

European Union squabbles over refugee quotas

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The refugee question has once again revealed the true nature of the European Union. While military intervention on the coast of Libya to destroy refugee boats is welcomed by all member states, the question of accepting refugees has unleashed a fierce dispute inside the EU.

On Wednesday, the EU Commission presented an “immigration agenda,” which, among other things, foresees 40,000 refugees from Italy and Greece being dispersed to other EU countries over the next two years under a quota system. In addition, 20,000 Syrians from refugee camps outside Europe would also be settled in the EU.

The EU Commission created distribution quotas taking into account the respective population, gross domestic product, unemployment rate and number of refugees already recorded. Accordingly, Germany would take most of the refugees (around 18 percent), followed by France and Spain. However, the UK, Ireland and Denmark are excluded from the quota system, having agreed arrangements with the European Union some years ago freeing them from participation in such joint actions.

The basis for the EU Commission proposal is Article 78 (3) of the Lisbon Treaty, which provides for the resettlement of refugees within the European Union if individual member states face “a sudden influx of third country nationals in need.” The EU Commission has announced that it will pay 6,000 euros from an emergency pot to the host country for each resettled refugee. But despite this miserable haggling over refugees, a sharp conflict between the EU member states has broken out over the quota system.

Even before the plans were presented to the public, there was fierce opposition to the proposals. British Home Secretary Theresa May said beforehand that the UK would not under any circumstances participate in a quota system for distributing refugees. Last weekend, French President François Hollande said, “It’s out of the question

to have immigrant quotas because we have rules on border checks and policies for overseeing immigration.”

He was repeating statements made by the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who rejected the planned quota system with openly xenophobic arguments, calling it a “proposal bordering on madness.” Appealing to nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments, Orban stated, “Europe must remain the continent of Europeans, and Hungary the country of Hungarians.”

Also opposing the proposed quota system are the governments of Spain, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia. Those speaking in favour are those states that have so far taken the largest share of refugees, or because of their location at the external border of the EU have been most affected by the refugee influx.

The quota system is a bureaucratic monstrosity that enforces the dispersal of traumatized refugees like general cargo across the continent, in some cases transporting them to countries where there is no functioning asylum system, where they are locked up in camps or have to live on the street without any support. Of course, this not the reason why the quota system is being rejected by European governments.

Although the EU Commission proposal only concerns refugees coming from Syria and Eritrea, whose asylum recognition rate in the EU is more than 75 percent, they are being denounced as “economic refugees.”

For example, instead of a quota system, Hollande demanded that all “economic refugees” be immediately deported. He said, “People who come because they think that Europe is a prosperous continent, even when they are not hired by companies...must be escorted back, that’s the rule.”

British Home Secretary Theresa May employed similar reasoning, urging that refugee boats should not even be allowed to reach Europe, but sent back to safe landing

sites in North Africa. The Hungarian, Polish and Spanish governments justified their refusal to accept refugees, saying that they were “economic migrants.”

In reality, the growing number of refugees is a direct result of the military and political interventions of the European powers and the United States in the Middle East and North Africa. The Iraq war, the bombing of Libya, the fomenting of civil wars in Syria, Yemen and other countries, and the arming of Islamist groups by the Western powers and their regional allies have destroyed whole societies and driven millions to flee their homes.

In the last 18 months alone, more than 5,000 refugees have drowned or died of hunger or thirst in a desperate attempt to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. In the first four months of this year, 26,000 refugees have reached Italy and 28,000 have reached Greece. There is no functioning intake system for asylum seekers in both countries. Refugees are often left to fend for themselves and face being homeless on the street.

At the same time, refugees who drowned in the Mediterranean or live in limbo on the edges of Europe are used as justification for further military interventions by the European Union. As fierce as the dispute is over their intake and distribution of refugees, even greater is the consensus on military action off the coast of Libya.

For the European governments, it is not a question of protecting migrants from unscrupulous people smugglers, as military interventions are officially justified. Rather, refugees should be apprehended far away from the coasts and borders of Europe, and access to the resource-rich regions of Africa secured. How far the EU intends to go is clear from official documents published by Statewatch and Wikileaks last week.

An internal EU paper describes in detail the four phases of the planned operation. According to military intelligence, refugee boats should first be taken into international waters and in a second phase of the operation, destroyed. In a third phase, if possible with a UN mandate or the agreement of the Libyan government in Tobruk, operations could also be conducted on land. Special Forces would “conduct operations along the coast, in harbours or against smugglers’ ships at anchor before they are used.” Fuel depots and other facilities used by the smugglers and traffickers are to be destroyed. What remains unclear is whether the EU will also conduct these actions without a mandate if necessary.

The EU Commission does not fail to point out that “operations against smugglers in the presence of migrants pose a high risk of collateral damage” and could mean the

loss of human lives. They clearly accept that military action can lead to numerous deaths. In Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and in the global drone war conducted by the United States, so-called “precision operations” against infrastructure targets have led to massive “collateral damage” among the civilian population.

The EU Commission is already preparing for such an eventuality. A report by the EU Military Council proposes an “information strategy” that minimises “the EU’s reputational loss in case of loss of human life being ascribed to the EU mission.” To this end, it should be made clear from the beginning that “the focus is [not] to rescue migrants at sea but that the aim of the operation is to disrupt the migrant-smuggling business model.”

The Military Council also proposes a massive operation on land, whose tasks include “seizure of vessels...neutralisation of smugglers’ vessels and assets...hostage rescue...temporary detention of those posing a threat to the force or suspected of crimes.”

The document of the Military Council also points out that the success of the entire mission is expected to be very low if a UN mandate is absent for military operations on the Libyan coast and it applies only to phases one and two—monitoring and military surveillance and the confiscation and destruction of boats on the high seas.

On the other hand, a successful mission, according to the document, could not exclude that migration movements are displaced to the western and eastern Mediterranean. An extension of the action to Tunisia and Egypt, and close cooperation with the local military, was therefore advisable. In plain language, this means nothing other than that the European Union is seeking to turn all of North Africa into a war zone.



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