

European Union seeks agreements with African dictators to deter refugees

Martin Kreickenbaum
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The European Union (EU) is abandoning all pretense of human rights restraints in its refugee policy. A strategy paper published last week by the EU Commission outlined migration partnerships that will compensate nine states in Africa and the Middle East, both transit countries and countries of origin, for their cooperation in deterring refugees.

The goal of the agreements—described as “compacts”—is “the combatting of causes of flight and a reduction of irregular migration to Europe,” EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos declared in an interview with the German daily *Die Welt*. In fact, what is involved is a programme with which the refugees themselves are to be combatted. The EU’s reactionary partners are to seal off escape routes, detain refugees and send them back to their countries of origin.

The list of countries with which agreements are to be concluded alone makes clear that the EU has no qualms about with whom it cooperates. In the interview, Avramopoulos named Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Niger, Mali, Ethiopia, Senegal, Nigeria and Libya. In addition, there is the “Better Migration Management” programme, with which the EU intends to provide technical assistance to the dictatorial regimes in Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea to combat refugees. These are the most important transit states and countries of origin for refugees in Africa.

The agreement the EU plans to conclude with each of these states is aimed at “convincing” each government to “take back illegal migrants. In addition, we want to ensure that these countries deal firmly with people smugglers and effectively secure their borders,” Avramopoulos told *Die Welt*. Describing refugees as “illegal migrants” has long since become accepted practice in the EU, so as to deny the desperate people fleeing war, poverty and persecution any right to protection in Europe.

To secure cooperation in combatting refugees, the EU intends to top up the financial assistance available to those states designated part of “migration partnerships.” The prospects of improved trading relations and relaxed visa requirements have also been raised. The EU Commission intends to make almost €8 billion [\$US 9.01 billion] available for the program by 2020.

With utter cynicism, the chairman of the social democratic fraction in the European Parliament, Italian politician Gianni Pitella, praised the EU Commission. Africa could not be permitted “to become a cage which refugees cannot leave” and the EU member states had to make a financial contribution. Yet the EU Commission’s plan is precisely to keep refugees stuck in Africa at any price. The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, spoke of a “Copernican shift” in the EU’s policy.

It is breathtaking how savagely the EU is trampling its oft-repeated “values” and principles under foot. With the migration partnerships, the EU is effectively making clear that it no longer has any intention of being bound by international law as contained in the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

“We want to try and bring order to the flows of refugees,” said Frans Timmermans, EU Commission vice president, repeating a formulation of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She set the goal in April of “bringing order and managing the route from Libya to Italy as we have done in Turkey.”

The EU’s dirty deal with Turkey already systematically violated the rights of refugees. They are detained in Greece and even children are held under catastrophic conditions in internment camps. Turkey permits its forces to shoot at refugees on the Syrian border and ruthlessly departs them to their countries of origin.

Concluding such a deal with Libya, as the EU Commission proposes, would be a further crime. Since

the US-led NATO intervention in 2011 to topple the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, the country has been dominated by a bloody civil war that has thrown it into economic and political chaos. There are three governments in the country, none of which controls substantial territory. A “unity government” recently imposed by the imperialist powers is to help, above all, to prepare a further military intervention by the US and its European allies.

Amnesty International recently published a report documenting arbitrary violence against refugees by the Libyan coast guard. Refugees intercepted at sea were beaten and shot, before being dragged to Libyan detention centres where they were abused and tortured. Despite this, the EU intends to deport refugees there.

Another “partner” of the EU is the Sudanese regime of Omar al-Bashir, who is sought by the International Criminal Court in the Hague for war crimes. Nonetheless, his regime is to receive vehicles, cameras, an aeroplane and additional technical equipment so as to strengthen the “border infrastructure” at the country’s 17 border crossings, as an EU Commission document states.

The German government has taken the lead in working out the deal with Sudan. Although Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development Gerd Müller (Christian Social Union) rejected a report by the *Guardian* that the German government was financing the strengthening of the Sudanese security forces, he neglected to mention that the state-sponsored Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) has already assumed this role.

In Eritrea, the EU plans to expand the judicial system. The military regime of Isaias Afewerki is a brutal dictatorship and has been charged by the United Nations with crimes against humanity. A UN report came to the conclusion that crimes against human rights had been systematically practiced in the country for 25 years. Oppositional figures are arbitrarily detained, tortured and killed.

Things are little better in South Sudan, Ethiopia or Somalia, which the EU also hopes to secure as border guards to carry out the dirty work in its ruthless policy of sealing off its borders.

The other side of the EU’s brutal external refugee policy is the further erosion of rights for refugees within Europe itself. The European Council for Justice and Internal Affairs issued a demand to the Greek government, which virtually coincided with the presentation of the African migration “partnerships,” to recognise Turkey as a secure third country and deport

more Syrians there.

Austrian Minister for the Interior Wolfgang Sobotka also gave his backing to a proposal by Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz (both members of the right-wing Austrian People’s Party) to intercept refugees in the Mediterranean and either deport them immediately or detain them on Mediterranean islands. He mentioned Australia as an example, which interns refugees on Pacific islands.

On Sunday, Bulgaria’s Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov told the Austrian newspaper *Die Presse* that the Geneva Convention on the status of refugees was obsolete. He claimed that “the document was written basically for people escaping communist regimes. It was not about masses of people.” This is a brazen lie. Mitov neglects to mention that the convention adopted in 1951 was primarily a response to the crimes of National Socialism. Hundreds of thousands of people, above all Jews, fled the Hitler regime between 1933 and 1945. With no country prepared to take them in, they were left in the murderous hands of the Nazis.

Today in Europe tens of thousands of refugees are once again kept in detention and denounced as “illegal migrants” or “economic refugees.” The human rights commissioner of the United Nations, Zeid Ra’ad Al-Hussein, recently sharply criticized the EU’s policy. The number of detentions are increasing “alarmingly”—with even unaccompanied minors being imprisoned, declared al-Hussein at the opening of a new session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. The “hot spots” set up by the EU were, “essentially huge incarceration facilities.” Al-Hussein called on the EU to monitor the detention of migrants statistically: “I fear the numbers will be very shocking.”



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