

Canary Islands boat people: European Union creates new border patrol

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The European Union has used the Canary Islands boat people tragedy to create a new border patrol. The deputy prime minister of Spain, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, had asked for EU help in curbing the number of boats landing on the Spanish territory, which is situated off the western coast of Africa, 50 miles from Morocco. She praised the decision of the EU to create the new patrol as “a common policy on frontier control for the first time on the part of the European Union.”

On June 10, Spain joined nine other member states—Austria, Finland, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal and Greece—under the auspices of the European Borders Agency, Frontex, in patrols along the coast of western Africa. The operation involves five patrol boats, five helicopters and a reconnaissance airplane that will attempt to turn back boats sailing from Mauritania, Senegal and Cape Verde toward the Canary Islands.

Officials say the Canary Islands have been the destination this year of about 9,000 undocumented workers, who originate from the sub-Saharan countries of Cameroon, Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Cote D’Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. Although politicians and the media have focused on the fact that the number is almost double the 4,751 for the whole of last year, it is well below the tens of thousands from Africa who entered Spanish territory in recent years along alternate routes that have gradually been sealed off.

The government of the Mediterranean island of Malta has asked for a similar Frontex surveillance patrol to be launched later this summer in the seas between Malta and North Africa. In the past four years, some 5,000 African workers have landed on the island after making the 200-mile crossing from Libya. Others have ended up on the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Human rights groups estimate that more than a million sub-Saharan Africans displaced by war and poverty have gathered in Libya, hoping to make the journey to Europe.

The majority of the boats now attempting the crossing to the Canary Islands are small wooden craft from Senegal powered by a single outboard motor. The Red Cross believes as many as a thousand people have perished attempting to make the 800-mile crossing this year.

In March, a boat with the mummified bodies of 11 men was

found 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean, drifting off the Caribbean island of Barbados. It is thought that 52 workers originally boarded the vessel in Senegal last December after paying up to €1,500 each for the journey. A note from one of them, believed to be Diao Souncar Dieme from Bassada in western Senegal, read, “I would like to send to my family in Bassada a sum of money. Please excuse me and goodbye. This is the end of my life in this big Moroccan sea.”

The terrible fate facing workers like Dieme is the result of the EU’s “Fortress Europe” policy, which has forced Africans to resort to ever-more hazardous measures to reach the continent in an attempt to escape poverty and civil strife back home.

Previously, undocumented workers tried to reach Europe by crossing from North Africa to southern Spain. The gap at the Straits of Gibraltar is only eight miles wide. Even so, 10,000 people drowned on this route between 1989 and 2003. Few now attempt the crossing, as the EU has funded a high-tech surveillance system at strategic spots along the Spanish coast.

Another route—into the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan mainland—has been effectively sealed off with higher and more deadly fences. As a result, the number of undocumented workers trying to enter the enclaves has dropped from about 47,000 in 2000 to fewer than 10,000 in 2004. At the end of 2005, European television news reports were full of images showing bloody and battered migrants attempting to scale the fences. The French-based Doctors Without Borders estimates that 6,300 refugees have perished in such efforts.

Since 2005, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government has pressured the Moroccan authorities to tighten border and coastal patrols. On the initiative of the EU, a border force of almost 11,000 soldiers and police has been created.

More recently, Spain began applying the same pressure to Morocco’s southern neighbour, Mauritania. Joint naval patrols are being carried out to seal off the port of Nouahibou, and help has been offered to set up detention centres in the country to hold refugees expelled from the EU.

The arrival of 1,500 undocumented workers in the Canary Islands from Senegal in the first two weeks of May provoked a hysterical response in the right-wing Spanish media and opposition Popular Party (PP), which was then echoed by the liberal press and the PSOE government.

PP General Secretary Ángel Acebes complained that Spain's borders had become "sieves," letting through thousands of illegal immigrants, and that "the crimes being committed in people's homes are related to the criminals who traffic in human beings." He blamed the PSOE government for allowing another 1 million "illegal immigrants" to enter the country a year after it had granted an amnesty to 700,000 undocumented workers. The PSOE has used the amnesty to regularise the supply of cheap labour and increase its tax revenues.

The Canary Islands' regional president, Adán Martín, said that he would appeal directly to Spain's King Juan Carlos for help in dealing with "the rising tide of illegal immigrants," and called for a substantial extension to the 40-day detention period that is granted police to carry out investigations into the origins of the detainees.

The government answered these criticisms with reassurances that it had set aside €120 million to deal with the problem. It mounted "Operation Noble Sentry," directing three navy ships, surveillance aircraft and spy satellites towards the Canary Islands. Spain's interior minister, José Antonio Alonso, announced that the government had expanded the use of electronic surveillance systems to cover the islands.

Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos met with ministers from 10 African countries and offered Spanish aid to train and employ people, if the governments agreed to guard their coasts and take back undocumented workers. Spain will open three new embassies, in Mali, Sudan and Cape Verde, and diplomats have begun missions in Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Senegal and Cape Verde.

These moves have also enabled Spain to extend its neo-colonial ambitions in the North African region and secure further energy sources. Big business is eager for access to African markets, especially the special economic zones, and for greater involvement in the rapid privatisation programmes in countries such as Morocco. A 1,430-kilometre-long gas pipeline from Algeria via Morocco to Spain has already been built, and exploration for oil has started in southern Algeria.

At the end of May, Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced that Spain had struck a deal with Senegal, under which some 600 Senegalese would be repatriated in exchange for aid. Recent reports suggest talks have started on a quota system, and Senegal has begun its own surveillance operations, detaining hundreds of boat people. Sierra Leone has indicated it will soon start talks on a similar agreement, and the Gambian Navy arrested 66 Senegalese nationals last week who were trying to get to the Canary Islands.

The measures introduced as a result of the Canary Islands crisis are a realisation of many of the proposals in the Hague Programme agreed at the September 2004 EU summit. These include increased border guards and surveillance and the signing of deportation and repatriation agreements with African states and other countries through which refugees transit.

The EU is also seeking to agree to a list of "safe" countries,

in which a claim for asylum would be automatically dismissed, and to establish a worldwide network of refugee camps outside the borders of the EU to prevent undocumented workers from entering Europe. This would, according to the EU, enable their "return to homeland, local integration or resettlement in a third country."

The idea that ringing Europe with armed border guards and sea patrols will stop the wave of refugees from starving and war-torn African countries is both barbaric and illusory. The sharp increase in "illegal immigration" is bound up with the systematic curtailment of opportunities for legal immigration. Apart from specialists, sought for their value to the economy, it is now virtually impossible for non-European workers to enter Europe legally. An Amnesty International report issued in 2005 and entitled "Spain: The Southern Border" notes that the percentage of asylum requests granted by Spain is among the lowest in the world.

More fundamentally, the misery driving people to flee their home countries is a result of the plundering of the poor countries by European and American capital. The roots of this misery are to be found in the colonial policies of previous centuries, but they are continued today by major transnational corporations and institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, whose shock readjustment programmes have destroyed what little social provision existed in the African states.

According to the United Nations World Food Programme, nearly 20 million people are undernourished in West Africa. Many of the countries have suffered the effects of drought and locust infestation, and some have been affected by military conflict. A World Food Programme appeal for \$237 million to feed 10 million people in West Africa in 2006 had only elicited \$18.4 million by the beginning of the year.

The brutal measures against West African workers go hand in hand with an offensive against the jobs, wages and living standards of European workers and an ever-greater concentration of wealth at the apex of society. The crisis of the social system in Europe is not the result of a burdensome surplus of immigrants, but pro-big-business policies aimed at further enriching the ruling elite at the expense of the mass of working people.



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