

Europe's attack on refugees produces humanitarian catastrophe

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In the immediate aftermath of the special summit involving European Union (EU) member states and Turkey last Monday in Brussels, a ruthless policy of sealing the borders against refugees is being initiated. Since Wednesday, the Balkan route has been completely shut to refugees, Hungary has declared a state of emergency and deployed its army on the border, and Bulgaria has put its military on alert to use force against refugees.

With the agreement between the EU and Turkey, the European powers are energetically pressing ahead with the outsourcing of the deterrence of refugees, trampling on fundamental rights enshrined in international law to protect refugees. For years, the EU distanced itself from the concept of a fortress Europe. Now, the protection of the external borders has been elevated to a moral principle, while refugees are being treated like a hostile invading army and deterred by warships, barbed wire fences and soldiers.

On Tuesday, the Slovenian government declared that it would only accept people with valid travel documents. Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia followed suit, as a result of which no refugee can any longer pass through the Balkan route. EU Council President Donald Tusk noted on Wednesday on Twitter that the closure of the Balkan route was by no means a decision taken solely by the government in Ljubljana, but had been supported by all 28 EU member states.

Tusk referred to the summit's concluding statement, which said, "An end has been put to the irregular flow of migrants along the west Balkan route." He thereby exposed the false press reports claiming that German Chancellor Angela Merkel had successfully fought against the closure of the Balkan route. This was supported by an interview with Austrian Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner with Germany's *Die Welt*, in which she declared, "The closure of the Balkan route is taking place according to plan, and the clock will not be turned back."

The closure of borders in the West Balkans will have catastrophic consequences for refugees, who will now be confined to Greece. More than 14,000 refugees are now waiting to continue their journey in temporary refugee camps at Idomeni on the Greek-Macedonian border. Days of heavy rain have transformed their camp into a swamp, and the small two-man tents, in which six-member families have to suffer, are full of water. The hygienic conditions are horrific. Hundreds of refugees, including many children, are suffering from colds and diarrhoea, doctors from a hospital near Idomeni have reported.

According to the official count, 36,000 refugees are currently stuck in Greece. The country, pushed to the economic and social breaking point due to the austerity dictates of the EU, has capacity for only 25,000. According to Greece's crisis management centre, around

7,300 refugees are in emergency camps on the Greek islands, around 9,400 in Athens and more than 18,000 in camps in northern Greece.

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias expects that by the end of the month up to 150,000 refugees will be stranded in Greece. So far this year, 131,847 refugees have been registered crossing the Aegean Sea, and at least 347 have drowned during the crossing. The latest 25 died in a boat which sank practically at the same time as the talks were taking place in Brussels.

However, the mounting humanitarian crisis has been met with utter indifference by the political elite in the EU. Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz responded to a question from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* last week on whether the pictures from the camps should act as a deterrent: "I have said previously that we had to expect such pictures—even though one cannot feel good about it when one sees such pictures." But, he added, "there are only two ways. We allow the people through, or we stop them."

Deal with Turkey

The first place where they are to be stopped is in Turkey. This is at least the intention of the dirty deal made by the EU heads of government with Ankara. The details are to be finalised at another summit next week.

According to the agreement, Turkey will in the future accept the return of refugees who make it across the Aegean Sea to Greece or across the land borders with Greece or Bulgaria. In line with a "one-to-one" principle, the EU will accept a Syrian refugee registered in a camp in Turkey under a "resettlement programme" for every Syrian refugee deported. This will involve only hand-picked refugees, since it is the EU itself who will choose them.

In addition, the EU will increase its financial aid to the Turkish government from €3 billion to €6 billion, which is to be paid by 2018. In addition, Turkey is pushing for the elimination of visa requirements for its citizens to travel within the EU, as well as the opening of further chapters in negotiations to join the bloc.

After hours of talks, Tusk and German Chancellor Merkel spoke of a "breakthrough." Merkel opined that it "is a qualitatively new proposal which can help us move forward on the issue of how we combat illegality." It had been, according to Merkel, "possible to map out a perspective to return to orderly relations."

Regardless of the fact that the alleged "illegality" of the flood of refugees is the result solely of the EU's policy of sealing the borders,

which declares refugees to be “illegal immigrants,” the “orderly relations” will consist of the EU making Turkey the border guard, assuming responsibility for the dirty work of deterring refugees.

Although there are some reservations within the EU about this cynical deceit, these are related only to the question of whether the concessions demanded by Turkey are too great. The French government has expressed reservations about visa-free travel, and the Cyprus government has demanded the recognition by Turkey of the Greek-Cypriot government in Nicosia before negotiations on joining the EU can proceed.

But not a word was mentioned about how Turkey is trampling basic democratic rights underfoot. Immediately prior to the summit, the government violently brought the critical newspaper Zaman under its control, as well as the Cihan news agency. A demonstration on the occasion of International Women’s Day was brutally suppressed by the police. In the country’s east, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is conducting a bloody war against the suppressed Kurdish minority.

Already prior to the summit, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière made clear that the EU would overlook violations of human rights. “We cannot be the arbitrator on human rights for the entire world,” de Maizière told the *Passauer Neue Presse*. He was thus defending in advance the crimes and violations of law which will be committed by the EU in its attacks on refugees.

As in a bad film, where a doorman with a dubious past is made to appear even more threatening, the EU is outsourcing the deterrence of refugees to a state which employs extreme brutality against refugees and pays no attention to international norms concerning the protection of refugees.

The deputy director of the international charity Amnesty International, Gauri van Gulik, protested against the agreement, stating, “Using Turkey as a ‘safe third country’ is absurd. Many refugees still live in terrible conditions, some have been deported back to Syria and security forces have even shot at Syrians trying to cross the border.”

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu made clear during his flight back from the summit that Turkey would immediately deport the refugees taken back from Greece. “We will send non-Syrians intercepted in the Aegean Sea back to their home countries,” Davutoglu said. “We will bring the Syrians to camps.”

Turkey is currently negotiating repatriation agreements with 14 states. There can be no doubt that Turkish authorities will ruthlessly deport Afghans, Iraqis, Yemenis, Somalis and Eritreans. Refugees from the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq must have the additional fear of being pursued by Turkish security forces as “terrorists.”

Turkey has to date only ratified the Geneva refugee convention with a geographical reservation, so as to recognise only those refugees from Europe. By contrast, the 2.7 million refugees living in Turkey from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq are tolerated merely as guests. Moreover, Syrian refugees are simply turned away at the border.

But since Turkey has neither fully implemented the Geneva refugee convention nor the ban on repatriating people in search of protection, Turkey can, purely in legal terms, not be declared a “secure third country.” This would not only violate the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), but even the European Union’s own lax asylum regulations. This is the conclusion reached by a number of legal reports conducted by groups such as ProAsyl, Human Rights Watch and Statewatch.

But European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has

simply ignored such legal considerations. He was cited in Britain’s *Guardian* as saying that deporting refugees to Turkey was legal because Greece had declared Turkey to be a “safe third country.” The Greek government was compelled to take this action above all under the pressure of the German interior minister, de Maizière.

According to Merkel, the €6 billion promised to Turkey is “to be spent on supporting the conditions of refugees.” In fact, Turkey is focused on building deportation camps with the assistance of the EU. Markus Ederer, the state secretary in Germany’s foreign affairs department, confirmed in response to a question from the Greens in parliament that the EU was paying Turkey for “the construction and equipping of centres for the reception and repatriation of those from third countries.” The EU is thus in practice financing the deportation of refugees back into war zones.

“There is no work for adults, no school for children—this is the daily norm for many Syrian refugee families in Turkey,” according to a report from Bavarian state radio based on the findings of Turkish migration researcher Murat Erdogan. “Some refugee families send their children to work in order that there is enough money to survive. And those who want to send their children to school often fail because of the bureaucracy. In reality, only 70,000 Syrian children are integrated into the Turkish education system, so only 8 percent,” stated Erdogan.

According to a report by the British *Independent*, Syrian refugees are systematically shot at by Turkish border police. The government in Ankara does not even deny such crimes, but dismisses them as a necessity for self-defence. *The Independent* cited a senior government official as saying, “In certain cases, the border patrol has no option but to fire warning shots because they often come under attack from smugglers and terrorist groups on the Syrian side.”

Amnesty International reported in December that at the hospital in Azaz near the Turkish border, an average of two refugees per day arrived with bullet wounds caused by Turkish border guards. Among the arrivals were a ten-year-old girl and one-year-old baby who were essentially executed with head shots. Orthopaedic doctor Ali al-Saloum from Azaz hospital confirmed this report to the *Independent*. “It used to be much rarer,” he said. “And when it did happen it was people being shot in the leg or the arm. But people started dying.”

By shutting the Balkan route and with the repatriation agreement with Turkey, the EU has very consciously abandoned the remnants of the laws for the protection of refugees. Migration researcher Olaf Kleist told the *Schwäbischer Tageblatt* that the EU had given Turkey a pay-off. “This policy does not even aim in the most limited way to protect the refugees,” Kleist said.

Kleist added that he feared that many refugees would pay with their lives as they seek alternative routes: “The first alternative is probably the route across North Africa and the Mediterranean to Italy. A very dangerous route, not only because of the sea, but also the states in between, Egypt and Libya, a dictatorship and a ‘failed state’. In this case there is not only the concern of many deaths, but also because the deal now struck with Turkey will be the model for further migration prevention deals with North African states.”



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