

The German chancellor's PR tour in Turkish refugee camps

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At the end of last week, German chancellor Angela Merkel and European Union (EU) Council president Donald Tusk, along with EU Council vice president Frans Timmermans, visited a showcase refugee camp on the outskirts of the city of Gaziantep, Turkey, close to the Turkish-Syria border. The hypocrisy of the visit was hard to beat. The misery of the great mass of the refugees in Turkey was airbrushed out of the picture, as was the denial of their rights resulting from the dirty deal struck between the EU and the Turkish government.

The trip by the German chancellor and EU Council president to the refugee camp at Nizip resembled a visit to a Potemkin village. According to the official figures, some 5,000 refugees from Syria live in the camp, including about 1,900 children. Even the right-wing newspaper *Die Welt* had to note that there was “not a camp in Turkey where conditions are better than in this one. The facilities are good, there are schools for children, and many residents go to work.”

Accompanied by Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, Merkel and Tusk opened a child protection centre for the UN children's relief organisation UNICEF in Gaziantep, financed with EU money and regarded as a model project. That EU money is also funding internment camps and deportation facilities was not mentioned during the visit.

Rather, Merkel, Tusk and Timmermans established that the agreement with Turkey was apparently in the interests of the refugees and followed “humanitarian” objectives. At the press conference, Tusk stated: “Since the agreement in March, we have seen that the streams of illegal refugees coming across the Aegean have decreased significantly. Our return and readmission measures work. In return, we are resettling Syrian refugees from Turkey. So we are on the way from illegal migration to legal migration.”

Quite apart from the fact that seeking refuge from war and persecution is an internationally recognised right and thus cannot be criminalised as “illegal,” Tusk avoided any mention of the inhuman consequences of the EU-Turkey

pact. Although in the three weeks since the pact came into force only 5,847 refugees arrived on the Greek islands, compared to 26,878 in the previous three-week period, this was not because Turkey offers better care for those seeking protection. It is because the EU is treating the new arrivals brutally and inhumanely and deporting them back.

On the Greek islands of Lesbos, Samos and Chios, refugees are crammed into severely overcrowded detention facilities; families are torn apart and asylum applications dealt with in expedited proceedings, without any chance of legal support. Also, the promised resettlement programme, which the EU had pledged to carry out, taking in one Syrian refugee directly from Turkey for every one deported there, is running very slowly. So far, the EU has only accepted 102 refugees from Turkey within the framework of this agreement, of whom 54 were permitted to come to Germany.

At the press conference, Merkel also praised “the practical possibility of inspecting one part of the EU-Turkey agreement.” She added, “With the deal with Turkey, refugees also have more opportunities to be near their homes. They are also served by the cooperation between the European Union and Turkey.”

Tusk added that the visit was “the best example for the world, when it comes to how we should deal with refugees. No one had the right to teach Turkey what to do.”

This was meant not only to justify the deportation policies of the EU, but also to detract from the fact that the EU has engaged Turkey to do its dirty work of repelling refugees. Turkey has still never fully ratified the Geneva Refugee Convention. Refugees who do not come from Europe are not recognised as such in Turkey, and have no democratic rights.

For all intents, the deal between Turkey and the EU has eliminated the fundamental right to asylum. While a few handpicked Syrians are permitted to come to Europe, refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea and Sudan no longer have any chance and must reckon with being deported from Greece via Turkey back to their country of origin. Turkey is negotiating readmission agreements with the most important countries of origin for refugees.

Those affected already include 13 refugees from Congo and Afghanistan, whom the EU deported to Turkey in early April illegally, and who were then taken into custody. Access to them by human rights organisations and lawyers is being denied. According to Amnesty International (AI), refugees in Turkey are systematically isolated in internment camps. Staff from the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR and other NGOs are also denied access to these detention centres.

Turkey has also hermetically sealed off its outer borders to refugees. At the start of 2015, the border was closed for people fleeing the civil war in Syria. Now, the government has even built a 911-kilometre-long wall along the border. AI has meticulously documented how the number of forcible returns on the border has increased in recent weeks. Two refugees reported to Human Rights Watch that people from their group of refugees “were beaten so severely that they were barely recognisable.”

Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu used the visit of Merkel, Tusk and Timmermans to deny these allegations. “I want to emphasise quite frankly that not a single person is being sent back to Syria against their will,” Davutoglu declared, adding that no one knows whom Amnesty International is working with. Without contradiction from Merkel or Tusk, Davutoglu insinuated that the human rights organisation collaborated with alleged “terrorist” groups.

In fact, at least 16 refugees have been shot on the border by Turkish soldiers in the past four months, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. A refugee smuggler told the *Daily Mail*, “Refugees who cross the border are now either killed or arrested. Turkish soldiers who have previously helped the refugees and even carried their bags are now shooting at them.”

The European deputy director of AI, Gauri van Gulik, told the *Guardian*, “Merkel and Tusk should not confuse PR with reality. The mistreatment of refugees in Turkey is really happening and what makes the whole thing worse is that Merkel and Tusk are complicit. Rather than focusing on whitewashing the behaviour of Turkey and continuing to spur it on, Europe should be aware of its own responsibility.”

Aside from flagship camps like Nizip, where 250,000 of the estimated 2.7 million civil war refugees from Syria and Iraq were housed, refugees in Turkey mostly live in poverty, hardship and misery.

A report by *Die Welt* described a makeshift camp in western Turkey. In the district of Torbali, at least 10,000 Syrian refugees live under abominable hygienic conditions in barracks, ruins and tents. Refugees pay the landowners up to €375 a month for a pitch. Even children have to work as day labourers in the fields, for the equivalent of €11-€14 per

day. No one goes to school here.

Nesrin Semen from the World Food Programme (WFP) told the *Tagesspiegel* that it was hard for refugees to find work in Turkey. “Some families have to live in abandoned buildings or windowless sheds or empty shops.” The aid from the WFP and the Turkish Red Crescent is not enough to supply the bulk of the refugees. “The fact is that most Syrian refugees in Turkey do not have enough to eat,” said Semen, adding, “Many refugees have depleted their savings and are forced to take their children out of school so that they can earn a little.”

The EU is directly responsible for the catastrophic situation faced by the refugees and their mistreatment. As allies of the US, the European imperialist powers have supported the wars in the Middle East that have forced millions of people to flee their homes. These desperate people are denied the fundamental right to asylum and are repulsed at the external borders by making authoritarian regimes the henchman of “Fortress Europe”.

While Merkel is praised in Germany for her supposed “welcoming culture,” and she praises the EU’s dirty deal with Turkey as a sustainable “solution” to the refugee crisis, refugees in Turkey suffer the brutal consequences of this rigorous isolationist policy of the EU.

The managing director of ProAsyl, Günter Burckhardt, told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, “Merkel’s Turkey visit pretended humanity, but we are witnessing the greatest attack in the history of the EU on the human right to asylum.” The EU-Turkey deal, according to Burckhardt, “abolishes the right to asylum, systematically making refugees defenceless and disregards human rights.”



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