European Union responsible for drowning of refugees in Mediterranean

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19 September 2014

Last weekend 500 refugees drowned off Malta in the Mediterranean Sea. Since then, horrific details about the catastrophe have come to light.

The majority of those on board had fled from Palestine or from civil war in Syria and Sudan. According to the Adamir organisation, 400 refugees who were on the sunken ship are missing from the Gaza Strip: “The entire Gaza Strip is speaking about it, it is such a horrendous event. As if the last war wasn’t enough.”

The European Union rejected any responsibility for the tragedy, blaming the traffickers, who according to two survivors, intentionally rammed the boat after the refugees refused to board an even smaller craft. “That is not an accident, it is murder,” stated Michele Cercone, spokesperson for EU migration and asylum commissioner Cecilia Malmström.

This crime itself flowed, however, from the policies of war and repression supported by the EU commission in Brussels, Europe’s governments, and the headquarters of the EU’s border patrol agency Frontex in Warsaw.

The news agency AFP published eye witness reports from the ten people who survived the disaster. Most of the over 100 children allegedly on board were from Gaza, fleeing the US- and EU-backed Israeli war. The overladen boat sank within minutes, and only 80 or 90 refugees were able to remain on the surface of the water initially. Parents then were forced to watch as their children died and slid in to the water.

Refugees continue to risk such catastrophes to flee their countries, however. One Palestinian told *EU Observer* that he was also planning to flee. “We are thinking about whether it is better to start an attempt and possibly drown, or be killed by Israeli bombs.”

23-year-old Mohammed Raad said that he had fled because he had “never had a good day” in Gaza, “Just tyranny, war, and no work. We didn’t know when we would be killed.”

Besides the Israeli war against the Palestinian people in Gaza, Europe and the United States have also stoked war in Syria, Libya, Mali, and other countries in the Middle East and Africa, driving millions to flee. Although only a few of these refugees ever reach Europe, the EU has erected an almost impregnable system of exclusion. This in turn forces refugees to take enormous risks to avoid EU controls.

Comprehensive surveillance of the Mediterranean with warships, drones and coast guard boats is cynically presented by European authorities as an emergency sea rescue mission. The mass fatalities in the Mediterranean expose the true character of these policies, however.

Two boats capsized off the Italian island of Lampedusa last October, resulting in the deaths of almost 500 refugees. Then-EU commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecelia Malmström shed crocodile tears and told a shocked public that the EU would take measures to prevent such an event ever happening again. But this was empty rhetoric. A rapidly organised state burial for the drowned refugees was overshadowed by the deportation of the survivors back to Africa.

All that was ultimately expanded was surveillance, in order to more effectively reject and turn away refugee boats. In November 2013, the EU began the Eurosur border surveillance system, financed with €340 million and mobilizing drones and satellites. It aimed at closer coordination between national border patrols, customs agencies, navies and Frontex.

Malmström also announced the establishment of a Frontex mission for the entire Mediterranean. All that

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remains of this promise is the Italian Mare Nostrum (our sea) mission. Fittingly, this was the name of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini's project to secure Italian hegemony in the Mediterranean.

In the Mare Nostrum mission, the Italian navy has deployed two frigates, corvettes and amphibious ships, to conduct surveillance in the Mediterranean. Frontex helps the unit track down migrant boats with infrared images and data from drones and satellites from the Eurosur programme. In addition, Italy has intensified collaboration between navy, state police, and interior ministry officials.

In fact Mare Nostrum is not primarily a sea rescue mission. Its main goal is to identify trafficking boats and force them back to Africa. As then Italian Defence Minister Mario Mauro and Interior Minister Angelino Alfano made clear as the mission began last October, the deployment of warships was to deter those who "think they can get away with people trafficking without being punished."

Over the last ten months, more than 3,000 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean, more than in the entire year of 2013. Over 2,100 lost their lives in just the ten worst shipwrecks since May between Libya and Italy.

This increase in accidents is no coincidence. Libya has fallen into a civil war between rival militias after the NATO-led war and overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Hundreds of thousands of migrants from Eritrea, Syria, Sudan, Somalia and other African countries are now trapped there. The numbers of those trying to flee in unseaworthy boats has skyrocketed.

Mare Nostrum has also triggered conflicts inside the EU, as the number of migrants picked up by Italian naval and trade ships has surpassed 100,000. European governments have sought to unload on each other the responsibility for accepting these refugees.

When refugees arrived in Vienna, Munich, Berlin and Paris who were not registered in the Eurodac fingerprint system, Austrian, German and French officials insisted that Italy had to stick to European asylum guidelines. This meant they were obliged to register and care for the refugees in Italy.

The number of rescued refugees particularly irritated German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere. He blamed Mare Nostrum for encouraging refugees to cross the Mediterranean. Echoing the argument of Italy's far-right Northern League, he told *Deutsche Welle* that all European ministers agreed that "the justifiable and responsible action of the Italians has become a 'pull factor', as we call it."

Just a few days before the latest tragedy an agreement was finally reached. De Maiziere announced a seven-point plan in the German parliament to combat people traffickers and speed up the deportations of refugees in Europe.

At the same time, Malmström and Alfano declared that Frontex would assume control of the Mare Nostrum mission, starting in November. Commission spokesperson Michele Cercone said its forces would not operate in international waters, where most refugee tragedies occur. It will instead be a mission near the Italian coast, for surveillance and early detection alone. Cercone justified this by stressing that Frontex was not a sea rescue organisation.

Malmström adopted de Maiziere's argument, blaming the Italian navy's operation because it had supposedly encouraged further refugees to flee.

Such claims are false and dishonest. The EU has no interest in rescuing refugees at sea, and it is well aware that refugees from war-torn countries will take escalating risks to flee towards Europe. Repressive EU policies ensure that catastrophic shipwrecks of migrant ships will continue and will not receive prompt assistance.

It is a declaration of political bankruptcy when the European Union, which presents itself as one of the world's strongest economic regions, claims it cannot greet a few hundred thousand refugees. They prefer to let migrants drown, even though most have been forced to flee by the EU's reactionary wars.

According to the latest estimates, over 850 migrants drowned last weekend in four ship sinkings off the coasts of Malta and Libya. Research from The Migrant Files found that more than 25,000 refugees have died on the way to Europe since 2000.

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