

European governments make an example of Cap Anamur refugees

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On June 20, the rescue ship Cap Anamur picked up 37 African refugees from a sinking inflatable boat in the Mediterranean Sea, near the Italian island of Lampedusa. When the Cap Anamur tried to dock at Empodocle, the nearest port in Sicily, Italian navy frigates and helicopters as well as the Coast Guard were sent to force it back to sea.

For 11 days, the Cap Anamur—a converted freighter—tramped through international waters off the Sicilian coast, while the situation onboard deteriorated. Some of those rescued suffered nervous breakdowns and wanted to throw themselves overboard.

Only when the captain issued an emergency call was permission given to enter port, but any help was short-lived. Elias Bierdel, the director of the relief organisation, the ship's captain, Stefan Schmidt and his Russian first officer were all arrested immediately after setting foot on Italian soil. They were accused of aiding illegal immigrants. The ship was seized, and the remaining crew ordered to leave the vessel.

The refugees, whom aid agencies initially believed had fled from the Sudan, were brought to the reception camp at Agrigento, and were transported to Caltanissetta two days later. Their claims for asylum were dealt with in express proceedings, without the individuals receiving any legal assistance.

Italian television reported July 17 that all 37—described in press reports as coming from Ghana and Nigeria—were denied asylum. Fourteen of them were immediately taken from Sicily to Rome and incarcerated in a detention centre to await deportation. Others may be allowed to stay in Italy on humanitarian grounds.

The end result of this high-seas rescue is that the rescuers have been branded as criminals, and the marooned refugees have been treated as illegal immigrants.

The German Interior Minister Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party—SPD) had previously denied that German authorities had any responsibility regarding the refugees' requests for asylum—even though the Cap Anamur sails under the German flag and the requests were made in writing. Their applications were declared null and void by the Interior Ministry, on the absurd pretext that asylum applications must be submitted on German territory.

The Italian authorities then tried to palm the matter off on a

new European Union member, Malta. They argued that, as the Cap Anamur had crossed Maltese territorial waters after taking aboard the refugees, they should have applied for asylum in Malta. The Maltese government, which is notorious for interning refugees and deporting them as swiftly as possible, washed its hands of the matter declaring, "Send them back to Libya."

The basis for this Kafkaesque game between the various national authorities is the EU's Dublin Convention. According to this treaty, a refugee can only make a single application for asylum in the EU state whose territory he first enters. While this accord was supposed to harmonise the various national asylum policies, the case of the Cap Anamur confirms that the Dublin Convention created a procedure to reject refugees everywhere and ultimately deport them back to their countries of origin.

The German and Italian authorities are both saying that no precedent should be created "which could then in all probability be cited by others in similar circumstances," according to Interior Minister Schily. Meanwhile, a clear precedent is being established for the inhumane treatment of shipwrecked refugees.

If one follows the logic of Schily's argument—and that of his Italian counterpart, Giuseppe Pisanu (Forza Italia)—the Cap Anamur crew should have abandoned the shipwrecked refugees to their fate. German Interior Ministry spokesman Rainer Lingenthal described as "irresponsible" Bierdel's announcement that he would undertake further missions in the Mediterranean to save shipwrecked refugees. The German and Italian authorities are trying to criminalise the relief organisation and intimidate anyone who opposes the EU's reactionary refugee policies.

For some time, the coast guards of those states bordering the Mediterranean have been doing everything possible to keep refugees away from the EU. Supported by NATO naval units, overloaded and ancient boats are stopped and forced back into African territorial waters. The corpses of those who die attempting to flee eventually wash up on the beaches of Europe. According to official figures, there have been 5,000 such cases in recent years, but the real numbers could be far higher.

EU governments—whose asylum policy literally costs

lives—seem unperturbed at the prospect of another 37 bodies being washed up on a European beach.

Using billions of tax euros, the coasts of Spain, Italy and Greece are being transformed into a tight net through which even a small dingy could not pass undetected. Refugees are to be prevented from reaching EU territory at any price. The right to asylum in the EU only exists on paper, as there are no longer any legal means for refugees to enter the EU.

The Cap Anamur Committee provides a classic example of the changes in refugee policies. Founded by Rupert Neudeck in 1979, the relief organisation chartered a freighter to rescue refugees from Vietnam—the so-called “boat people”—out of the waters of Southeast Asia. Ten thousand Vietnamese were brought to Germany by the Cap Anamur, and the ship was able to provide medical assistance to another 30,000 shipwrecked refugees.

The Cap Anamur’s humanitarian mission was seized upon by the ruling elite as grist for its anti-communist propaganda campaign. The refugees were officially welcomed and the ship greeted in Hamburg with flowers and applause. The crew was hailed for helping refugees escape from “communist tyranny.”

Some 25 years later, the Cap Anamur is met with warships off the Sicilian coast. Those who were previously hailed for aiding refugees to escape are now dubbed immigrant smugglers, while the European governments make the pursuit of refugees on the EU’s outermost borders a key priority.

Elias Bierdel and Stefan Schmidt of the Cap Anamur were detained for several days and threatened with imprisonment for up to 14 years. Otto Schily went further, saying that German authorities may also prosecute the crew on charges of immigrant smuggling.

Notwithstanding the statements of some Green Party politicians like Claudia Roth (“Europe should be a protective castle for refugees, and Germany should be its model”) and Angelika Beer (“establishing humanity and the right to survive”), the Greens have supported Schily’s xenophobic policies for the last six years. Germany leads Europe in keeping out refugees. The SPD-Green Party government in Berlin has made it practically impossible for refugees to come to Germany. The numbers of refugees, like the numbers granted asylum, are in free-fall, while forcible deportations are now on the agenda.

After a few days, the media also joined in the attacks on the Cap Anamur Committee. Not only conservative newspapers, like the *Tagesspiegel*, but also papers regarded as more liberal, such as *Frankfurter Rundschau* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, cast doubt on the credibility of the rescue mission and insinuated that the crew of the Cap Anamur instigated what happened to attract donations.

In the July 14 edition of *Tagesspiegel*, Caroline Fet accused the Cap Anamur of purposefully seeking a “high-visibility crisis,” which it found in the Mediterranean refugees. The crew is supposed to have convinced the refugees to say they were

Sudanese to create the association in the public mind of “Cap Anamur-war-refugees.” The journalist dismissed the refugees as mere “economic migrants,” to whom she would deny any right to enter Europe.

On July 13, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* declared in its headline that the rescue was a “PR stunt with a happy ending.” The fact the director of the relief organisation Elias Bierdel only came aboard the Cap Anamur after several days accompanied by journalists was presented as a “powerful PR action.” The story’s author, Christiane Kohl, was disturbed by the fact that the refugees left the ship wearing clean white shirts and did not need medical aid.

If one follows this argument, Kohl would have preferred the Cap Anamur crew to have allowed the refugees to starve for three weeks and to have refused to provide them with any medical aid. In her eyes, only famished refugees in torn clothes—if any at all—deserve protection. The rest of her article tried to make the reader believe that the whole story of what happened on the Cap Anamur was an invention, and that the authorities were completely justified in denying the refugees admission and criminalising those who came to their aid.

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* on July 13 also joined the attack. Roman Arens wondered why, following repairs, the Cap Anamur undertook a test voyage in the “very part of the sea” where refugee dramas take place daily. One day later, Joerg Schindler was even more pointed. Under the headline, “A Ship and Many Questions,” he accused the Cap Anamur of utilising the refugees for its own ends. As proof, he stated that the shipwrecked refugees went ashore “apparently in relatively good spirits,” while on board Elias Bierdel “shook his fists.”

The source for all this seems to have been the German Interior Ministry. Spokesman Rainer Lingenthal claimed callously on July 12—without providing any proof—that “the circumstances would indicate that the Cap Anamur is trying to raise its own profile.”

Responding to these attacks, Elias Bierdel declared that it is “shameful to see the way Europe reacts to a shipwreck emergency in its coastal waters.”

The criminalisation and defamation of the Cap Anamur serve only one purpose: to set an intimidating example. Anyone providing assistance to refugees in distress will be punished. The only permitted response is to sail right past their sinking boats.



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