

More migrant deaths as Europe tightens border controls

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A recent study conducted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), estimates that up to 3,000 migrants have died attempting to cross from West Africa into Europe.

Most of these deaths were on the perilous sea crossing to the Canary Islands. More than 30,000 migrants arrived on the islands in 2006 from the West African countries of Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Mauritania and Morocco, but the number has dropped this year to about 6,500, due to the ramping up of surveillance and security controls.

Until recently, the most important entry points from Africa into the European Union (EU) were the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the coast of Morocco, a few miles across the sea from mainland Spain. Tightened security controls have now forced people to use more-dangerous routes originating further south. As a result, the main source of migrants leaving the African continent has moved to Senegal. This poverty-stricken country is crowded with thousands of people originating from across north and central Africa and even as far as south Asia, hoping for a life free from poverty and war.

Consequently, there is an ongoing crisis of bodies being washed up on beaches across the Mediterranean shore, stretching all the way from Spain in the west to Italy and Greece in the east. Many have died because they are forced to cross in overcrowded fishing vessels such as the small open craft with only two small outboard motors known as *cayucos*, suffering exposure, hunger and dehydration or becoming lost in bad weather.

Last month, in one of the worst incidents, at least 10 people drowned when their boat capsized off Gran Canaria. In July, up to 90 Africans drowned near the nearby island of Tenerife. Another incident involved

the death of 12 migrants, with survivors saying they threw the bodies of nine men and two children overboard during the voyage.

East of the Canary Islands, in the Mediterranean Sea, migrant workers have attempted to sail across to Malta and the Italian island of Lampedusa from Tunisia and Libya. In August, 21 of them died after their boat capsized south of Malta, and 59 were rescued off the Libyan coast from an overloaded boat without an engine or food. Two pregnant women died during the voyage and were thrown overboard.

In 2006, the EU increased the powers of the Frontex, which coordinates border patrols, surveillance and security controls across the region. According to Frontex's website, it can call on 21 airplanes, 27 helicopters and 116 boats to round up migrants and forcibly return them to their home countries.

Although it is almost impossible to obtain accurate statistics on the numbers of migrants entering the EU, official data shows that the movement of peoples across frontiers is returning to levels not seen since the first two decades of the last century.

Immigration to the core group of EU15 countries has increased rapidly in recent years, adding nearly 9 million people to their populations. According to official World Bank statistics in 2005, the GDP of the EU is worth more than 16 times that of all the countries of sub-Saharan Africa combined. In Europe, the life expectancy is 80 years, whilst in sub-Saharan Africa, it is only 47 years.

Unemployment is running at the highest levels in North Africa and the Middle East, especially among younger people. Very often, these people are well educated and unable to find suitable work in their home countries.

These trends reveal the collapse of economies

brought about by the “restructuring” plans instigated by the International Monetary Fund under the auspices of the imperialist powers during the 1980s and 1990s.

Another factor is growing armed conflict, especially in Africa and the Middle East. A 2007 report by the Population Reference Bureau states that “The number of refugees worldwide, defined by the United Nations as ‘people who have fled persecution in their own countries to seek safety in neighbouring states,’ rose from 8.7 million to 9.9 million during 2006.”

Last month’s report, *Millions in flight: the Iraqi refugee crisis*, published by Amnesty International, gives an indication of the true scale of this growing crisis, saying, “The humanitarian crisis triggered by the mass exodus of refugees from the on-going and widespread violence in Iraq shows little sign of abating. In fact, recent estimates show this to be the fastest growing displacement crisis in the world with the number of those displaced now having reached 4.2 million—2.2 million internally displaced within Iraq and over 2 million outside the country.”

Although the majority of Iraqi refugees reside in Jordan and Syria, the report states that “The number of Iraqi asylum-seekers in Europe rose to nearly 20,000 in the first half of 2007, equivalent to the number received in the whole of 2006.”

In addition to ratcheting up border patrols, the EU has also passed a raft of new immigration laws tailored to the requirements of European capital that seek to prevent the entry of low-skilled labour, while attracting skilled labour.

This two-sided policy was summed up by Spain’s *El País* newspaper, which praised Spanish Socialist Workers Party Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero’s clampdown on immigration whilst noting that “migrants have invigorated the Spanish economy to the extent that they have contributed 50 percent of GDP growth since 2001.”

In April of this year, the British Immigration Minister Liam Byrne cynically claimed immigration was “harming the poor.” He proposed a five-tier points-based system, with high-skilled workers given fast-track entry, while lower-scoring workers will only be allowed to work in specific jobs for fixed periods.

Last month, the French prime minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, offered more favourable facilities for Senegalese business people in exchange for repatriation

of “unwelcome migrants.” This turn in French policy has led to a recent spate of police crackdowns, rounding up thousands of workers from their workplaces and homes because they are “sans papiers” (without papers). Sarkozy is calling for 25,000 such immigrants to be deported by the end of the year.

Franco Frattini, vice president of the European Commission, told an EU immigration ministers’ meeting in Lisbon last month that a new “mobility” of labour was necessary to compete against “Australia, Canada, the USA and the rising powers in Asia.” He proposed the introduction of an EU “blue card” by which skilled workers could apply for a two-year residency that could be extended.

Across Europe, there is now a determined effort to create a two- and even three-tier workforce, with diminished rights and legal status for those at the bottom end. The objective is to supply European capital with cheap, skilled labour that can more easily be exploited than domestic labour, owing to the diminished legal status of many migrants.

This is then used as a battering ram to further undermine the real wages of all workers, irrespective of national status.

Due to their desperation and general poverty, migrant workers are a “soft target,” subject to new rounds of chauvinistic and xenophobic hate campaigns. In official political circles and the media across Europe, they are blamed for the general lowering of living standards so as to divert attention from their real cause—the big business policies of governments across the continent. That is why the defence of migrant workers must be inseparable from the broader struggles of working people as a whole, to protect their social interests and democratic rights.



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