

EU dispute over refugees intensifies

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18 June 2015

The question of the distribution of a few tens of thousands of refugees is increasingly becoming the subject of a bitter dispute between European Union member states. Some are now threatening to end the Schengen Agreement and its associated freedom of movement within the EU, and to reintroduce border controls.

As expected, at their meeting on Tuesday, EU interior ministers could not agree on a quota system for the distribution of 40,000 refugees over the next two years. The Eastern European countries, as well as Spain and Portugal, opposed the proposal of the European Commission to distribute refugees across the entire EU using a binding quota system. In all probability, only a voluntary redistribution will be decided at the European Council of heads of state and government next week.

A fixed allocation formula would completely ignore the interests of refugees to seek protection where they have relatives or other social links. But that is not the reason for the opposition to refugee quotas. Rather, the opponents of such a system are against taking any additional refugees at all. The British Home Secretary Theresa May, who vehemently rejects a redistribution of refugees, expressed this attitude in a nutshell when she said, “We must fight against the smugglers, and we need to bring the people back to North Africa and to their home countries.”

At the same time the proponents of the EU Commission’s plan are acting out of pure self-interest. For example, Italy, France and Greece would have to take fewer refugees under the quota system.

The meeting of EU interior ministers was preceded by sharp verbal exchanges and the imposition of stricter controls at the Italian border. In an interview with *Corriere della Sera*, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi called the proposal to redistribute only 24,000 refugees from Italy and 16,000 refugees from Greece to other EU countries in the next two years “a provocation.”

He also said, “If Europe chooses solidarity, good. If it does not, we have plan B ready. But it would first and foremost hurt Europe.”

Renzi did not want to explain the nature of this plan B, but Interior Minister Angelino Alfano said on television channel Sky TG24, “I want to say with great clarity: Kids, either we do equal distribution of migrants in Europe, or we organize refugee camps in Libya, or we organize a serious policy of repatriation. I cannot reveal our plan B but if Europe is not supportive, it will find itself dealing with a different Italy. We will not accept a selfish Europe.”

Also under discussion is the establishment of so-called “hotspots.” This refers to holding centres in Italy, where the European border agency Frontex can fast-track asylum applications and deport rejected refugees immediately under its

own authority. To this end, Frontex would be provided with an additional mandate and be able to deport refugees itself.

In recent days, the situation on the Italian-French border at Ventimiglia-Menton has worsened dramatically. Hundreds of refugees are stranded there who want to leave Italy to join relatives in France, Holland and Belgium. But French gendarmes with military equipment are stationed on the border, and have so far stopped more than a thousand refugees wanting to travel. On Tuesday the Italian police stormed the refugee camp, chased the migrants and brought them to the Ventimiglia railway station to send them away.

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve declared mendaciously that there was no blockade of the border, but added, “When migrants arrive in France that have been through Italy and registered there, the European law applies and that means they must be returned to Italy.”

He was referring to the Dublin Agreement, according to which the first country of refuge is responsible for processing an asylum application. This is problematic for refugees, because there are completely different chances of being granted asylum in the various EU states and living conditions sometimes differ dramatically. Even if they receive asylum status, they are excluded from free movement within Europe and must remain in the country that granted them protection. Otherwise they will be treated as illegal migrants and criminalized.

The governments of other EU countries suspect the Italian authorities have not registered all refugees for quite some time, allowing them to continue their travel onward. In response, they have massively tightened up controls in border regions. In the first months of this year, France has deported more than 6,000 refugees back to Italy.

The German government used the G7 summit in Bavaria to suspend the Schengen Agreement. From May 26 on, Germany has not only controlled border crossings into Bavaria, but also carried out passport inspections in Rhineland Palatinate, Baden-Württemberg and at major airports. The federal police recorded a total of 10,555 violations of the right of residence. More than 3,500 people were taken into custody. The German Federal Police are also active on Italian territory, where they undertake passport controls on trains and the Brenner motorway.

German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière openly threatened to abolish the freedom to travel in Europe because of the refugee issue. He did not want to “introduce systematic border controls again,” he said on the fringes of the interior ministers meeting on Tuesday. However, if countries did not fulfil their obligations under the European asylum law, this could lead to the “end of free

movement in Europe. Everyone should be aware of this danger.” In this way, de Maizière is pushing responsibility onto the Mediterranean countries, in particular the Italian and Greek authorities.

Outwardly, the German government likes to appear generous regarding the refugee issue, but it exerts massive pressure in negotiations with its European partners. In an interview with broadcaster Deutschlandfunk, Elias Bierdel of the organisation Borderline Europe said it was no accident that the German government was the “taskmaster of Fortress Europe.” He had experienced German politicians boasting to him “that they have built the fortress.”

The inhumane, catastrophic conditions in the hopelessly overcrowded reception centres and refugee camps in Italy and Greece are well known. Since the beginning of the year, nearly 60,000 refugees have come to Italy from across the Mediterranean.

In addition, thousands of refugees are stranded at railway stations in Milan and Rome, because their onward travel north is being blocked. At Rome’s Tiburtina railway station, where around 800 people, including women with small children, camp under bridges, there were scenes reminiscent of a hunt as Italian policemen tried to capture refugees in order to carry out ID checks.

In Greece, the situation for refugees has further worsened. Since the Greek government has largely stopped patrols in the Aegean for lack of money, refugees are increasingly using the route via Turkey and Greece to reach Europe. Here, 52,000 refugees have arrived, more than eight times as many as in the same period last year. Almost half have been taken to a refugee camp on the island of Lesbos.

But there are repeated clashes due to overcrowding. Last weekend, the police intervened and mercilessly beat refugees who were fighting. As a result, there was a march of refugees to the port of Mytilene to protest against the unacceptable conditions in the camp, where there is no electricity and the sanitary conditions stink to high heaven. The refugees demanded that their asylum applications be processed and that they be granted a regular residence permit. “It’s not a camp. It’s a disaster. It’s a zoo,” Sameer, an Iraqi refugee who had arrived three days earlier on Lesbos, told the press.

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As much as the European governments are at loggerheads on the issue of accepting refugees, in measures to repulse refugees they all pull together. They agreed on an EU directive to tighten up measures for taking refugees fingerprints for registration purposes. This can be done against the will of the refugee, forcibly.

The directive reads: “If the data subject refuses to cooperate quietly it is suggested officials trained in the proportionate use of coercion may apply the minimum level of coercion required.”

This also applies explicitly to pregnant women and children. Resistance to having fingerprints taken means refugees face detention, deportation and a re-entry ban of five years. This is the EU’s welcome to refugees who have escaped prison, torture and war in their home countries.

What the EU means by stronger cooperation with countries of origin and transit in Africa was revealed when Britain’s *Guardian*

reported on secret diplomacy by Italy, the UK and Norway with the government in Eritrea. The EU reportedly offered the regime the lifting of economic sanctions and a dramatic increase in aid if it enforced stricter controls on its borders.

The *Guardian* quoted a United Nations staffer with the words: “Key European figures have been heading to Asmara and it’s clear there is a real political will to solve the migrant crisis by getting the borders shut from the Eritrean side--it’s a very dangerous tactic.”

There is concern that Eritrea will reintroduce the order to open fire at the border. Following German reunification in 1990, leading functionaries of the former East German regime were brought to trial for shooting those attempting to flee across the intra-German border; under pressure from the EU, Eritrea is now to adopt such a practice.

The brutal character of the EU becomes ever clearer over the refugee issue. According to a recent report by Amnesty International, there are more than 50 million people fleeing their homeland worldwide, more than at any time since the end of World War II. But in Europe, where last year a mere 600,000 people presented an asylum application--little more than one percent of the world’s refugees--the issue of accepting a few thousand additional refugees has plunged the EU into a crisis.

The European powers are themselves responsible for the dramatic increase in refugee movements. They have participated in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya, which have plunged entire societies into chaos and forced them to flee.

Nearly 2,000 people have lost their lives this year alone trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe to seek protection and a better life. European governments have responded by bolstering the continent’s borders. They would rather allow refugees to drown than offer them a safe asylum.



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