

Death toll of refugees in the Mediterranean continues to rise

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In the last three weeks, more than 150 refugees have died in the Mediterranean in an attempt to find asylum. On May 5, 22 died off the coast of the Greek island of Samos in the Aegean when their boat capsized; 10 others are still missing.

One day later, at least 36 people died off the coast of Libya, when the stern of their boat broke away. Off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa, the bodies of a further 18 refugees were recovered from the sea. According to survivors, the boat was attempting to bring 400 people to Europe; only 200 have been saved.

The Greek coast guard was only able to rescue 36 of some 65 occupants of the capsized boat. The rescuers found the bodies of 18 refugees on board and four corpses were recovered from the sea. The dead included three children and a pregnant woman. The survivors come from Syria, Eritrea and Somalia.

Shortly after this disaster, another 24 refugees were saved from a sinking boat, and 16 were apprehended on the island of Chios.

Six months after the catastrophe of Lampedusa, in which nearly 400 died, accidents involving boats carrying refugees in the sea between Libya and Italy have drastically increased again. This is despite wide-ranging counter-measures by the Italian coast guard and navy, as well as by the European Union. In the last three weeks alone, more than 100 refugees have died off the coast of Libya.

Following the accident on May 6, the Libyan border police were only able to save 52 immigrants from Mali, Cameroon, Senegal and Burkina Faso. Thirty-six were recovered dead and 42 are still missing. In another case, the Libyan coast guard was only able to rescue a single Somali from a shipwreck; he reported that 40 others had drowned.

In another incident on May 2, 80 Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians were rescued from a boat that had gotten into difficulties. This came too late, however, for four other refugees. In addition, Carlotta Sami, the European spokeswoman of the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported a missing boat with 40 refugees from Eritrea.

The survivors of the boat that sank south of Lampedusa have since been moved to the Sicilian town of Catania. "It was hell, you had to see it with your own eyes in order to understand the tragedy", naval officer Romano said. The rescuers have

recovered 18 bodies from the water so far, while aid came too late for the 200 missing.

And while the rescue actions were still ongoing, a new dispute erupted in the European Union regarding the accommodation and care of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Africa. The European border agency Frontex is also pouring oil onto the fire, and reports that 42,000 immigrants were arrested on the borders of the EU in the first four months of the year, more than three times as many as in the same period the previous year.

"We assume that in the summer, very high numbers will be reached", warned the Frontex deputy director, Gil Arias-Fernandez, in Brussels. He cited the conflict in Syria and the dire social conditions in many African countries.

In the first months of the year a total of 36,000 refugees arrived in southern Italy. The reception camps on Sicily are full to bursting, and some refugees are being temporarily housed in warehouses, where they are left to their own devices. The government has withdrawn the law making illegal immigration a crime, as the jails too are overloaded.

The Italian government is now demanding that other EU member states accept refugees. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi declared: "Europe cannot rescue states and banks while mothers and children are drowning."

Interior Minister Angelino Alfano even suggested that many of the migrants who are recognized as refugees will not stay in Italy. "Europe does not help us to recover the dead, it should at least accept the living. Those who have a right of asylum, which Italy recognizes, can travel all over Europe wherever they want to go and Italy will not be a jail for political refugees."

It has become routine for the European Union to express its "deep shock" at the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, as in this case by the responsible EU Commissioner Cecilia Malmström. However, she pushed the responsibility onto the EU member states "to now show concrete solidarity, in order to avoid the repeat of such tragedies." Malmström also announced she would table the issue on the agenda of the next EU interior ministers meeting in June.

Meanwhile, Libya's Interior Minister Salah Mazek has also threatened the EU with accelerating the wave of migration to

southern Italy if his country does not receive support. “We can let thousands travel unhindered if Europe does not take responsibility”, he said.

But the appeal to distribute the refugees to all EU states would completely undermine the Dublin II Accord, under which the state in which refugees first make a claim for asylum must take responsibility for them.

It is no accident that the German interior minister has just tabled a draft law under which asylum seekers can be arrested at any time in Germany. This will likely accelerate deportations to countries of origin, as well as to other EU countries under the Dublin II agreement.

The deadly consequences posed by maintenance of a militarised outer-EU border for all EU states, including Italy, were exposed by a consortium of 10 European journalists utilizing the database, “The Migrants Files”.

Confirmed reports detail lethal asylum attempts, in which more than 23,000 have died on the external EU border since 2000. The responsibility for these mass deaths is borne by the European Union.

Since then, for example, the Greek government hermetically sealed off the land border to Turkey in the summer of 2012. As a result, over 230 refugees have died in the Aegean. A 3-metre high impenetrable fence has diverted the stream of refugees into the far more dangerous route by sea, where they are dependent on the goodwill of the Greek coast guard.

The refugee organisation ProAsyl reports that in January this year, a refugee ship off the coast of the uninhabited Greek island of Farmakonisi suffered motor damage. When the Greek coast guard attempted to push the boat back into Turkish waters, it capsized. Some refugees attempted to swim to the patrol boat, but they were pushed back into the sea. A total of 11 people drowned, including children.

Although the Greek state has cut wages and pensions, and the public health service has practically collapsed as a result of the austerity measures imposed by the EU and the International Monetary Fund, it continues to guard its frontier with Turkey against refugees, with more than 1,800 border guards, with the support of Frontex.

The Mediterranean area is surveilled with drones and satellites around the clock under the Eurosur System. This is not in order to rescue those in danger at sea, as Frontex deputy director Gil Arias Fernandez had to admit to the online magazine *Euobserver*. The satellite images were only provided to the border agencies days later, since they are only for observing the movement of refugees in order to prevent future attempts.

And the Italian navy operation “Mare Nostrum” does not serve to prevent refugee catastrophes or to save those whose ships capsize. Rather, the apprehended refugees are to be returned to North Africa as swiftly as possible. To this end, the first identification measures are taken on board the ships, with decisions taken as to who can and cannot make a claim to

asylum. Nigerians are thrown onto the street and must leave Italy within seven days. Tunisians and Egyptians, however, are deported immediately.

Two Libyan officers are also present, who are responsible for contact with the Libyan authorities, in order to turn over refugees apprehended near the Libyan coast directly to Libyan units.

In Libya itself, some 70 EU police officers are deployed, training and supporting border guards. Libya receives financial aid within the framework of the Eubam Mission, and is involved in guarding its own borders against those seeking to flee abroad. This forward displacement of the anti-refugee measures is the ultimate goal of the European Union. The dirty work is to be done by the neighbouring states, while the EU states keep their hands clean.

But here, too, the number of victims is increasing. For example, last week near the Algerian border, 13 migrants from Niger were found who had nearly died of starvation and thirst. According to information from the newspaper *Al-Watan*, the group, which is said to have consisted mainly of women and children, numbered a further 33 people. And in October last year, the bodies of 92 refugees were found after their vehicle had broken down in the desert in North Niger. Most of them were women and children.

Giusi Nicolini, the mayor of Lampedusa, has demanded a “Mare Nostrum 2 on land and on the coast”. This would include an efficient reception system for refugees, and the provision of ships that can “return the refugees directly to the harbour of Tripoli or other African towns, and so put an end to the trafficking business”.

What is more likely, however, is that the EU will agree further measures to seal off its borders, extending border protection in cooperation with the indigenous police and secret service right into the Sahara, the Turkish-Iran border or the Urals.

The European Union is now home to about 500 million people. That its 28 member countries are unable and unwilling to absorb a few tens of thousands of refugees is an expression of its historical bankruptcy.



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