify refugees, announce tougher measures to fend off incoming refugees and force states bordering the European Union (EU) to do the same.

Umberto Bossi, chairman of the separatist Northern League party and minister for reform in the Berlusconi government, has demanded that the Italian navy and coast guard be allowed to open fire on refugee boats. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in mid-June, he declared, "I've had enough of these illegal immigrants. After two or three warnings...boom!...let them have it! Forget the palaver."

Questioned by the irritated interviewer as to whether it would be right to open fire on boats filled mainly with women and children, Bossi answered abruptly: "Illegal immigrants have to be scared off, either politely or rudely. At some time or other force will have to be used."

Faced with strong criticism of his statements from government circles, accusing him of veritable incitement to criminal misdemeanours, Bossi later denied his own words. However, when the newspaper stuck to its version of what he said, he spoke of a "joke" and a misunderstanding. Shortly afterwards, he then described his own government as "impotent" in repelling refugees, and Minister of the Interior Beppe Pisanu—who had called for the rescuing of refugees in danger of drowning in the Mediterranean—as a "punch ball," demanding his resignation.

It is no accident that Bossi's tirades occurred at a time when increasing numbers of refugees were daring to make the voyage across the Mediterranean to the European mainland during calm waters. In view of the two catastrophes and the landing of other refugee boats on the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa and on Sicily, it was of apparently no interest to the media that the number of refugees running aground on the Italian coastline this year has fallen by more than 30 percent compared to last year. Instead, the sudden arrival of so many refugees in this part of the world was exploited to raise alarm against "foreign infiltration" and swelling streams of refugees. The startled public was thus prepared for the ensuing xenophobic measures by the government, which seemed downright humanitarian

when compared with Bossi's harangues.

Criticism of Bossi's statements from government ranks was confined to the tone he adopted. In fact, there is virtually no difference between the coalition parties when it comes to the issue itself.

Nor are Bossi's comments unique within the ranks of the Italian government. When Silvio Berlusconi's party, Forward Italy, was still in opposition in 2000, it had called for refugee ships to be shelled. Moreover, almost at the same time as Bossi's statements, a decree was issued allowing the Italian coast guard to ward off refugee boats and force them to turn back, so long as they were not in obvious danger of sinking. Decisions about such risks are bound to involve misjudgements.

Furthermore, the EU has been boarding and seizing refugee ships at sea in violation of all international maritime law for the last two years. It has also been encouraging border states, such as Turkey, to fire upon refugee boats under the guise of combating illegal immigration.

As a consequence of the recent disasters, the Italian government has mounted increasing pressure on Libya to take tougher action against refugees. According to a report in Berlin's *tageszeitung* newspaper, Interior Minister Pisanu demanded open interventionist measures by the North African state. "Libya's pan-African policies constitute a serious problem. We'll have to close Libya's borders. Europe can do this," he said.

Since 2000, when hundreds of refugees were killed in Libya in racially motivated pogroms, the country has practised relatively liberal immigration policies for black Africans. Since that time, President Muammar Qaddafi has pursued a reconciliatory course with his southern neighbours, and has stood for pan-African politics and against interventions into Africa on the part of the EU or the US. Qaddafi has also refused up to now to enter into any agreement with the EU in relation to deterring refugees or returning them to their countries of origin.

However, Qaddafi is only exploiting the alleged 1.5 million to 2 million refugees waiting to find their way into Europe in order to eventually relieve the weapons embargo and economic sanctions imposed on his country by the EU in 1992. He had initially given the Italian request the cold shoulder, claiming

that African states were not in a position to stem the flow of illegal refugees so long as the EU was unwilling to contribute to the fight against poverty. Libya's foreign minister Abdulrahman Shalgham assumed a more cooperative tone just three days later in a June 27 BBC report, commenting: "We need at least 50 helicopters to patrol our 4,000-kilometre desert border and the 2,000-kilometre-long coast."

Since then, the Italian government has been trying to effect a lifting of the economic sanctions so that Libya can be equipped with the required aircraft, infrared monitors, trucks, and so on, for effective border control. In the meantime, Romano Prodi, president of the EU Commission, has followed suit by conducting preliminary negotiations with the Libyan head of state. At the same time, Italy's interior minister Pisanu has been negotiating in Libya to achieve agreement on a joint policy for the deterrence of refugees.

At first, the negotiations seemed to falter when Libya, a former Italian colony, invoked the right to national sovereignty and refused the authorisation of Italian police on Libyan territory as well as the control of Libyan territorial waters by the Italian coast guard and navy. On the other hand, as a result of the embargo against Libya (as opposition members have informed the media), Italy is not even permitted to provide a single jeep, let alone enter into military cooperation.

On July 3, both governments nevertheless signed an agreement that, according to Libyan government circles and reported in Germany's *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper, envisaged "the combating of illegal immigration on land and sea." All that was known about the details of the agreement was that it provides for joint sea patrols and is intentionally vague about infringements on Libyan national sovereignty.

The model for this agreement was supposed to be the one already existing between Italy and Albania, which gives Italy wide-ranging powers in the policing of Albanian sovereign territory and provides for a simplified and speedier return of refugees to their native countries. Due to the increased surveillance of the Adriatic Sea, refugee movement in this part of the world has virtually ceased, as they are now forced to use the longer, more dangerous routes via Turkey and Libya.

The agreement between Italy and Libya now deprives refugees of their last loophole for finding access into Europe.

In addition to this, Foreign Minister Frattini has announced the setting up of transit camps for refugees on certain Mediterranean islands. On June 23, Frattini told *Corriere della Sera* that Cyprus has agreed to provide for such a camp, which will be administered jointly by Italy and Britain. Another camp is to be set up on Malta under the management of Italy, the UK and Spain, to cater for the western Mediterranean.

Immigrants whose boats are seized by the coast guard will then be transported directly into these camps, where a summary procedure will either sanction the refugees' asylum applications or authorise their immediate deportation back to their countries of origin.

In implementing this policy, Italy is following the British recommendation, whereby accommodating refugees in camps outside EU territory or on islands is designed to deny them any chance of reaching the European mainland. Refugees will only be granted makeshift provisions in these transit centres, and they will have no claim to an asylum procedure in line with the Geneva Convention for Refugees.

The British government originally wanted to put recommendations for such a policy on the agenda of the last EU summit meeting in Thessaloniki. It withdrew them at the last moment, however, owing to criticism from Sweden and Germany, which are pursuing a different course in fending off refugees.

However, the EU Commission had produced a paper for the summit, which took up the issue of the British recommendations. The paper expressed certain legal doubts and reservations about implementation of the plans, but the setting up of enclosed camps for refugees was generally welcomed as a fresh approach to asylum politics.

In their concluding statements, the heads of state pointed out that the EU would not be financing any model projects and would not accept any responsibility for them. However, member states were encouraged to set up transit camps under their own direction, and the Commission was asked to submit a feasibility study within a year concerning the construction of such camps. Enormous protest from refugee organisations, responding to the erosion of safeguards for refugees, went unheeded.

Italy's surprising early declaration that it is already in agreement with Cyprus over the setting up of a camp raises the suspicion that further attacks on the rights of foreigners and asylum-seekers will occur during Italy's EU presidency, which began on July 1. In an interview with Germany's *Welt am Sonntag* newspaper on June 29, Franco Frattini announced that the Italian EU presidency would give the highest priority to illegal immigration. He said that it would "establish an EU protection agency for the coasts of Spain, Italy and Greece" by the coming December. Here the focus will be on protection *from* rather than *for* the refugees.



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