

EU begins military intervention in Mediterranean

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At their meeting in Luxembourg on Monday, European Union (EU) foreign ministers agreed to the commencement of the EUNAVFOR Med mission against so-called people smugglers in the Mediterranean Sea. The programme plans to target refugee boats and involves a massive expansion of intelligence and police powers.

The first phase of the operation is to begin within days. It involves intelligence agency spying on alleged smuggling organisations and networks in North Africa, particularly Libya.

Agents are to locate targets and identify boats and suspected masterminds, before forwarding this data to the command centre. With this information, refugee boats will be intercepted, confiscated and destroyed on the high seas in the second phase of the operation. The third stage allegedly involves the deployment of Predator drones, Tornado fighter jets and military divers on the coast and in Libyan ports.

The military operation is a response to the tragic shipwrecks off the Italian island of Lampedusa earlier this year, in which over 1,200 refugees drowned in a matter of days, attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. It is indicative of the character of the EU that it has responded to the humanitarian catastrophe of mass deaths by stepping up the militarisation of the Mediterranean. With the state funding of EUNAVFOR Med, the EU is officially declaring war on refugees.

A total of ten EU member states are participating in the operation, providing five warships, two submarines, drones, fighter jets and helicopters. The fleet will be led by the Italian aircraft carrier Cavour, and the operation is commanded by Italian rear admiral Enrico Credendino.

The EU's foreign affairs representative, Federica Mogherini, said after the EU foreign ministers' meeting, "The EU has never taken the issue of migration as seriously as we are doing now." She could just as well have said that the EU had never done so much to prevent

refugees from reaching Europe.

The latest annual report of the UN agency for refugees finds nearly 60 million refugees worldwide. More than half of these are children. But instead of accepting a small fraction of this total, the EU seals its borders and is sending an armada of warships against them.

German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told journalists that the issue was to "get an overview of the flow of refugees, where they are coming from and who possibly are the decisive actors."

In reality, he knows this very well. It was mainly the European powers in alliance with US imperialism which led wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, triggered a horrendous civil war in Syria, and left chaos in Libya, unleashing a tidal wave of victims attempting to flee. Their neocolonial policies of exploitation in Africa are forcing additional hundreds of thousands to leave their countries of origin in an effort to secure the survival of their families in Europe.

The EU passes over these facts without a word. Mogherini said, "With this operation, we are targeting the business model of those who benefit from the misery of migrants." The real target was not refugees, she claimed, but "those who are making money on their lives and too often on their deaths." Rather than save refugees at sea and admit them into Europe, the EU has launched a struggle against alleged organised smuggling networks. The refugees are to be kept out at all costs.

There is a dishonest confusion of cause and effect in this policy. The unscrupulous smugglers are the only means for refugees to bypass the walls of the impregnable fortress Europe. The multi-million-euro smuggling business is the direct result of the policy of sealing the EU's borders ever more tightly.

At the same time EU powers are using the military operation to strengthen and coordinate their intelligence agencies. The official justification for the deployment of

intelligence agencies and the military in the first phase is more than questionable, because the information to be collected on methods of work, routes, business model and financial transactions of the smuggler organisations is already captured by the Eurosur surveillance scheme.

In truth, under cover of the surveillance of alleged smuggler networks, the EU is working to integrate various security agencies. EUNAVFOR Med is not merely a naval exercise in the Mediterranean, but involves the closer integration of the intelligence agencies, military, police and the EU border agency Frontex.

French President François Hollande agreed to the participation of French intelligence in a joint operation with Italy and Britain. An intelligence agency base is to be constructed on Sicily tasked with monitoring smuggler networks, under the control of the European police authority Europol. Britain's National Crime Agency is sending six agents. Britain has also announced the sending of the warship HMS Enterprise to the Mediterranean, with a team of agents from GCHQ.

Already in March, the Joint Operations Team Mare (JOT Mare) was established, including Germany's federal crime agency (BKA). This is an operational group of Europol, which is to investigate smuggler networks through intelligence-gathering activities and collaborate closely with Frontex.

According to the Geneva Convention on Refugees, police authorities are supposed to protect refugees. In order to integrate police into the military operation in spite of this, a sleight of hand has been used. The smuggling of refugees across the Mediterranean was recently declared, in spite of knowledge to the contrary, to be "organised crime."

The claim is that organised criminals compel refugees to travel across the Mediterranean to Europe. But nothing could be further from the truth. The British-based *Guardian* quoted the researcher Tuesday Reitano, who is currently working on an OECD (Organisation for Co-operation and Development) project on refugees, saying, "There are few, if any, 'kingpins' or formal criminal networks at play that would significantly impact the flow if removed."

But since the EU has declared the smuggling of refugees to be organised crime, data can be collected and evaluated by Europol, something Frontex would not be allowed to do. In addition, the Eurodac database for police investigations was opened. The fingerprints of refugees and a vast amount of other information are saved there.

The close integration of the civil European authorities

like Frontex, Europol and Eurojust with the military raises fundamental legal issues. In Germany, for example, there is a constitutional guarantee of the separation of the police and military. Since, from the standpoint of international law, the smuggling of refugees is a private criminal act, it can only be combatted through police investigation. The participation of the German army in the operation in the Mediterranean and the merging of the police, intelligence agencies and military are thus a violation of German basic law.

The planned phases two and three of the EU military mission carry "a high risk of collateral damage and the loss of human life," the EU Commission admitted when the plans for EUNAVFOR were presented.

A high-ranking Italian military official told EUObserver that the entire operation would be condemned to failure if one did not explicitly accept the possibility that refugees would die. He stated, "When it comes to destroying smugglers' boats, they'll simply put migrants on them, even when they're at anchor, to act as human shields." Despite this, EU governments are sticking firmly to the criminal plan of using warships, fighter jets and drones to destroy smugglers' boats.

The refugee defence organisation ProAsyl considers the operation to be in violation of international law, because the UN mandate being sought by the EU to give it a blank check for its military operation requires, according to article 39 of the UN charter, that there be a threat to peace.

ProAsyl wrote: "The EU foreign affairs representative has constructed this threat by suggesting that the high levels of refugees are supposedly destabilising EU states. This argument cannot be accepted under international law. The acceptance of refugees is an obligation under international law and not a danger to peace."



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