Refugee deaths in the Mediterranean: An imperialist crime

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The deaths of hundreds of refugees in the Mediterranean on Monday is not only a tragedy, it is a crime. Those responsible are the governments in Washington, Berlin, Athens, Rome and other European capitals, as well as the European Union Commission in Brussels.

They bear the guilt for these tragic deaths in two regards. The decades of imperialist oppression of the Middle East and Africa and the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria have created the conditions in which millions of people would rather risk their lives by fleeing than face the constant danger of death and ever-present reality of bitter poverty at home. And the sealing of Europe's borders, together with naval patrols in the Mediterranean, force refugees to take ever more dangerous routes.

Thousands of deaths by drowning are accepted, if not welcomed, as collateral damage required by the campaign to keep desperate refugees out of Europe. Charles Heller, co-author of a study by Goldsmiths College (University of London) on the deadly consequences of EU policy in the Mediterranean, accuses those responsible of "killing by omission."

When the European Union and Turkey concluded their dirty deal on halting the flow of refugees last month, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière said, "Even if we have to endure some hard images for a few weeks, our basic approach is right." As the lack of reporting on Monday's disaster shows, the Europen media have decided to spare the public the "hard images."

When it became known on Monday that hundreds of people had drowned in a single incident, most newspapers and news media barely reported it. There were some brief reports in online editions, which soon disappeared. The lack of official confirmation was noted, as though this justified the paucity of reporting.

There was already ample evidence that somewhere between 200 and 500 refugees from Libya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt and Sudan had lost their lives when the boat carrying them from North Africa to Italy capsized on the high seas in the middle of the night. Both Italian President Sergio Mattarella and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier reported the mass drownings. Somali government spokesman Abdisalan Aato said there were some 500 migrants on the boat. Lists of the passengers began circulating on social media.

The legal expert for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Beat Schuler, confirmed to Swiss TV, "We know that there are 40 survivors and that possibly up to 460 people set sail in the boat from Egypt." In the Greek coastal town of Kalamata, the BBC interviewed survivors who described the disaster and spoke of some 500 victims. Nevertheless, silence prevailed in the media on Tuesday.

If the figures are confirmed, the latest incident ranks as one of the worst, but remains just one of many similar catastrophes. According to statistics from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which collates all available data on refugees, on average ten refugees have died each day in the Mediterranean in the last two-and-a-half years.

In 2014, according to IOM figures, 3,279 people died attempting to cross the Mediterranean and Aegean. In 2015, it was 3,770, and by April 13 of this year, i.e., before the latest catastrophe, it was 732. This does not include an unknown number of cases that are never mentioned in reports or broadcasts.

The daily death toll in the Mediterranean is an indictment of the capitalist system, which has nothing

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to offer the vast majority of the world's people other than worsening social inequality, repression and war. The brutality with which the refugees are turned away, mistreated and driven to their deaths anticipates what will be unleashed against the working class as a whole.

The savage treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, fleeing the destruction of their countries at the hands of American and European imperialism, is inseparably linked to the growth of militarism, nationalism and great power conflict, fuelled by the deepening economic breakdown of world capitalism. Just as in the 1930s, governments are promoting anti-immigrant racism and national chauvinism in an attempt to intimidate and disorient public opinion and overcome broad anti-war sentiment. The noxious poison of xenophobia is an essential part of the ideological and political preparation for a new world war.

A broad front of bourgeois parties, ranging from the conservatives to the Greens and Social Democrats to the supposed "lefts," are stirring up hatred against refugees, preparing the ground for far-right and fascist organisations. The Greek government under the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) is playing a special role. The Syriza government is deporting refugees on behalf of the European Union, even though this means trampling on their human rights, violating international legal protections for asylum seekers, and condemning the victims of this policy to imprisonment, torture and death.

The imperialist wars of the last fifteen years are the most important cause of the mass flight of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. Now, the US and its European allies are planning new imperialist wars under the pretext of "fighting the causes of flight." The preparations for military intervention in Libya are far advanced, and in Syria too, the Western powers are intensifying their course of action against the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies.

The root cause of the eruption of imperialist militarism is the systemic crisis of world capitalism, which has intensified since the financial crash of 2008. As in the first half of the twentieth century, the ruling elites are responding to the insoluble contradicitions of their system with social attacks on the working class, repression and war.

Under these conditions, support for refugees, the defence of democratic and social rights, opposition to war, and the fight against capitalism are inseparably linked. They require the development of a politically independent, revolutionary movement of the international working class.

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