

Thousands of refugees intercepted off the coast of Sicily

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Last week, Italian navy ships in the Mediterranean intercepted more than 3,000 refugees, most of them fleeing the civil war in Syria. The rescue of the thousands of refugees from their overloaded and rickety boats is being hailed as a demonstration of the allegedly humanitarian focus of military patrols in the Mediterranean.

The real nature of Italian and European refugee policy, however, was more accurately reflected in a video released in the past days by the *Repubblica* on-line site. The video taken in November 2013 shows members of the crew of an Italian frigate firing on a boat with 176 refugees. Such intimidation to repel those seeking a safe haven in Europe is integral to the hard-hitting “Fortress Europe” policy of the European Union (EU).

The rescues carried out on March 17 and 18 were mounted in line with Operation Mare Nostrum, which the Italian government launched following last autumn’s refugee tragedies off the coast of Lampedusa, in which more than 400 refugees were drowned. In the latest interception, a total of 15 dinghies and small, barely seaworthy fishing boats were mustered for the rescue.

The 2,128 apprehended refugees were brought to Sicily. In the next two days, a further 1,165 refugees were taken from their small boats. The refugees, most of whom were considered by authorities mainly to have come from Syria, Eritrea and Palestine, had set out from the coast of Libya. One of them died after he inhaled the toxic fumes from the ship’s engine.

Since the beginning of the year, nearly 10,000 refugees have been apprehended at sea by the Italian navy and coast guard—three times as many as in the same period of 2013. The Italian spokesman for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Flavio Di Giacomo, spoke of a “serious emergency”. Never before have “we seen 13 boats coming at once, especially not in March.” Due to the current calm weather conditions, Di Giacomo expects thousands more refugees to venture the perilous passage across the Mediterranean to Italy in the coming days.

Operation Mare Nostrum has involved the Italian government in deploying a naval unit consisting of two frigates, corvettes and amphibious ships to monitor the Mediterranean. The European refugee agency, Frontex, is supporting the Italian

unit’s tracking of refugee boats by supplying it with infrared images and satellite monitoring data, as well as drones from the Eurosur programme. The Italian government has also tightened cooperation among forces of the navy, the Carabinieri state police and interior ministry.

The rescue of refugees, apprehended in acute distress on the high seas, by no means marks the end of their desperate odyssey. The reception centre on Lampedusa was closed following complaints of abuse suffered there by the refugees, who were treated almost like cattle. Only 180 places are available for refugees at the Pozzallo reception centre in Sicily, and the Sicilian authorities are hoping to be able to allocate them to the 13 refugee camps on the mainland as quickly as possible. There they face a month-long wait for the processing of their asylum applications or, as is more often the case, speedy deportation to their countries of origin or transit countries.

The rescue operations associated with Operation Mare Nostrum are nevertheless being acclaimed a great success by the authorities in charge. Laurens Jolles, representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for Italy and Greece, described Mare Nostrum as “a model for other countries” and called on EU member countries to assist Italy financially in the continuation of its good work. So far, the operation has swallowed up €30 million.

Italian armed forces chief of staff Luigi Binelli Mantelli extolled the “humanitarian aspect” of the operation, but not without adding that Mare Nostrum has made a substantial contribution to the curbing of people smuggling, since 46 Egyptians and Libyans have so far been arrested and charged with operating the refugee boats. Binelli Mantelli declared that Mare Nostrum thus “contributed not only to border protection, but also to the security of Europe”, because there were “close ties between human traffickers and terrorist organisations”.

However, he failed to provide any evidence for this assertion. Even if EU law criminalises the skippers and smugglers, who often collect thousands of euros for the crossing and put the refugees’ lives at risk, the causes of the plight of those involved should not be ignored.

People smugglers are able to operate their profitable business only because the EU is increasingly closing itself off to

refugees and building the walls of Fortress Europe higher and higher. Operation Mare Nostrum was certainly not conceived with humanitarian goals in mind; the aims were to detect the approach of refugees at an early stage and force them back to the Libyan coast. Even the name, Mare Nostrum, which means “our sea” and was ancient Rome’s name for the Mediterranean Sea, clearly implies that migrants and refugees are not welcome in this part of the world.

Officers of the Italian coast guard criticise the operation as absurdly excessive in scale and unfit for rescue operations. In their view, three additional speedboats, flying units and a hospital ship would have been quite sufficient for the effective monitoring and rescuing of refugees in distress, as *Die Zeit* newspaper reported in October last year. Admiral Falco Acame stated that the use of the navy primarily serves the interests of the defence industry, which wants to display its latest technologies and senses a billion-euro business opportunity in the upgrading of Fortress Europe.

At the start of the operation in October of last year, Interior Minister Angelino Alfano had already openly declared that the massive deployment of the navy was designed to deter those who “believe they might be able to engage in people smuggling with impunity”. Alfano went on to insist that refugees rescued from drowning would by no means necessarily be brought to Italy. It remains unknown how many refugee boats have been turned away and forced to return to Libya. These illegal push-back responses continually involve accidents, like that of only a few weeks ago, when 12 refugees were drowned off the Greek island of Farmakonisi.

The real crime is not that refugees are being helped to reach Europe, but that European governments are flagrantly denying these desperate people protection and shelter and, instead, criminalising them as “illegal migrants” to be deported as quickly as possible.

It is no coincidence that a large proportion of the recently apprehended refugees came from Syria, where a bloody civil war has been raging for three years, provoked by the US with the help of its vassal states on the Arabian peninsula and in the European Union. An estimated 146,000 Syrians have been killed, and some 9 million are displaced and trying to escape the fighting. Approximately 6.5 million people are stumbling around in Syria in search of protection, while 2.4 million are languishing in huge refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt. However, less than 4 percent of the Syrian refugees have been able to secure accommodation in the EU. Since the conflict began, about 56,000 Syrians have sought asylum in the EU, most of them in Sweden and Germany. By contrast, Lebanon and Turkey have accepted almost a million and 625,000 refugees, respectively, from Syria.

But provision of the refugees in the camps is becoming increasingly strained because the United Nations, which assumes responsibility for the bulk of the food supply, no longer has sufficient financial resources. Promised financial aid

has not been forthcoming, and food rations from the World Food Programme have already had to be reduced by 20 percent, as UN emergency relief coordinator Muhannad Hadi told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* press.

In mid-March, even UN refugee commissioner Antonio Guterres asked the EU, “What kind of world are we living in, when Syrians fleeing a brutal conflict have to risk their lives on the run and—when they have finally managed to escape—are made unwelcome or even turned away at the border?” According to the UNHCR, at least 250 Syrians died trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2013.

Approximately 2 million Syrian children also suffer from acute malnutrition. Life-threatening diseases such as polio and measles are again spreading, because Syria’s former, excellent vaccination programme completely collapsed as a result of the civil war. The Save the Children children’s rights organisation has reported accounts of newly born babies who were dying in their incubators because of electricity cuts. In the absence of narcotics, some hospital patients even had to be beaten unconscious in order for doctors to perform operations on them.

In Germany, however, the government is more concerned about whether the few Syrian refugees that it might accept into the country will observe German laws. Before entering, approved refugees must therefore first complete a “course in cultural orientation for Germany” in the Lebanese capital of Beirut.

To make matters worse, European governments regularly tighten their restrictions on refugees. Only a few weeks ago, the European parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs instituted the new Sea Borders Regulation, which gives the Frontex European border agency far-reaching powers to turn away and send back refugee boats. The new regulation stipulates that refugee boats within the 12-mile zone around the EU states can be stopped by the coast guard and forcibly towed back towards their country of origin. The regulation undermines one of the main principles of the Geneva Refugee Convention, the so-called non-refoulement principle, according to which refugees cannot simply be rejected, but have a right to a hearing. People will continue to die on the Mediterranean Sea regardless of the exaggerated stories of successfully rescued refugees.



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