

Spanish authorities lie about African migrant drownings

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Fourteen migrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa were the latest to die earlier this month while attempting to swim around the security fence surrounding the Spanish enclave and port-city of Ceuta in North Africa.

The Spanish authorities have repeatedly lied about the circumstances surrounding the tragedy, which occurred when 400 migrants descended the mountains in Morocco to the El Tarajal border crossing early on February 6. In a desperate attempt to escape anti-riot Civil Guards in the Spanish zone and gendarmes and Military Auxiliaries in the Moroccan area, one group tried to climb the three rows of six-meter-high barbed-wire fencing, while others attempted to swim around the part that juts out to sea.

According to surviving migrants interviewed by NGOs, panic set in as Civil Guards began firing tear gas and rubber bullets at those attempting to swim. Examinations by the Northern Observatory for Human Rights on some of those who died confirm that some had marks indicating they had been shot by rubber bullets. The observatory also stated that the Civil Guards did not assist the migrants or alert the rescue coastguards.

Ever since the tragedy occurred, the civil guard director and officials have repeatedly denounced the “violent” attitude of migrants. The only violence on the part of the migrants was the throwing of stones by some of the distraught survivors after learning about the death of their companions and the illegal return of those who had reached Ceuta back to the Moroccan authorities. Both the Geneva Convention on Refugees, to which Spain is a signatory, and Royal Decree 557 of 2011 implementing the Aliens Act, give foreigners who enter Spain “irregularly” the right to legal advice, the assistance of a translator, and any application for

asylum to be considered before any attempt at deportation is made.

At first Spanish government statements tried to pin the blame on the Moroccan police. When it became clear Civil Guards had used rubber bullets and tear gas, they posted heavily edited out-of-sequence footage showing migrants on land throwing stones at the border fence and omitting any footage of events in the sea. The television broadcaster *La Sexta*, however, has posted a video that shows eight migrants who were able to reach Spanish territory. Armed officers, one brandishing his rifle in the air, stand on the shore while the migrants flounder in the water until they swim ashore and are arrested.

Last week, Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz was forced to appear before the congressional Interior Committee. He acknowledged that Civil Guard officers fired their anti-riot weapons, contradicting an earlier version of events by Civil Guard director Arsenio Fernández de Mesa who denied that rubber bullets had been fired. He defended the security force’s actions, calling them “proportional” and “strictly necessary” and claiming that it was in response to “the belligerent behaviour” of the migrants. He asserted that the police used their weapons in a “dissuasive” manner and that no one had been killed as a result of their actions.

The main opposition party, the Socialist Party (PSOE) has called for De Mesa to resign his post with immediate effect. PSOE Secretary for Institutional Relations Antonio Hernando said, “If the [people who died] were white, Spanish and with an identity card, somebody would not have gone to their job today.”

These are crocodile tears by a member of a party that has direct responsibility in the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers and migrants. It was the PSOE in 2005 that began construction of the original border fence,

which now consists of 11 kilometres (6.8 miles) of parallel three-meter (10 feet) high fences with razor-wire, regular watch posts, CCTV, spotlights, noise and movement sensors, and a road running between them for police patrols. In 2007, the PSOE government was forced to order the removal of the razor-wire after scores of people suffered horrific injuries trying to climb over the fence.

When the PP government reintroduced anti-climbing mesh designed to grab onto clothing and rip flesh last year, the PSOE reacted by proposing instead a hyper-militarization of the border including the introduction of drones, the installation of radar at strategic points and more sophisticated movement sensors, high-intensity acoustic and light alarms along the entire perimeter. They also proposed to increase the number of patrols on land and at sea, especially of the special submarine unit, as well as strengthen cooperation with the Morocco police.

The European Commission said it would demand explanations from Spain with Cecilia Malmström, the home affairs commissioner, saying she was “very concerned about Spanish border police using rubber bullets to deter migrants in Ceuta.” However, it was the EC that established the FRONTEX border agency replete with its own fleet of planes, helicopters and boats and insisted that the Spanish and Moroccan government effectively patrol the border between Morocco, Ceuta and the other Spanish enclave of Melilla to prevent people migrating to the rest of Europe.

This hypocrisy contrasted with the genuine sympathy of workers throughout Spain, with protests taking place in 15 Spanish cities to condemn the death of the migrants. Placards proclaimed, “They didn't drown, they were murdered,” “Natives or foreigners, we're all the same working class,” “No one is illegal,” and “Where are the pro-lifers now?” could be seen (the latter in reference to those who support the new restrictive Abortion Law being prepared by the PP government).

According to estimates made by refugee organizations, 25,000 people have drowned while attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe since 1990. For those who are fortunate to reach Europe, they are denied all basic rights, interned in camps or brutally exploited.

A main demand of the manifesto of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) and Socialist Equality Party (UK) for the 2014 European Elections is an end to the brutal European border regime, full democratic and social rights for all migrants and the abolition of all repressive measures and special laws that are currently being introduced against them.



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