

# European Union working with African despots to deter refugees

**Martin Kreickenbaum****11 July 2016**

“The refugee crisis is not resolved, but the solution is progressing well in Europe and very well in Germany,” claimed interior minister Thomas de Maizière at the announcement of the latest figures for asylum applications in Germany. It is possible for someone to make such a cynical appearance before the press only if they believe that the “solution of the refugee crisis” means drastically reducing the number of refugees that reach Europe and Germany.

In fact, the refugee crisis has sharply deteriorated internationally. The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) has registered a significant rise in the number of people fleeing their homelands around the world, to over 60 million. The number of those who have lost their lives while fleeing has also risen in the first half of the year. According to official statistics, 2,920 refugees have already died on their way to Europe. The Mediterranean Sea is once again becoming a mass grave.

Refugees from the wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen or Afghanistan, stranded in Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon, are sinking into poverty, misery and hopelessness. The EU has responded by making Europe’s borders even more impassable for refugees.

Although the EU leaders remained deeply divided at their latest meeting in Bratislava over the distribution of refugees, they agreed on a speedier deportation of refugees and closer collaboration with African despots to deter them.

Italian interior minister Angelino Alfano complained at the meeting above all about the difficulty of deporting refugees who have received no asylum in the EU. “The danger is that the refugee institutions explode and the system can no longer be sustained. The problem of repatriation is an issue that Italy has repeatedly placed in the forefront in Brussels,” according to Alfano. To overcome these “problems,” all considerations of human rights which have thus far stood in the way of deportations should be thrown overboard.

The interior ministers discussed the implementation of the “migration agreement” adopted by the EU summit on 28 June with selected African states, which are to be incentivised into “cooperation” with the EU by offering them the prospect of economic and military assistance to block routes of flight and accept the return of refugees.

The EU summit set as the goal of European refugee and immigration policy the “rapidly operating repatriation of

irregular migrants.” The heads of government authorised foreign policy representative Federica Mogherini to quickly begin negotiations with African despots “so that by the end of the year the first migration pacts can be concluded.”

The EU Commission has since made clear what is to happen with the billions labelled “development assistance.” A document published last Tuesday proposed the redirection of €100 million in aid to Sudan into military and border security measures. This would mean the EU would for the first time be directly financing the military apparatus of another country—one, moreover, whose army and government militias are notorious for serious violations of human rights.

The Sudanese government militia “Rapid Support Force” (RSF) deployed 1,000 personnel to al-Dabbah in the north of the country to control the borders with Libya and Egypt. The goal is to perform the EU’s dirty work and block refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. The RSF boasts that it has already captured hundreds seeking protection on the border.

These refugees now run the risk of being detained in internment camps in Sudan or returned to the torture chambers of their own country. The EU has no qualms about Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir having been sought for arrest by the International Criminal Court in The Hague on charges of genocide and war crimes. The EU commissioner for development aid, Neven Mimica, instead announced that a further €100 million was being made available, and declared, “Development and security go hand in hand.”

The EU would also like to conclude a migration pact with Eritrea, even though the director of the EU border protection agency Frontex, Fabrice Leggeri, recently said, “In Eritrea there is persecution and a brutal dictatorship, the fleeing people require protection.” Nonetheless, Isaias Afwerki, the president since 1993, is to be given €200 million in aid to combat smugglers and those assisting refugees, and expand border controls with Sudan.

The German government is playing a particularly perfidious role. While it has officially suspended cooperation with the East African countries because of their human rights records, it has involved the Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) in deterring refugees. A spokesperson for GIZ confirmed to online magazine Euractiv.de that it plans to work with 11 African

states “to take action against criminal networks of people traffickers and smugglers.”

German interior minister Thomas de Maizière also once again raised the idea of internment camps in North Africa at the summit. People rescued on the Mediterranean route could then be “brought back, but not released anywhere, rather in secure camps.”

In the camps, which would be jointly run by the EU and UNHCR, asylum applications would be processed. It would therefore not be the “wallet” of the refugees, or smugglers deciding “who comes to Europe, but the European states themselves,” stated de Maizière in Bratislava. Given the long-running conflict over a few thousand refugees from Syria, it is already evident that the camps will become a trap for the refugees from which they will not be able to escape.

“As Europeans, we cannot close our eyes when we have to deal with flight in the world and people need protection,” said refugee organisation Pro Asyl director Günter Burkhardt on Deutschlandfunk, criticising the EU’s plans. “Now they are trying to offload all responsibility and strengthen other states according to the principle, out of sight, out of mind; others can deal with refugees, but the main thing is: not like Europeans.”

Sending refugees back to Libya would be criminal. Refugees would be detained, tortured and abused. Several detention centres where refugees are housed are controlled by militias. Responding to a parliamentary question in the Bundestag, the German government had to quietly acknowledge that “the conditions for refugees and migrants in Libyan detention centres [are] very bad.”

The sealing off of European borders against refugees is being further expanded. On 6 July, the European Parliament agreed to the establishment of a new EU agency responsible for border protection. The previous border protection agency Frontex is to be integrated into the new agency, which will receive an additional 1,500 personnel for police and military activities in surveilling the borders, and will be equipped with much more wide-ranging powers than Frontex.

The agency will be capable of deploying to a border area according to its own judgment and even against the will of an affected state, enabling it to intervene significantly into the sovereignty of EU member states.

In addition, the agency will actively deport refugees; forward data, including fingerprints, to Europol; and bring refugees intercepted on the high seas to the “closest safe port.” Given the rapid expansion of the list of “safe third countries and countries of origin,” this will result in the EU agency in the future sending refugees back to Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Turkey, Egypt or Libya.

In line with this, the Dutch government has suggested the establishment of hot spots at sea. Refugees would not only be registered on special internment ships, but their grounds for asylum would also be reviewed in a quick procedure so that those seeking protection would not even reach dry land in

Europe.

Reports of rapidly rising numbers of refugees crossing the Mediterranean do not correspond with reality. Since the closing of the Balkan route and the EU’s deal with Turkey, the flow of refugees across the Aegean Sea has been practically halted. The alternative routes through Egypt or Libya are hardly reachable for refugees from the civil wars in Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. According to figures from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 70,978 had crossed the Mediterranean to Italy by 6 July, practically the same number as in the same period last year.

Despite this, with officially 2,499 deaths, the number of victims on the central Mediterranean route has risen by around 30 percent.

Responsibility for this also lies with the Eunavfor Med “Sophia” mission implemented by the EU. As the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported, operation “Sophia” is not even connected to the Italian coastguard’s emergency system, because it is not seen as a rescue mission, but as a combat mission against people smugglers. However, military ships are not on the coastguard’s radar. The Italian coastguard always has to first ask the office of commander Enrico Credendino whether naval vessels are in the region of a stranded refugee boat.

The other side of the policy of hermetically sealing off and deterring refugees from the European Union, which de Maizière describes as a “solution of the refugee crisis,” is the misery and bitter poverty of Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees, whose route to Europe is blocked.

“A growing number of people now fall, after years of exile and after using up all their savings, into poverty,” said the spokesperson for the UNHCR, Leo Dobbs, to Reuters.

According to the UN, more than 70 percent of the one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below the poverty line. Two years ago, it was “only” 50 percent. In Jordan, it is even higher, with 90 percent of the 650,000 refugees living in poverty. Sixty-seven percent of families which have fled are highly indebted. Families in both countries are compelled to skip meal times or life-saving medication. Children are taken out of school to work.



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