

The refugee tragedy and the European Union: The balance sheet for 2015

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The barbaric treatment meted out to refugees fleeing to Europe has revealed before the whole world the inhumane and barbaric nature of the European Union. The EU responded to the hundreds of thousands of desperate people trying to escape the war-ravaged regions of the Middle East and North Africa or the social misery of the Balkans by sealing off the EU's external borders, erecting barbed wire fences, locking up refugees in detention centres and carrying out mass deportations.

The mistreatment of refugees has assumed proportions that would have been unthinkable for many people twelve months ago. In broad sections of the population, indignation and sympathy were aroused by the images of the bodies washed ashore after drowning in the Mediterranean; refugees living in inhuman hygienic conditions in makeshift tent camps; border guards and soldiers forcing refugees back with batons, rubber bullets and tear gas; refugees, like the prisoners of Nazi concentration camps, with numbers written on their forearms; and families who have had to travel hundreds of kilometres on foot with small children.

In contrast to the humane sentiments of Europe's workers and young people, the governments of European countries have engaged in a sordid competition to see who could most effectively deter refugees or push them into neighbouring countries as soon as possible. In the Schengen area, national barriers were re-imposed and border controls introduced to drive refugees away. The surge of nationalism and the debate about refugee quotas have brought the sharp conflicts of interest within the European Union to the fore and threaten to blow it apart.

The utter hypocrisy of the European Union in dealing with refugees was put on display in October 2013, when a refugee boat capsized off the Italian island of Lampedusa and 366 people were sent to their deaths. The leaders of the European Union gathered by their coffins and the EU Commission President declared, "We do not accept that thousands die at Europe's borders."

In the 27 months since then, according to official figures, more than 7,000 refugees have lost their lives at the gates of Europe. According to estimates by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 3,771 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean last year, up from 3,279 in 2014. Now, the Aegean has increasingly become a death trap for migrants. In 2014, only four drowned refugees were registered there, in 2015 it was 805.

The Mediterranean was again the deadliest region in the world for refugees last year. Of 5,350 migrant deaths worldwide, 70 percent were in the Mediterranean. In addition, there were at least 138 deaths within the EU, refugees struck down by trains in Macedonia, asphyxiated in lorries on the transit route from the Balkans to Central Europe or killed in the Euro Tunnel between France and Britain.

In total, the IOM counted 1,004,356 refugees who arrived in Europe by sea, almost five times as many as the 219,000 who arrived in 2014. While the 153,052 refugees who arrived via the central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy was nearly the same as the previous year, the number of refugees arriving in Greece from Turkey via the Aegean rose tenfold to

847,084.

But this was still only a fraction of the estimated 60 million people worldwide who were forced to flee from wars, persecution and hunger. Despite the fact that the one million refugees who arrived in 2015 constitute only 0.2 percent of the total population of the European Union, the European governments have steadily intensified the repression against refugees in the course of the year.

Refugee deterrence

The German government was the first to start, unceremoniously declaring the Balkans to be "safe countries of origin," in the face of rising numbers of refugees from those countries. Initially in Bavaria and later throughout the country, special detention centres were set up in which refugees from the Balkans are detained. Their asylum applications are rejected in fast-track procedures. The perfidious idea of "safe countries of origin," which makes an individual right to asylum an absurdity, is now aggressively promoted and applied throughout the European Union.

In April last year, when within a few days more than 1,200 refugees drowned off the Italian islands of Lampedusa and Sicily, the EU did not step up rescue operations but instead established the EUNAVFOR Med military operation and sent a dozen warships into the Mediterranean. The aim of EUNAVFOR Med is to find refugee boats and sink them. In addition, EU soldiers are to march into Libyan coastal towns to take military action against suspected refugee smugglers there and destroy boats lying on the beach.

In the second half of the year, the focus of refugee deterrence shifted increasingly to the so-called Balkan route. Refugees from Syria, who were starving in the camps in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan because neither the European Union nor the United States wanted to provide sufficient funds for basic services, and who were not allowed to work and whose children could not attend school, set out in desperation for Europe.

They experienced a weeks-long ordeal on the miserable trek through the Greek islands, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary towards central Europe. Along the entire route they were continuously rounded up and regularly abused by police officers. To date, there are neither fixed humanitarian camps nor an adequate supply of food, water or adequate sanitation on the Balkan route.

European governments responded to the wave of the poor and starving as if it were a hostile invasion force. This was expressed most clearly by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. "If we give them [the refugees] the impression that they are welcome, that would be a moral defeat. We must make it clear to them: Do not come," he said in Brussels in September.

When thousands of refugees were stranded at Budapest train station and

could not move backward or forward, German Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed with her counterparts in Austria and Hungary, Werner Faymann and Viktor Orban, to allow them to continue in order to avert a complete destabilization of the Balkans and sharp tensions within the EU.

But that did not change the fact that the refugees' lives were made a living hell. Hungary erected a 3.5-metre-high barbed wire fence and declared illegal border crossings to be a criminal offence carrying one year's imprisonment. Refugees were bombarded with tear gas grenades and beaten with batons. Since then, Germany and Austria, countries of destination for most of the refugees, have sought to deter them through unbearable conditions in the reception centres and accelerated deportation procedures, and by reducing benefits.

In recent months other states have followed Hungary's example, erecting border fences and making illegal entry a criminal offence. Under pressure from the German and Austrian governments, the Balkans finally closed their borders for refugees who did not come from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan.

In addition, the European Union has put massive pressure on the Greek government to better secure the external borders and set up registration centres. These so-called "hot spots" are nothing more than concentration camps where refugees are detained and have their fingerprints taken like criminals, and are deported in summary asylum proceedings as soon as possible.

The European border protection agency Frontex was tasked with carrying out mass deportations, and had its mandate especially extended to this end. In the future, Frontex is to be used to deter refugees, even against the will of an EU member state. States such as Greece, Italy or Bulgaria would thus become quasi-protectorates of the EU.

In the last weeks of the year, the EU also pushed through the externalization of refugee deterrence, negotiating dirty deals with African dictatorships and the authoritarian regime in Turkey. While the government in Ankara has been offered three billion euros to keep refugees from entering Europe, the countries of Africa have been told that development aid will only be paid in return for cooperation in the deterrence of refugees.

The EU also does not flinch from involving the dictatorship in Eritrea, which shoots down refugees, or in Sudan, against whose President Omar al-Bashir the International Criminal Court has an outstanding arrest warrant for genocide and war crimes.

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By contrast, the EU plan to redistribute 160,000 refugees from Greece and Italy, announced with enormous fanfare, has failed utterly. To date, there has been agreement to take just 4,027 refugees, with only 272 from Eritrea and Syria actually being accepted. Particularly in the Eastern European countries, there is fierce resistance to a redistribution quota of refugees. Like the Hungarian prime minister, the new Polish government has also categorically rejected any further intake of refugees.

New repression

The first week of the new year shows that the EU intends to intensify the repression against refugees. Since the icy temperatures have halted crossings over the Aegean, and some 2,000 refugees continue to reach the Greek islands every day, the Greek coast guard is deliberately pushing back refugee boats into Turkish waters, as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported. When this resulted in a boat capsizing, 34 refugees drowned in the icy waters, their bodies washing up on the Turkish coast.

In Germany, demands in the political establishment and media are

growing louder for increased deportations, the closure of the border with Austria and a ceiling on the number of refugees admitted.

At the same time, together with the United States and other European powers, Britain and France are also aggressively seeking the intensification of the bombing of Syria. Plans for a ground invasion are in preparation, which would enormously increase the number of refugees fleeing to Europe. In addition, according to a report by *Tunisie Numérique*, the US, along with Italy, France and Britain, wants to bomb positions of the Islamic State in western Libya, which would result in another massive wave of refugees. The NATO countries are planning to counter the disastrous consequences of their military action by preventing anyone fleeing from finding safety.

The situation in Europe increasingly resembles the first half of the 20th century. In 1940, the Fourth International wrote in its manifesto against imperialist war: "The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded. The question of admitting a hundred extra refugees becomes a major problem for such a world power as the United States."

The decaying capitalist society "is striving to squeeze the Jewish people from all its pores," the manifesto continues, "seventeen million individuals out of the two billion populating the globe, that is, less than 1 percent, can no longer find a place on our planet! Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison."

The barbarous ill-treatment of refugees in "democratic" countries reveals the true face of capitalism. A society that spends hundreds of billions of euros overnight to rescue ailing banks, and in which the number of billionaires is constantly growing, is supposedly unable to take in refugees and provide them with decent conditions.

The brutal treatment of refugees is an expression of the hostility of the ruling elite towards the working class and youth throughout Europe. Their barbaric attitude towards people who are fleeing war, poverty and oppression also finds expression in the austerity measures imposed on workers and young people in Greece and other EU states.

The national and social tensions in Europe reached levels last year that can only be suppressed by authoritarian measures. The immediate targets of the border closures are refugees, but in the longer term, they are a declaration of war against the entire European working class.



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