

Who is responsible for the Libyan refugee boat tragedy?

Martin Kreickenbaum
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There is still a lack of clear information on the disaster that took place on March 31 when several hundred refugees drowned after their boat capsized off the coast of Libya. The refugees were attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Italy.

The exact number of victims of the disaster remains unknown, and there are contradictory reports about how many overfilled refugee boats actually sank. Political responsibility for this tragedy, however, rests primarily with the European Union and its anti-immigration policy.

Reliable information is only slowly emerging over the tragedy—evidently one of the worst cases of drowning of its sort. What is known is that an overloaded boat with 257 refugees cast off from Sid Belal Janzur, a suburb of the Libyan capital, Tripoli. Less than 30 kilometers from the coast the boat encountered difficulties, panic broke out on board and the ship capsized. Only 21 refugees could be saved by the Libyan coast guard, 23 dead bodies were recovered, and more than a hundred corpses were swept up onto the Libyan shore.

The fate of a further boat with 365 refugees on board remains unclear. According to a Libyan representative, one Tunisian is the only survivor of the second disaster: “I was with 13 further Tunisians on the boat with 365 refugees. I am the only survivor. All my compatriots drowned.”

Following a search, which was stopped after just two days, no further survivors or corpses were found. The fate of the second boat remains uncertain, because the Italian coast guard declared on Tuesday that a boat with 350 refugees had been rescued on Sunday by the Italian tugboat “Asso 22,” with those on board taken to Tripoli. Under conditions where it is not uncommon for several refugee vessels to be at sea at the same time, it is unclear whether the boat rescued is the same boat referred to by the Tunisian citizen. It is quite possible that two ships capsized over the weekend in the heavy seas claiming the lives of nearly 600 refugees.

An additional three ships, however, were able to reach the Italian mainland on Monday. One boat loaded with 222 refugees reached the small Italian island of Lampedusa—a journey of at least 10 hours from Libya—while 2 other boats with a total of 400 persons on board landed in Sicily.

The passenger list of the rescued boat demonstrates the global character of the refugee movement. The list includes 66 refugees from Bangladesh, 5 from India, 15 from Syria and 2 from Pakistan. Other refugees included persons from Egypt, Somalia, Ghana, Nigeria, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Gambia and Cameroon. All of the survivors were arrested following their repatriation to the Libyan coast. Some of the countries of origin of the refugees lack any sort of

representation in Libya, and these victims now confront months or even years in Libyan prisons and deportation camps before repatriation to their homelands.

Authorities reacted with dismay to this latest refugee disaster in the Mediterranean. The European parliament held a minute’s silence for the victims at its meeting on April 2. However, these gestures are merely crocodile tears. European governments and European Union institutions are willing to tolerate the deaths of thousands of refugees at EU borders as a consequence of existing EU immigration policy.

According to a press release from *Fortress Europe*, a total of 13,000 refugees have died attempting to reach the European continent since 1988. In the last three years approximately 2,000 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean or the Atlantic off the Canary Islands. The real figure could be considerably higher. The only “offence” ever committed by these persons was to attempt to enter Europe. The European Union, however, refuses them entry and reserves a few pious words for the dead.

After this latest disaster EU authorities also rapidly returned to business as usual and denied any responsibility for the tragedy. Instead of providing aid to the families of the victims, EU leaders promised more of the same medicine that caused the tragedy: more restrictions, stronger controls at EU borders and faster deportation for those who do manage to reach the shores of Europe.

The EU interior and law commissioner Jacques Barrot, who is responsible for migration policy, told the European parliament “not to lose sight of the human dimension of the refugee problem,” but then went on to blame smugglers and people traffickers for the misfortune. Barrot then appealed to EU member states to support countries lying on the Mediterranean, such as Italy, Malta, Greece and Spain, in the monitoring of the continent’s coastal borders and developing a “strategy for the struggle against the stream of migration.” No mention was made of the humanitarian obligation of Europe to accept and treat refugees with dignity.

The German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble made similar comments to the conservative daily paper *Die Welt* declaring, “We have to put an end to the contemptible and inhuman activities of these people traffickers. Such sellers of souls use the desperation of others and bring them into great danger on completely overloaded ships.” Schäuble deliberately omitted to mention that such persons are put at the mercy of unscrupulous traffickers in the first place because of the restrictions laid down by the EU.

Instead Schäuble spoke out in favor of extending the powers of the European border control agency Frontex with the assistance of the German government: “The Federal Police will further support Frontex operations in the Mediterranean with experts and helicopters.”

The role of the Italian and Libyan governments

For his part the Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni of the racist Northern League expressed no regrets over the tragedy. On the same day of the disaster Maroni declared that he expected the stream of refugees from Libya to Italy to come to an end following May 15th—the date when joint monitoring operations by the Italian and Libyan coast guard are due to begin. The governments of the two states had decided on this policy in August 2008 in a so-called “friendship agreement.”

Experts such as Michele Bombassei of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) fear that the numbers of highly dangerous sea passages by refugee boats will only increase prior to this deadline. Refugees have already been forced by Frontex to resort to dangerous detours and sea passages at night. In this latest catastrophe, the boats set off even though a violent sandstorm was raging along the Libyan coast and the seas were stormy—evidently seeking to use the bad weather conditions to evade the coast guard and Frontex helicopters.

There are no indications that the stream of refugees from poorer southern countries to the wealthier EU will ebb in the future, and it can be expected that the death rate amongst such refugees will merely increase following implementation of the deal between Italy and Libya. The global financial and economic crisis has hit the poorest states of Africa and Asia particularly hard, with prices for raw materials, cotton and other products falling rapidly. Unemployment, misery and hunger are increasing drastically and fuelling many in their desperation to scrape together their savings to pay for the perilous passage to Europe in the hope of finding work and income for their families.

The “friendship agreement” between Italy and Libya is being used by the Italian government of Silvio Berlusconi to use the services of the Libyan head of state Muammar al-Gadhafi as policeman for Europe’s fortress border policies. In so doing, the Italian government is faithfully implementing the EU policy of preventing refugees from reaching the shores of Europe through a series of deals with countries of origin and transit countries. Terms are being dictated whereby African states will only receive development aid from Western countries when they agree to accept refugees who have been deported from Europe and take measures to ensure that they do not attempt to travel to the continent. In addition to the European Union itself, a number of individual member states are currently negotiating such extortionate bilateral contracts.

Libya and Italy had already struck an initial agreement in 2003. Libya received 20 million euros from Italy, which were invested in jeeps, boats, deportation camps and body bags. Since then Libya has increasingly developed into an outpost for EU migration policy. The country now has a total of 20 assembly and deportation camps where the most terrible conditions prevail. According to a report by Fortress Europe, torture, rapes and mistreatment of the arrested African refugees are commonplace. The prisoners are often held in captivity for years without any charge being brought against them.

The new agreement between Italy and Libya has now intensified cooperation to deter refugees. In return, Libya is to receive 250 million euros per year for 20 years—a sum that is officially defined as

compensation for Italian crimes committed during the latter’s 40-year old colonial reign over Libya. In fact, most of this money flows to Italian companies involved in infrastructure projects in Libya. In response, Libya has promised “intensified” cooperation in the “struggle against terrorism, organized crime, the drug trade and illegal immigration.”

Libya is well known for its contempt for the human rights of refugees, who not only confront months of intolerable conditions in the country’s jails, but can then be deported peremptorily to their countries of origin where they often face torture or the threat of death. This state of affairs is not only accepted by the European Union and the Italian government—it is in fact the intention of EU policy aimed at deterring potential migrants.

At the same time conditions in the assembly and deportation camps of EU Mediterranean states are not much better than those prevailing in Libya. The camp “Contarda Imbriacola” on the island of Lampedusa is hermetically sealed off. Originally set up to accommodate 350 persons, it now houses up to 2,000 refugees. Even a resolution of the European Parliament refers to unacceptable conditions at the camp regarding hygiene, overcrowding and the mistreatment of the refugees. In February prisoners carried out a revolt to protest against the deportation of 100 Tunisians. The main building of the camp was destroyed by fire.

The situation in the camps on the island of Sicily or the Italian mainland is similar. The Italian government has already implemented EU repatriation guidelines and has increased the duration of residence for illegal immigrants and refugees from the existing 60 days to 18 months. The issue of immigration was also used to declare a “national state of emergency” allowing the government to deploy the national army for domestic duties. Rates of deportations have been stepped up and identification and deportation camps set up across the country—similar to the camp on Lampedusa—although such measures stand in flagrant violation of human rights and the Geneva convention on refugees.

The Italian government has deliberately used illegal immigrants as scapegoats to divert attention away from the country’s political and economic crisis. This is despite the fact that 75 percent of the 37,000 refugees who reached the Italian coast via the Mediterranean in 2008 entered a request for asylum, and half of this number were accepted as refugees—despite the restrictive policies of the EU.



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