

The alliance between the EU and Libya in the persecution of refugees

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The Western powers are preparing a military attack against Libya, citing humanitarian concerns as the pretext. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said “we cannot watch as people are being murdered”. But that is precisely what the European Union has done for past years, collaborating closely with the dictatorships in Libya and Tunisia to stop refugees breaching the perimeter of “Fortress Europe”.

Since 2003, a system of refugee camps has been created in North Africa with the help of the EU. The regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Gaddafi in Libya have carried out the EU’s dirty work, employing the most brutal means to prevent African refugees reaching Europe. The European governments supported this and promoted it with millions of euros.

In 2003, given the growing number of asylum-seekers in the United Kingdom, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair introduced a “new vision for refugees”. This consisted of two key points: the establishment of reception centres for refugees outside EU territory, and military intervention into crisis areas to nip in the bud refugee movements in the direction of Europe.

Although EU interior ministers and the European Parliament officially rejected such plans, the EU summit of European leaders in June 2003 in Greece quietly gave the green light to Blair’s plan to establish refugee camps. Within 12 months, the first pilot projects were begun.

A year later, in connection with the rescue of 37 African refugees in the Mediterranean by the ship “Cap Anamur”, then-German Interior Minister Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party, SPD) came up with a similar plan to outsource the job of keeping refugees out of the EU, which he discussed with his Italian colleague Giuseppe Pisanu.

At a meeting of EU interior ministers in October 2004, Schily won approval for his plans. The interior ministers agreed the construction of five reception camps in North Africa, which, however, were not to be managed by the EU. The EU governments were thus given carte blanche to conclude bilateral agreements with the states of North Africa to stem the flow of refugees at the source. The interior ministers ignored the fact that these plans represented a massive violation of fundamental rights and of the Geneva Convention.

The Italian government was quick to create a fait accompli. In Tunisia, Italy financed a total of 13 detention centres, where

refugees have faced torture and abuse.

In 2003, the Berlusconi government signed a secret agreement with Libya to take back “illegal” immigrants. Italy renovated a refugee camp in the north of Libya and established two new camps in the south, in the middle of the desert. Italy also provided 100 inflatable boats, three coaches, six off-road vehicles, night vision devices, underwater cameras, 12,000 blankets and 6,000 mattresses. The Italian government was fully aware that the Libyan authorities did not treat refugees with kid gloves, since the deliveries also included 1,000 body bags.

The close collaboration with Libya was remarkable because the Gaddafi regime had been regarded as a pariah internationally since 1992 and was made respectable again particularly by the efforts of the Italian government and then the EU as a whole. Moreover, Libya also had a very bad reputation regarding the protection of refugees.

The country is home to some 2 million refugees and migrant workers from all over Africa, but the government has never signed the Geneva Conventions and has also refused to cooperate with the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR). Refugees and migrant workers are exposed to cruel persecution in Libya and are completely unprotected legally in relation to the security authorities.

As early as 2000, racist pogroms claimed the lives of some 150 black Africans. Conditions are appalling in the 15 refugee camps in the country, in which up to 60,000 refugees are crammed. There are not enough beds or food for the inmates. Migrants are subjected to torture and ill treatment and expulsions are carried out regardless of the legal situation of those affected.

Living conditions in the camps were so catastrophic that in some cases inmates gave their last belongings to the guards to be able to escape. For many, the journey to Niger ended with death in the desert. Human rights groups say there have been more than 1,600 deaths in the Sahara.

Despite this, since 2003 Italy has regularly flown refugees who were stranded on the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa back to Libya. Between 2003 and 2005 it also provided finance for the Libyan authorities for an additional 60 deportation flights. The close collaboration at an economic level and in

stemming the flow of refugees led Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to praise Gaddafi in October 2004 as “a good friend and freedom-loving prime minister” at the inauguration of a gas pipeline from Libya to Italy.

But such ties were developed not only by the Italian government. The Maltese and German governments also began to court Gaddafi in the hope of winning lucrative contracts for their domestic economies and to intensify cooperation in stemming the flow of refugees. To that end, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) visited Libya in 2004.

In October 2004, the European Union lifted its arms embargo on Libya, saying the same day that it wanted to work more closely with Tripoli in the field of migration control. The same year, an EU Commission “technical mission” visited Libya and inspected border controls and refugee camps. Although it criticized the prevailing conditions of detention, it proposed to intensify collaboration. This manifested itself initially in supplies and training for Libyan border guards.

In 2007, a delegation from the European border agency Frontex visited Libya. Its report once again documents massive human rights violations. Nevertheless, Frontex recommended the supply of command posts, radar surveillance, patrol boats and other equipment to Libya.

In the same year, the EU signed a memorandum of understanding with Libya, which was praised enthusiastically by then-EU commissioner for external relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, “Our agreement will not only strengthen relations between the EU and Libya,” he said, “but will also contribute much to current Libyan policy and consolidate its position in the international community.”

However, the framework agreement envisaged in the memorandum of understanding has still not been realised. So far, only the Italian coast guard has conducted joint patrols off the Libyan coast. This has repeatedly resulted in refugee boats being fired upon.

In recent years, the EU has invested about €60 million in Libya in order to perfect its ability to stem the flow of refugees from North Africa. However, more ambitious actions were planned. For instance, a radar-and satellite-based border control system was to be built on Libya’s southern borders with Chad and Niger, with the cost of €300 million being divided between Italy and the EU. Implementation would be undertaken by the Finmeccanica group, the largest Italian defence contractor.

The EU’s anti-asylum policy, conducted in cooperation with the Libyan regime, has cost the lives of thousands of refugees in the Mediterranean and in the deserts of Libya. The responsibility for this lies primarily with the European governments. They have not only looked on as the Gaddafi regime harassed migrants and refugees, tortured and sent them to certain death, but have also supported the government in Tripoli logistically and financially.

The European governments now fear that the revolt against the Gaddafi regime could unleash a new wave of refugees

across the Mediterranean. The EU has responded with the positioning of helicopters, speedboats and war ships, deploying a rapid reaction force from the Frontex border control agency to the Libyan and Tunisian coast to prevent the flight of refugees to mainland Europe at any price.

The dealings with refugees also reveal deep disunity within the European Union. Two weeks ago, when 6,000 refugees from Tunisia reached the Italian island of Lampedusa, a violent dispute broke out over their onward dispersal. The Mediterranean countries of Italy, Malta, Spain, Greece and France have called for those stranded on the island to be dispersed among all EU states by means of a quota system. This has been rejected by the northern EU member states like Britain, Sweden, Austria and especially Germany.

Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni declared a state of emergency on the island of Lampedusa. He spoke of a “humanitarian catastrophe” and raised the spectre of an “exodus of biblical proportions”, but at the same time refused to open up the empty reception camps for refugees on Lampedusa. Refugees had to camp out under the stars, relying on the kindness of the local population which supplied food and shelter.

The “boat is full” strategy of the EU interior ministers meant that they could agree only on the deployment of the Frontex border agency. Germany was also involved with the deployment of helicopters for maritime patrols.

In view of the dramatic events in Libya, differences remain within the EU about accepting refugees. While more than 100,000 workers and families are fleeing to Egypt and Tunisia from the slaughter taking place in Libya, the EU categorically refuses to open its borders to these people. Frontex repels refugee boats at sea, forcing them to turn back.

The calls for the regime in Libya to respect human rights and the desire for freedom of the population is completely undermined by the fact that the EU is trampling underfoot the right to asylum and security of life and limb.



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