

France re-establishes border controls with Italy amid dispute over African migrants

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Last week, France took the unprecedented move of restoring border controls with Italy on April 7, after Rome granted temporary visas to thousands of African migrants. In the three months since the outbreak of mass protests and revolutionary struggles in North Africa, growing numbers of African refugees have arrived in Italy; it is estimated that some 26,000 immigrants are on Italian soil, including 21,000 who say they are from Tunisia.

Under the European Union's Schengen treaty, which was agreed in 1997, immigrants can freely travel throughout the Schengen area, which covers most European Union countries except the United Kingdom and Ireland. The treaty specifies that there are to be no border controls at transit points between countries, like France and Italy, that signed the Schengen treaty.

Fearing a flow of immigrants into France, which is home to a large North African community, the conservative government of President Nicolas Sarkozy effectively disregarded the Schengen treaty with regards to Italy. Simultaneously, it sharply criticised Italy's decision to grant temporary visas to the migrants.

France tightened border controls, adding more than 300 police to patrols monitoring roads and foot trails that lead into French territory, along with inspecting rail traffic.

In March, more than 3,300 Tunisian migrants from the south of Italy had arrived in the town of Ventimiglia, located 10 km south of the French border. Ventimiglia is a transit point from which refugees try to cross the border into France, by train or on foot.

However, they are routinely returned to Italian territory by the French authorities, who have adopted a stricter policy towards refugees.

French Interior Minister Claude Guéant said that France had detained 2,800 undocumented Tunisian migrants in March, and that most of them had already been sent back to Italy.

France's unilateral decision to restore border controls underlines the extreme fragility of the legal basis of the capitalist European Union.

It is not the first time that the French ruling elite has disregarded EU legal principles. Last year, although the Council of Europe condemned France's banning of the burqa as anti-democratic and discriminatory, Sarkozy's government implemented the anti-burqa law. It will go into effect on April 11 in France, which is the first Western country to institute such a ban.

Last Thursday, after Italy issued the visa permits, Claude Guéant told *Europe 1* radio that "France will not submit to economic immigration." On the same day, he issued instructions to regional police authorities (*préfets*), asking them to limit the impact of arrivals in France of immigrants transiting through Italy.

The circular states that an immigrant who wishes to cross the French border must "hold a valid travel document recognised by France" and a "valid residence document," "show proof of having sufficient resources—that is, €31 per day if the person has accommodations, and €62 otherwise. Immigrants "may not constitute...a threat to public order" and "may not have entered French territory more than three months

previously”.

Italy accused France of violating the Schengen treaty. Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni said, “Tunisians to whom we are granting the residency permits will have the right to travel. France cannot prevent this, unless they leave the Schengen accords or suspend the treaty.

EU Interior Affairs commissioner Cecilia Malmström, though she advocates the reactionary position that undocumented migrants should be sent back to their own countries, criticised Sarkozy’s decision. Under the EU’s Schengen agreement, “you are not allowed to do checks at the border” unless “there is a serious threat to public security, and for the moment that is not the case,” she said.

France responded that under the so-called Chambéry agreement, a bilateral treaty between France and Italy existing before the Schengen treaty, it was entitled to return any undocumented migrants to Italy for expulsion, if French officials had evidence they travelled from Italy.

The Sarkozy administration’s decision to intensify anti-immigrant sentiment comes amid the rising prominence of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), which has profited from the promotion of anti-immigrant sentiment by Sarkozy and the bourgeois “left” parties. The FN is now set to challenge Sarkozy’s Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) in the 2012 presidential election.

Polls suggest that the UMP risks being eliminated from the first round of election in 2012. Sarkozy’s government is deeply unpopular and suffered a defeat in recent local elections.

Under these conditions, Sarkozy’s government is appealing to the FN vote through racist policies, promoting anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment. Last week, the UMP launched controversial debate on the practice of Islam in France, stoking up further anti-Muslim sentiment. At the same time, the government is preparing an immigration bill that would be discussed at the Senate on April 12.

Recently, Guéant, who plans to deport some 28,000 undocumented immigrants by the end of 2011, attacked immigrants, saying: “French people, after a long period of uncontrolled immigration, sometimes have the feeling that they are no longer at home, or have the feeling that they are seeing practices that are being imposed on them and that do not correspond to the rules of our social life.”

The right-wing Italian newspaper *La Stampa* wrote, “the struggle against immigration (and not only illegal immigration) is the hard core of Sarkozy’s presidency—like ‘security,’ which was a real motor of his politics, whose origin and development arise from the confrontation with the far right of [former FN leader] Jean-Marie Le Pen.”

Having exchanged sharp diplomatic criticism between Paris and Rome, Claude Guéant met with his counterpart Roberto Maroni last Friday in Milan. It is reported that the two countries reached a deal to carry out joint patrols off Tunisia’s coast to block migrants headed for Europe.

Such measures underscore the complete contempt by France, Italy, and other European governments for the rights of migrants fleeing oppression or misery in their home countries.

The French government stuck by its reactionary persecution of immigrants. Guéant said, “there is no reason why France and Italy should welcome all these migrants who came to Europe for economic reasons, so we will work together to repatriate them.”

Guéant also said that France would pursue its policies of the border patrol with Italy to stop migrants, insisting it had every right to send the migrants back to Italy.



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