

Casualties of “Fortress Europe”: Refugees dead on land and sea

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The death toll among desperate refugees fleeing war zones in the Middle East and Africa continues to mount, with horrifying scenes that go beyond anything seen in Europe since World War II.

The vast majority of these refugees are seeking to escape violence unleashed on their homes and families by the imperialist powers, above all the United States, with its accomplices including France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands.

Once they escape their home countries, including Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and various countries in east and west Africa, the refugees encounter still more violence at every step: from police and border guards, from smugglers like those who asphyxiated refugees in the hold of a ship and the van of a truck, and from neo-Nazi mobs in Saxony, who were permitted to attack them by German police.

More than 300,000 have already crossed the Mediterranean Sea this year, more than in all of 2014, according to UN and EU figures. This includes an estimated 180,000 making the short crossing from the Turkish mainland to Greek offshore islands, then trekking through Greece, Macedonia and Serbia to Hungary, and from there throughout the EU.

The UN forecast this week that 3,000 migrants a day were passing through the Balkans by this land route—an annual rate of more than one million people, the bulk of them fleeing the civil war in Syria, fomented by Washington and fueled by weapons supplied by US allies like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

Another 100,000 or more have made the even more dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy, in the course of which at least 2,500 have already lost their lives this year. This toll increased by another 250 Thursday night and Friday morning, as two more ships capsized off the Libyan coast.

At least 150 bodies have been recovered from the twin

disasters, involving a small dinghy with perhaps 100 people aboard, and a larger fishing boat loaded with more than 400 people. The Libyan Red Crescent told UN officials Friday that they did not have enough body bags for all the victims of the second, larger sinking.

Most of the victims on the fishing boat had been locked in the ship’s hold when it sank shortly after leaving the port city of Zuwarah, leaving them no escape. About 100 people were rescued alive, and the search was going on for additional bodies among those missing in the sea. The migrants were mainly Africans, officials said.

The International Organization for Migration said that 4,400 migrants were rescued from the Mediterranean near Sicily August 22-23, making it one of the busiest weekends for rescue operations this year.

The gruesome tragedy on the A4 motorway between Budapest and Vienna showed the deadly dangers of the supposedly safer land route for refugees. In an abandoned refrigerated truck lay 71 dead people, 59 men, eight women and four children; a girl who was not yet two years old, and three boys, ages between eight and ten years.

An Austrian employee of the motorway company Asfinag discovered the parked truck on Thursday when attending a breakdown near Lake Neusiedl; decomposition fluids were already dripping from the vehicle. The police had the truck towed to a veterinary border service at Nickelsdorf on the Hungarian border, where police investigators retrieved the dead and examined the vehicle before the corpses were taken to the coroner’s office in Vienna.

The cause of death is thought to have been asphyxiation. The truck’s refrigerator compartment, meant for poultry meat, had no fresh air openings. Dents on the side of the vehicle point to what horrific scenes must have occurred in the interior, as the refugees desperately tried to escape the agonizing suffocation.

On Friday, the Hungarian police arrested four people, three Bulgarians and a Hungarian as the owners and drivers of the truck, after surveillance footage at several tollbooths was analyzed. Since then, the media and politicians have indulged in tirades against the criminal traffickers. According to estimates, each of the 71 refugees had to pay up to a thousand euros for the ride.

People trafficking is only such a lucrative business because the EU member states have sealed up their borders so tightly. They are trying to prevent people who are fleeing war and terror from crossing the borders with fences and razor sharp barbed wire, with rigid police controls and attack dogs.

“Whoever really wanted to put a stop to traffickers would deprive them of the basis of their business, i.e. open up Europe’s borders to refugees,” Florian Hassel wrote quite rightly in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. “European politicians,” he added, “are not ready to do this.”

The corpse-filled van was discovered while the Western Balkans Summit was taking place a few miles away at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna. Chancellor Angela Merkel, Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini met with the leaders of six Balkan countries. The aim of the gathering was to agree on better control over the routes taken by refugees and to further fortify the EU’s external borders.

Merkel responded to the news of the tragedy by saying that one should approach the subject of migration “quickly and in the European spirit, that is, in the spirit of solidarity.” How this works in practice can be seen by the fact that her government now wants to declare Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania safe countries of origin in order to more rapidly deport people coming to Germany from these countries.

This had been demanded by German Interior Minister de Maiziere only two days previously. He also wants to speed up the deportation of refugees, cut benefits and replace cash in kind support to deter refugees from coming to Germany.

In Austria, the ruling coalition of Social Democrats and Conservatives is also moving harshly against refugees. Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner responded to the recent refugee crisis by demanding even more restrictive border controls and that traffickers be punished even more stringently.

The night before on the newscast “Zeit im Bild,” Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz had called for a tightening of asylum policy, “much more intensive border controls” and “rapid proceedings” for asylum seekers. He

cited Hungary, which is building a four-metre-high fence along its entire 109-mile southern border, as a model, and threatened that other EU members, “not only the Hungarians, but also perhaps we [will] take measures which are not so pleasing.”

A five-point plan presented by the Austrian government in Vienna also includes the use of force to combat criminal gangs and IS forces in the Middle East. The EU had already presented plans in May that provide for a military intervention in Libya. This would amount to a further expansion of the wars that are the main reason millions of people have been forced to flee.

The attitude of the imperialist powers toward the Syrian people is particularly cynical. For four years, they have cited the killing of Syrians by the government of President Bashar al-Assad as the reason for a stepped-up campaign of subversion and violence to overthrow the Assad regime. Yet, when millions of Syrians flee the resulting killing field, they are demonized as invaders threatening the jobs and welfare of the European population, who must be deported or walled off.

The 71 refugees who were found dead in Austria were likely from Syria, as a Syrian travel document was reportedly found among the bodies. This means that they had completed an arduous journey of 3,500 kilometres. An increasing number of Syrians are fleeing to Turkey and from there travel via the Balkan route and over the Aegean to Western Europe, since the North Africa-Italy route has proven to be extremely dangerous and the Mediterranean has increasingly become a mass grave.



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