

European Union steps up repressive measures against refugees

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A special summit of European heads of state and government held in Brussels on April 23 agreed a packet of measures to further repel the flow of refugees. The meeting was in response to the disasters in the Mediterranean, where within a week at least 1,200 refugees were drowned. The implementation of the decisions began immediately following the summit.

The European Commission is due to present a roadmap later this week for the period up to June. At the diplomatic level, Federica Mogherini, the EU foreign policy chief, has begun to call for a European military intervention in Libya.

Since the detection and destruction of smugglers' boats off the Libyan coast, as decided by the summit, runs contrary to international law, Mogherini tried to gain support in the Security Council this week for a resolution agreeing to military intervention in North Africa. She also met with US Secretary of State John Kerry to agree further action.

French President François Hollande has said he would introduce a resolution in the Security Council authorizing the destruction of ships by military means, and would talk about it with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Hollande and Putin met the day after the EU summit in Yerevan, at the commemoration of the massacre of Armenians a century ago.

Since the approval of the Russian and Chinese governments is uncertain regarding a UN Security Council resolution, Mogherini is working on several fronts. In addition to a Security Council resolution, a request by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to the EU would also be an option. It was in this way that the Atalanta mission was legitimized by the United Nations in 2008, through which European warships hunt down pirate boats off the Horn of Africa.

On Monday, Mogherini and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi met with Ban Ki-moon on the helicopter

carrier San Giusto off Sicily to demonstrate to him the need for military intervention.

But the UN general secretary seemed unimpressed. Ban described the Mediterranean as a “sea of tears and misery”, but did not support the planned hunt for smugglers' boats. “The destruction of boats is not an appropriate measure. There is no military solution to the tragedy in the Mediterranean,” he told the newspaper *La Stampa*.

If the efforts at the UN fail, a third option remains for Mogherini. “If the UN approach doesn't work, we need to find something else,” an EU diplomat told online magazine *Euobserver*. “All it takes is a little time.”

This refers to direct collaboration with the Libyan government. Such action is difficult, however, as the country is beset by feuding among two rival governments and dozens of militias following the NATO military intervention. The EU is therefore seeking to install a compliant national unity government that will give the green light for a military intervention.

The Libyan Dawn government in Tripoli, which is not recognized by the EU, announced that it would take any military intervention to destroy boats as a declaration of war and would not tolerate it. Even General Khalifa Haftar, the army chief from the government in Tobruk, recognized by the EU, told US cable network CNN last weekend that he would “never cooperate” with an EU military operation. This would be an “unwise decision”, he said, as “legitimate Libyan representation” had “not been consulted”.

The “international police operation” plan, as Matteo Renzi likes to call it, to deploy warships on the Libyan coast carries the risk of a bloody colonial war.

The militarization of the anti-refugee measures of the European Union does not stop at the Libyan coast. The EU summit has significantly extended the 10-point plan prepared earlier by the interior and foreign ministers.

Under the heading “Preventing irregular migration flows”, it says the EU is pledged “among other things, to step up support for Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Mali and Niger in monitoring and controlling their land borders”. According to the plan, this should be done using the existing European military operations in the region. European soldiers should therefore intercept migrants in the interior of Africa. The mass deaths of refugees are being exploited to pursue geo-strategic objectives.

Two employees of the *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* think tank underlined this in an article for *Zeit Online*, which also calls for an intervention in Syria. It was a humanitarian imperative that the EU and its member states “do not shy away from also intervening in conflicts, such as in Syria”, they write. “A military operation in the Mediterranean may reduce migratory pressure on the EU’s external borders. However, only a comprehensive foreign policy commitment in Europe can help refugees.”

In Africa, the EU is also planning the construction of detention centres for refugees. The Italian government has already begun this in Niger, an important transit country on the way to the Mediterranean coast. Who gets the opportunity to travel on to Europe will be determined at the camps. For all others there is just a return ticket to their country of origin.

Another camp is planned in Tunisia, where in 2012, with UNHCR support, a camp was built near Choucha for several thousand refugees who were stranded there for more than 18 months under inhumane conditions, without adequate food and sanitation. The German government finally accepted 195 migrants, while the rest were left to fend for themselves.

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Such detention camps are now supported by the German government’s immigration commissioner, Aydan Özuguz (Social Democratic Party), who cynically praised the camps as “welcome centres” in North Africa.

In order to make the measures to repel refugees more effective locally, the European Union wants to send more “liaison officers” to North Africa in the future. “Liaison officers” is a code word for direct police and intelligence collaboration. The European Union pays its neighbouring countries hundreds of millions of euros for the construction of prisons and simultaneously takes on the training and supervision of the local security forces. For example, thousands of refugees sit in prisons in Libya that have been funded by the EU. It is no different in Ukraine and Tunisia.

The collaboration of the European border agency Frontex with the Moroccan and Spanish security forces on the border of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla is particularly brutal. Refugees who try to get over the metres-high fences bristling with razor sharp blades are beaten by thugs. Illegal refugee camps are regularly bulldozed and the few belongings of the refugees burned.

The decision adopted by the EU summit tripling the resources for the Triton and Poseidon missions is not about rescuing refugees, but stopping them getting anywhere near Europe. Both missions will continue to work under the mandate of Frontex. They do not actively look for ships in distress and have no means of saving hundreds of refugees. Rescue measures are still left to merchant ships, which are not equipped to carry them out.

An initial list of resources EU members are providing for Frontex includes thermal imaging surveillance vehicles, liaison officers, coast guard boats, helicopters, surveillance aircraft and warships—all means of stopping refugees coming, not rescuing them.

Secretly, the EU summit also dropped the decision to take on 5,000 refugees as part of a resettlement programme. There was no readiness to accept even this ridiculously small number.

At the same time, the EU is further sealing off its land borders in Southeast Europe. In Bulgaria, the existing 33 kilometre-long border fence will be extended by 82 kilometres. Cameras that see up to 15 kilometres deep into Turkish territory can already register every move. Bulgarian border guards act with extreme ruthlessness against refugees. In early March, Iraqi refugees were mistreated so badly that they died shortly afterwards from hypothermia.

Collaboration with Turkey, which currently hosts more than 1.8 million refugees from Syria and Iraq, will be expanded, according to the EU leaders. The country should prevent refugees coming to Europe, they said, even though the conditions in the Turkish refugee camps are intolerable.



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