

Italy: Xenophobic immigration policy leads to hundreds of deaths in the Mediterranean

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A further 73 African refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as they attempted to sail from Libya to Italy. According to the UN refugee aid organization, 525 boat refugees died at sea in 2008 and several hundred have already drowned this year.

Only five refugees from Eritrea—two young men, two boys and a young woman—survived their recent odyssey in a small boat. Their journey took 20 days, one of the survivors reported. A spokesman for the Maltese navy told CNRmedia.com that a German Frontex helicopter had detected seven corpses in Libyan waters thought to have come from the boat.

On Thursday the five exhausted and weakened Eritreans landed on the Italian island of Lampedusa. “We are the only survivors,” they said. The rest of the refugees had died along the way, and their corpses had been thrown into the sea. Several ships had crossed their path, but none of them made any attempt to help. A patrol boat went so far as to give them fuel and rescue vests, but “then they headed off again and left us behind despite our condition.”

A UNHCR spokesman reported that a fishing boat had also given the refugees bread and water but had then left them to their fate.

Such indifference on the part of ships in the Mediterranean is a new development. It completely contradicts the maritime obligation to save those in emergency. This indifference is encouraged by the policy of the Italian government of Silvio Berlusconi, which does not permit refugees to land in Italy. It has led a contemptible months-long campaign against African refugees and is quite prepared to accept the deadly consequences.

In accordance with an agreement between Italy and Libya, the Libyan coast and the Straits of Sicily are systematically searched by patrol boats. When refugees are intercepted they are returned directly to Africa. They are not even allowed to set foot on Italian soil to make a request for asylum.

The latest disaster in the Mediterranean led to a heated political exchange. The Catholic newspaper *Avvenire* criticized the government’s immigration policy. It accused the West of “closing its eyes” to the problem and compared the tragic fate of the boat people in the Mediterranean to the Shoah.

Umberto Bossi, head of the racist coalition government party, the Northern League, reacted by calling upon the Vatican to set its own good example and open its gates to the immigrants.

Foreign Minister Franco Frattini (Forza Italia) intervened and sought to shift responsibility on the European Union, by claiming the EU did nothing to stop immigration to Italy. Frattini demanded that other European countries be prepared to accept refugees.

In May, Silvio Berlusconi cynically sought to justify Italian deportation politics by admitting that conditions in Italian deportation centres were very similar to “concentration camps.” Therefore it was “more humane” to prevent refugees landing on Italian soil in the first place.

Riots took place when new security regulations came into force in the identification and deportation centres at the beginning of August. Several inmates climbed onto the roof of the deportation centre in Turin. Others armed themselves with metal bars and sought to break down mesh windows. The rebellion was finally put down by a large police intervention. Similar protests and riots also took place in other deportation prisons.

In line with the new laws, refugees without proper residency papers can be locked up for six months. Illegal immigration can be punished by a fine of up to €10,000 and immigrants must pay €200 for an application for a residency permit. In addition the new law requires that teachers, officials and sanitary personnel denounce illegal immigrants and threatens landlords with prison who give them lodging. The laws also legalize the introduction of civilian militias to supplement the systematic use of soldiers to patrol city centres.

The new regulations give support to fascist elements and not only undermine the basic democratic rights of refugees, but those of the entire working population. At the same time, the government’s campaign against immigrant workers is increasingly being used to provide a scapegoat for the country’s economic demise and deflect blame away from the ruling elite.

The economic situation in Italy has deteriorated dramatically in 2009. According to the business federation Confindustria, the country’s gross national product declined by nearly 5 percent (–4.8 percent), and consumption by around 1.9 percent. The automobile industry sold 15 percent fewer cars than a year previously. As a result the government is well aware of the danger of labour disputes in major companies such as Fiat and possible riots in the cities.

The Berlusconi government has been able to hold onto power and implement its right-wing policies because it faces no serious political opposition. The so-called opposition parties represent points of view, which differ only insignificantly from the course of

the government. In addition a number of ministers, who are responsible for the government's inhuman xenophobic policy, began their careers in the camp of the parliamentary left or as petty bourgeois radicals.

Interior Minister Roberto Maroni, who is today a member of the racist Northern League, began in politics as a member of the group of so-called Marxist-Leninists of Varese. He then switched for a period to the organization Democrazia Proletaria, a union of several leftist, petty-bourgeois tendencies whose members later left to join mainly Communist Refoundation or the Greens.

Like both Berlusconi and Bossi, Maroni scraped by for a while as a musician. He met Bossi at the end of the 1980s and in 1990 joined the Lega Lombarda, which later became the Northern League. Today Maroni defends the introduction of private civilian militias and is intent on deporting half a million immigrants this year.

As an architect of the "Italian-Libyan Agreement for the Fight against Illegal Migration," Maroni is one of those principally responsible for the latest refugee tragedy. Maroni negotiated the present agreement in May in Tripoli. According to the Libyan newspaper *Akhbar Libya* the contract "commits Libya to fight illegal migration while Rome promised in return to pay Libya five billion dollars over the next 25 years as compensation for the colonial period." In addition, the Italian government donated three ships to carry out patrols along the Libyan coast.

Other members of the Berlusconi government originate from the Socialist Party, which collapsed under the weight of corruption scandals in the 1990s. Later a section of the party formed the New Socialist Party (Nuovo PSI), which has since merged into Berlusconi's "People of Freedom." PSI boss Bettino Craxi played a crucial role in furthering Berlusconi's own career by giving him free rein in the socialist centre of Milan to develop his construction and media interests. In 1994 Craxi was forced to leave the country to avoid a prison term for corruption. He died a wealthy man on Tunisia in 2000. Today his daughter Stefania Craxi is a secretary of state in the Foreign Ministry.

Other defectors from the Socialist Party are Franco Frattini and Giulio Tremonti. The current foreign minister, Frattini was formerly editor of the leftist newspaper *Il Manifesto* until joining Berlusconi's party in the mid-1990s. He is an avid advocate of wars in the Middle East and the "war against terror." Recently Frattini protested in the UN against a conference that condemned the criminal character of Israeli attacks on Palestinians.

Economics and Finance Minister Tremonti is notorious for his right-wing economic policies. He openly propagates nationalist and protectionist points of view and has a good working relationship with the post-fascists led by Gianfranco Fini. He drew attention with his remark: "There are times when one must put aside economic books and open up the Bible."

An especially valuable defector from the Socialist Party for Berlusconi is Renato Brunetta, the minister for public administration and innovation, who obtained his doctorate in labour law. He is responsible for making the job market flexible and introducing "precarious," i.e., short-term contracts and low-paid jobs. He is renowned for his vicious campaign against "fanulloni," i.e., alleged "good for nothings," working in public

administration.

Maurizio Sacconi, minister of health and also a former PSI member, defended the campaign by the Church against euthanasia in the recent case of Eluana Englaro.

Another section of Berlusconi's government stems from the Radical Party of Marco Panella and Emma Bonino. In the 1960s and 1970s the Radicals were regarded to be part of the left spectrum of politics and included intellectuals such as the writer Elio Vittorini, the actor Arnoldo Foà and for a while even the director Pier Paolo Pasolini. All of them supported the Radicals on the basis of its advocacy of the right to abortion and divorce and demand for a separation of church and state.

A former member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) also occupies a key position in the Berlusconi government. Sandro Bondi is culture minister and is coordinator of the People of Freedom. Bondi had joined the communist youth federation Federazione Giovanile Comunista Italiana as a young man. A fervent Catholic, he wrote his philosophy thesis on an Augustinus preacher and opponent of Savonarola. (The latter was burnt at the stake for heresy in the Middle Ages.)

Bondi joined the PCI and became a mayor of a town in Tuscany. In the 1990s he switched to become a fanatical defender of Berlusconi. In 2001 he led Berlusconi's election campaign and authored a slick advertising brochure that was distributed to every household. As culture minister, Bondi recently opposed the demands of striking artists protesting against cuts of a €100 million in the cultural budget. In order to cover the state deficit, Bondi also appointed a former McDonalds fast food manager as national director of Italian museums tasked with the job of marketing Italy's cultural heritage.



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