

After the deaths in Ceuta and Melilla

# European Union agrees to set up holding camps for refugees

## Part 2

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The call to set up worldwide refugee holding camps was initiated by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who in 2003 advanced a “new vision for refugees.” Blair proposed the adoption of a “regional protection program” in the refugees’ countries of origin, plans which have now been adopted by the European Union (EU). The program envisages the construction of holding camps on the perimeter of the EU, in the transit states in northern Africa and on the EU’s eastern borders.

In the summer of 2004, German Foreign Minister Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party, SPD) advocated support for Blair’s proposal after hundreds of refugees were drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. Schily called for the establishment of refugee stations in North Africa, in which refugees and migrants could be “pre-sorted.” Travel to the EU would then be permitted for a few, while the overwhelming majority would be transported back to their country of origin.

The EU has since fleshed out these original plans. In September 2004, an EU summit agreed to the Hague Program, which proposed closer cooperation with the refugees’ countries, the transit states and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This represented a significant step toward the realisation of both refugee camps and deportation agreements with the African states.

These plans received additional impetus from the EU Commission, which invited individual states to set up the first camps as part of a pilot project. In particular, Italy and Germany moved quickly and conducted intensive work with Libya and Tunisia.

In his last days in office, during the informal meeting of the EU foreign ministers in Newcastle, England, German Foreign Minister Schily concretised plans for refugee camps.

His paper, cynically entitled “Effective Protection for Refugees: Fighting Effectively against Illegal Migration,” makes clear that such refugee camps would effectively bury the

right of asylum. The camps would assess each refugee’s need for protection during a “screening process.” Such “screening” is not meant to be a regular assessment for asylum, but rather “to copy the process that the UNHCR implements in transit countries.” Every form of legal right of refugees would fall by the wayside, including those specified in the Geneva Refugee Convention.

For refugees whose applications are being assessed, safe third countries are to be found—outside the EU. The EU member countries would only “as an exception, within the realms of the humanitarian acceptance programs” accept refugees. Exceptions would not be permitted.

Schily wants to thereby wash his hands and those of the EU of the refugees. Deportations of those refugees who fail the assessment test would be delegated to so-called “holding states” where the camps are located. Schily also explained that it would not be a prerequisite for the “holding states” to have signed the Geneva Refugee Convention—it would suffice that they generally adhered to its standards.

Schily’s paper is aimed particularly at Libya, which has not yet signed any international legally binding treaty for the protection of refugees. For Schily and the EU, this is very convenient. They want to keep refugees in a regulation-free zone in which they are not covered by existing agreements and subject to international scrutiny, and from which they can be deported back to their home countries.

Libya is currently receiving the greatest amount of attention for the proposed holding camps from Rome and Berlin. Up until only a short time ago, the EU still considered the regime of Muammar al Gaddafi as a state supporting terrorism and had enforced a trade embargo against the country. However, due to Libya’s large oil and natural gas deposits—it is, after Nigeria, the second biggest producer of oil in Africa—the country’s economic and strategic significance has risen, a development that has been accelerated by the occupation of Iraq.

Libya, which was in desperate need of foreign investment in

order to modernise its ageing oil industry, could only resist economic pressures for so long. Through the public offer of compensation for the victims of the Pan Am plane bombing over Lockerbie, Libya was able to buy the lifting of the EU embargo in October 2004.

Since then, the EU has cooperated closely with the North African state in its plans against refugees. In autumn of last year, Italy began mass deportations of refugees to Libya, often without even bothering to assess their right to refugee status. In June 2005, the German government established a task force that provided Libya with high-tech equipment for border protection and that has already begun to build the first refugee holding camps.

There is more to the holding camps than just the camps themselves. Since first taking office, the EU minister responsible for immigration and asylum, Franco Frattini, has said that the “regional protection program” will play an important roll in controlling legal immigration to Europe. A green book presented to the EU Commission covering an “EU concept for the administration of economic migration” suggested that criteria for the selection of working immigrants be introduced.

The main aim of this selection process is to obtain from non-EU countries applicants who are required for the European labour market. The first step in this selection process is to be carried out by the education and training centres in the immigrants’ countries. A qualification profile would be created for potential immigrants, which would then be saved in a central EU database.

The EU is planning to use the refugee holding camps in Africa and Eastern Europe to select immigrant workers for employment. In autumn of 2004, Rocco Buttiglione, then a candidate for the EU post of minister for justice and home affairs, announced similar plans after discussions with the Italian industry association, Confindustria.

The residence visas for these selected migrants would be strictly bound to their employment permits. Their visas would terminate automatically at the conclusion of their fixed-term employment. This method of allocating jobs to refugees finds its historical precedent in the excesses of colonialism and the Nazi regime.

The refugee holding camps in Africa signify a revival of colonialism. It was not an accident that Otto Schily suggested, in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen* newspaper, “that individual EU member states establish partner programs with African nations in order to overcome their economic and social crisis.” In another interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in August of 2004, Schily made clear what he meant by this: the reestablishment of “certain traditional links to Africa.”

The European Commission’s recent announcement of an increase in financial help to Africa through 2010 must be understood in this context. In total, around €20 billion in extra aid is to flow to Africa in the coming years. However, this aid

is not intended to help fight poverty or strengthen the completely under-financed health and education systems. As the announcement of this package tersely explained: “In the context of the Partnership for Infrastructure, the EU will support programmes that facilitate interconnectivity at continental level to promote regional trade, integration, stability and development.”

Above all this means the construction of roads and rail networks as well as the development of electricity and water supplies. These measures are aimed at assuring that raw materials are produced more efficiently in Africa and that the continent serves as a market for the products of European businesses.

In addition, the EU, through the demand for a so-called “Governance Initiative,” plans to get directly involved in government decision-making. As the EU Commission President Manuel Barroso commented, the EU has its sights set on “the emergence of strong regional and continental organisations and African leaders who have committed themselves to good governance and regional integration.” It will be these layers who will secure leading positions in the economically backward states of Africa, by maintaining good relationships with the great powers and the transnational corporations.

The EU is not concerned about fighting poverty and dealing with needs of the population. The “Governance Initiative” aims above all to enforce the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank against the working class and peasant masses. The African countries south of the Sahara alone have total foreign debts amounting to \$230 billion. For every dollar received in development aid, these states have to pay back three in interest and repayments to the banks, institutions and governments of Western Europe and North America.

The increase in aid to Africa will therefore not alleviate the desperate circumstances that cause thousands to flee from their homes. Barroso announced the aid under the proviso that the European Union agree on its budget plans for the period to 2014. This, however, is by no means certain after the last EU summit talks collapsed on this very issue. Should the EU heads not come to an agreement on the budget, Barroso made it clear that this would mean an end to future and current aid to Africa.

*Concluded*



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