

Spanish government uses tragedy of African boat people to strengthen anti-immigration policies

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21 July 2008

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Once again, Spain has been gripped by horrific images of boats drifting from Africa to its shores overflowing with the traumatized and exhausted bodies of migrant workers lying motionless amongst the dead. It is estimated that over the last few years up to 3,000 migrants have died en route to Spain. But this year Francisco Vicente, the head of the Red Cross in the Spanish port of Almería declared that, “In five years, this is the worst I have ever seen.”

Earlier this month one boat was discovered near Almería containing 33 survivors who had left Morocco the week before. After the boat’s motor stopped working, 15 people died from thirst and hunger including nine young children whose rotting bodies had been thrown overboard. One distraught mother, who had lost two children on the journey, repeatedly asked Red Cross workers, “Where are my babies?”

Within days, there were reports of another 14 Africans lost overboard after their boat capsized near Motril in Andalucía. Twenty-three people were rescued and all but two of them will be deported once their identities are known. One of the survivors allowed to stay for the moment lost his wife, three-year-old child and brother, and the other is a pregnant woman.

According to further reports, another boat with 59 migrant workers on board was detained near the Canary Islands after it had set off from Guinea-Bissau and drifted in the Atlantic Ocean for two weeks. Four of those on board were found to be dead and two died later in a Spanish hospital. It is believed another ten died during the journey and been thrown overboard.

Similar scenes are occurring on the Italian coast on Lampedusa, Italy’s southernmost island, which is only 120 kilometres from the African coast.

Angel Madero, president of the Spanish refugee aid group Acoge, laid the blame for the deaths on successive Spanish governments: “They invest millions in security systems and the legal entry systems are more difficult. Necessity makes [migrants] carry on coming and the consequence is they take more dangerous routes.”

Migrants used to journey the few miles from Morocco across

the Strait of Gibraltar to Spain, but due to intensified high tech patrols people traffickers have moved operations further west forcing migrants on longer, more hazardous journeys from West Africa out into the Atlantic Ocean.

The wave of revulsion that swept the country after the recent tragedies was so great that even the mayor of Motril, Carlos Rojas, of the notoriously anti-immigrant Popular Party (PP), was forced to declare a day of mourning for the 14 dead Africans. Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero of the ruling Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government added that the stricken boat “should be imprinted in the minds of each and every one of us.”

These expressions of sympathy were designed to obscure the deadly consequences of the anti-immigrant policies that successive governments have pursued.

The majority of those brought ashore are currently held in detention centres for up to forty days before deportation. But Zapatero wants to extend the period to sixty days to ensure the majority of those detained are deported.

The conditions inside the detention centres are atrocious. The pro-PSOE *El País* reported, “Detainees and former detainees from the CIE in Carabanchel, Madrid, and their families, tell similar stories, and they’re not pleasant. In the lines that form outside the centre, one can hear complaints in various languages and accents about lack of food and medical care, the filth and cold, all of which the Interior Ministry denies.”

In June, Human Rights Watch reported on the treatment of unaccompanied child migrants reaching the Canary Islands: “Although some improvements have taken place... the systemic shortcomings of these centres remain unchanged and should be rectified at once. Since September 2007, there have been several media reports about serious incidents in these centres. These include the outbreak of a fire in Tegueste emergency center that resulted in the hospitalization of two children, a large-scale fight at La Esperanza center involving 200 children, a violent rebellion at La Esperanza over the quality of food, and the breakdown of the running water system at La Esperanza center for four days.”

The PSOE government has refused to act seriously on such

reports and the PP European deputy Agustín Díaz de Mera took it upon himself to defend the centres, stating that they are “relatively good. They may be more or less overcrowded, but honestly... they’re acceptable.”

Those migrants allowed to remain suffer not only long periods of incarceration but the Ulysses Syndrome, a mental condition identified by medical experts involved in treating migrants traumatized by their terrible ordeals. Most civilian doctors, however, wrongly diagnose the condition and recommend anti-depressants, which has resulted in serious mental disorders. Significant improvements in the condition of migrants result just by providing basic humanitarian assistance such as legal representation, housing and the prospect of decent jobs, alongside sustained treatment for mental health.

Many professionals are working hard to understand this condition and provide effective treatment, yet the government’s response as reported in *Deutsche Welle* (July 11) is not to provide safe sanctuary but tighten up its anti-immigration policy alongside making token calls to “help Africa.”

“We have to tighten our controls once again... We are in an alarming situation. Either we help Africa, either we help fight poverty and desperation, or our future as a region of well-being and progress falls into question,” said a government spokesman.

As part of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, Zapatero urged European Union member states to donate 0.7 percent of their income to aid for Africa as Spain has done. He explained, “As long as people are desperate and cannot feed their children they will try to reach Europe... It is unacceptable that as extreme poverty increases we see development aid fall ... the West has the resources and the capacity to help extreme poverty disappear.”

Behind these calls for humanitarian assistance one usually finds a push by the government concerned to expand its sphere of influence and secure vital resources. This is exactly what motivates Zapatero as he seeks to protect extensive and expanding Spanish business interests in North Africa.

As the charity Oxfam stated in a recent report on the Spanish government’s 2007 “Plan Africa” “One wonders whether it is a matter outlining a plan of Spain for Africa or a plan for Spain in Africa.”

It continues, “The use of development aid as a currency exchange to get African governments to raise fences, toughen their immigration controls or accept the repatriation of emigrants is a perversion of cooperation for development and is unacceptable.”

Zapatero has opposed criticism of the Return Directive, which the European union passed in June and which lays down common rules for the expulsion of undocumented workers. Amongst other reactionary initiatives, the directive extends the length of time an undocumented migrant worker can be detained to 18 months before deportation.

El País noted, “allowing immigrants without papers to be detained for up to 18 months constitutes a ceiling for some countries, which previously had no limits, but it also means opening the door for others, Spain among them, to toughen up their laws in the future. This is a side of Spain that few anticipate seeing when they dream of escaping their own wretched conditions.”

An editorial on the Inter-Movement Committee for Evacuees described how the directive will mean detention slipping “little by little” into “the logic of internment, transforming these centres into camps.”

Zapatero said of this fundamental assault on the democratic rights of migrants, “One could agree or not, but what cannot be said is that it goes against human rights,” adding that the directive is a “progressionist advance.”

Zapatero is taking the lead in and championing the militarised European Border Control Agency (FRONTEX), which is equipped with surveillance systems including satellites and aerial drones to monitor the movements of immigrants and Rapid Border Intervention Teams to arrest them.

Zapatero turned aggressively against immigrants, when it was only in 2005 that the government legalized 800,000 undocumented workers—a measure that was bitterly denounced by European leaders. Many immigrant workers and their associations helped put the PSOE into office in 2004 and again in 2008 in protest at the brutal treatment they had received under the PP government of José María Aznar.

His belief that “being tough can pay” was noted in *The Economist* (July 7), which explained how “Spain’s immigrants, most of whom arrived in the past seven years, have accounted for a big chunk of the economy’s growth. Now they are starting to lose their jobs. Immigrants make up 11 percent of the workforce, but half of those who are newly unemployed. The government is offering to pay them a lump-sum unemployment benefit if they go home.”

It continues, “A plan to stop them bringing over parents or adult children may discourage new immigrants. Both measures appeal to voters who fret that immigration has been too rapid. Mr Zapatero has spotted a problem that many Spaniards now confront for the first time, as they compete with immigrants for scarce jobs. In his second term, Spain’s so far relaxed race relations may be tested. Fixing the economy would be the best answer. But getting tough on immigrants may prove an easier way to stay popular than promoting unloved economic reforms.”



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