

European Union ends rescue mission for refugees

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6 October 2014

The European Union (EU) is responding to reports of horrendous numbers of refugees drowned in the Mediterranean by limiting measures to rescue them as much as possible. European governments have refused to allow the Italian maritime surveillance mission, Mare Nostrum, to continue its activities under its own management. Instead, only a stripped-down operation will be undertaken and this will not involve sea rescues. This decision makes it clear that the EU prefers to let refugees drown unaided, rather than admit them into Europe.

When two refugee boats sank off the Italian island of Lampedusa exactly one year ago, resulting in the horrendous deaths of some 500 people, the European Commission pledged that such a disaster would not happen again.

This was merely an empty promise. While the European Union was unwilling to lift a finger or provide a single euro for rescues at sea, the Italian government launched the Mare Nostrum mission, which has been the target of increasingly bitter criticism over recent months. Critics claimed the operation was saving the lives of too many refugees.

But Mare Nostrum was far from a genuine rescue mission. As the then-Italian defence minister Mario Mauro said, its main objective was to detect the boats of people smugglers and escort refugee boats back to the African mainland. The extensive employment of the Italian navy was primarily aimed at deterring refugees from making the crossing.

It was therefore hardly surprising at the beginning of the mission, when the naval ship Aliseo opened fire with several machine gun bursts on a boat containing 176 refugees. After the rescue of the refugees, the boat sank. The Italian navy justified firing on the vessel by pointing to the subsequent arrest of 16 suspected people

traffickers.

Although the rescuing of people stranded at sea was of only secondary importance to Mare Nostrum, more than 91,000 refugees were picked up and brought to Italy by the participating naval units in the last 10 months. Including those rescued by merchant vessels, a total of approximately 130,000 refugees succeeded in crossing the Mediterranean to Italy.

Rescuing refugees increasingly became a *bête noire* for the European Union. For months, it has been argued that Mare Nostrum has only intensified people trafficking in northern Africa. “Migrants were placed in boats that were increasingly unsafe and small in order to widen the likelihood of rescue,” said the incumbent European commissioner for justice and home affairs, Cecilia Malmström, in early September.

The issue of costs for maintaining the mission was ultimately seen as a welcome opportunity to reduce the rescuing of sea-stranded refugees to a minimum. First, the Italian government declared it no longer wanted to be the sole financier of the monthly €9 million for Mare Nostrum, urging that the European Frontex border agency should take over the operation instead. Responding to this, Frontex argued it had neither the funds nor the material resources to do so.

This is an absurd claim. The member states of the European Union spend billions of euros on wars in the Middle East and Africa. Satellite and drone-based surveillance of the entire Mediterranean will swallow an additional €340 million in the next few years. In addition, the EU partly reimburses its member states for the costs of shielding themselves from refugees. From 2007 to 2013, Italy alone received about €250 million for border management and €45 million for deportations.

In fact, the issue is not about a lack of funds, but the

enforced exclusion of refugees—even at the cost of higher numbers of drowned victims. What was finally agreed upon, therefore, was a stripped-down face-saving operation that will have neither the finance, nor the range of participating ships, aircraft and helicopters, nor an area of coverage even remotely sufficient to replace the Mare Nostrum mission.

According to the recommendations in a draft paper prepared by Frontex and dated August 28, 2014, the proposed joint operation, Triton, will deploy two surveillance aircraft and a few coast guard boats in Italian coastal waters. Frontex estimated monthly operational costs amounting to €2.8 million, a sum lagging far behind the €9 million required each month for Mare Nostrum. The draft paper states that Frontex should assume only border guard duties, and the scope and cost of Mare Nostrum are “far beyond the capabilities of Frontex”.

The consequences of the cutbacks are then listed with astounding indifference. The paper states: “It must be stressed that the withdrawal of naval forces from the sea area near the Libyan coast ... will probably lead to a higher number of deaths.”

This is not only considered acceptable—it is ultimately even intended. Frontex expects that reducing the naval surveillance will mean that “significantly fewer migrants will attempt to cross the Mediterranean in bad weather and prices for the crossings will rise.” The number of refugees would thus decline to “the level of previous years”.

These inhuman and cynical arguments are intended to distract attention from the real reasons for the growing number of refugees. In fact, it is the EU-supported wars in Syria, Mali, Libya, and Sudan, as well as Israel’s offensive against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, that have created the conditions driving millions of people to seek refuge beyond their own countries.

The unscrupulous people smugglers, who base their dirty business on the misery of these refugees, have not emerged because of existing rescue operations provided by the EU or its member states. Rather, their proliferation is due to the systematic sealing-off of the European Union. It is now impossible for refugees to legally enter Europe. They are forced by the EU to take ever more dangerous routes across the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean is already the world’s most dangerous zone for refugees. The International

Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that some 40,000 refugees worldwide have died while fleeing since 2000. More than half of them, about 25,000 people, drowned in the Mediterranean. So far, 3,072 have drowned this year alone. According to IOM, experts assume that the actual number is three times higher, because the world never learns about the most of the deaths.

The danger of dying during the crossing will now be increased in order to keep refugee numbers low. On September 9, just when a refugee boat sank off Malta and 500 refugees lost their lives, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière wrote a letter to EU Commissioner Cecilia Malmström. In coordination with his counterparts in France, Britain, Spain, and Poland, he called for the “implementation of priority measures” as a “response to migration issues”.

Among his central demands are the tightening of border controls and stringent enforcement of deportations. In addition, he presses for the smashing of organized refugee smuggling and closer cooperation with police authorities in the transit of countries of northern Africa.

The measures demanded threaten the lives of the hundreds of thousands of refugees, often struggling to survive for years under catastrophic conditions in makeshift tent camps in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco. The situation for refugees there is already harrowing. The police in Tunisia and Morocco—virtually on behalf of the EU—conduct regular raids on the camps, often setting fire to the refugees’ entire measly belongings. Refugees are maltreated and beaten by thugs of the Moroccan police under the very eyes of the Spanish Guardia Civil in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco.

By consciously refusing to undertake any rescue measures in the Mediterranean at all and thereby accommodate and provide for a few hundred thousand refugees, the EU reveals its true colours. It is prepared to let people drown rather than allow them to pass through the gates of “fortress Europe”.



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