

# Vienna refugee conference reaffirms Europe's closed-border policy

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At the Vienna refugee conference, where 11 countries participated along with European Union (EU) representatives, a decision was adopted to completely seal off the so-called Balkan route so as to prevent, if possible, any refugees from coming to Europe. In addition, repatriation agreements along the lines of the dirty deal with Turkey are to be concluded with North African states, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The representatives of the EU—Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece, Germany and Albania—who came to the meeting were implementing the decisions taken at the EU's Bratislava summit on 16 September. There, the EU and German government abandoned all pretenses and fully exposed their inhumane refugee policies.

It is clear that German Chancellor Angela Merkel's refugee policy, which insists on sealing off the EU's external borders, never had anything to do with a "welcoming culture," but rather represented an extremely reactionary agenda. At the Vienna conference she complained that despite the closure of the borders along the Balkan route earlier this year, 50,000 refugees had still made it to Germany via this path. Merkel advocated completely closing off the Balkan route with a huge deployment of Frontex border police. "Our goal must be to stop illegal migration as far as possible," she declared in a statement after the meeting.

EU Council President Donald Tusk already indicated his support for this course of action to Merkel prior to the conference, stating, "We must ensure practically and politically that the Western Balkan route is closed to illegal migration forever." This would be enforced by the EU border agency Frontex, whose personnel would be increased.

On 6 October, the new Frontex provisions come into

force, expanding the border agency into a more comprehensive border surveillance and refugee deterrence authority. It will then have a permanent force of 1,000 border police at its disposal, which can also be deployed in countries outside of the EU. The first deployment will take place within the EU, in Greece. "Greece has requested Frontex to carry out a comprehensive intervention on the borders with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania," said Frontex director Fabrice Leggeri.

But the Vienna conference also confirmed plans to soon deploy Frontex forces outside of the EU. Serbia and Macedonia were both being discussed as potential sites for interventions. The EU would thus be effectively legitimizing the human rights abuses refugees have faced in Macedonia. Just at the beginning of last week, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Said Raed al-Hussein, stated, "Macedonia is operating a systematic policy of persecution and internment." Close to 200 people have been confined to camps there without their individual cases being reviewed.

The issue of how to distribute the refugees arriving in Greece and Italy remained undecided. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras focused his criticism on the Eastern European EU states when he told the ANA press agency, "It is unacceptable that the countries which accept the refugees first have to bear the entire burden." Hungary's right-wing populist Prime Minister Viktor Orban repeated his demand to detain all asylum seekers at a location outside of the EU, yet to be determined. He continued to vehemently oppose the German plan to distribute the refugees arriving in Greece and Italy throughout the EU.

The refugee support organization ProAsyl criticized the decision of the Vienna conference to prevent refugees from travelling along the Balkan route, thus

confining them to Greece. Günter Burkhardt, head of ProAsyl, told *Die Welt*, “The German government, together with other states, is forcing the refugees in Greece into a desperate situation. Many of these refugees have a legal right to travel to other European countries because they have relatives there.” But this could not be realized by sealing off the borders.

The EU heads of government also agreed to conclude further repatriation agreements so as to immediately deport those refugees who breach the walls of fortress Europe in spite of all of the deterrence measures. Merkel declared that it was necessary “to conclude third state agreements with Africa, and also with Afghanistan and Pakistan, as quickly as possible, so that it is clear: whoever is not permitted to remain in Europe for humanitarian reasons will be sent home.”

Immediately prior to the meeting in Vienna, EU Parliament President Martin Schulz in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* called for a repatriation agreement with Egypt modeled on the Turkey deal. “We must take this route,” Schulz said, without even touching upon the catastrophic human rights situation. According to aid organizations, the military dictatorship of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has killed at least 2,000 people since his brutal seizure of power in June 2013 and disappeared another 40,000 into the country’s prisons where they face torture. Refugees are already systematically abused and detained in Egypt.

Political scientist Jan Völkel from the University of Cairo said in an interview with *Deutschlandfunk*, “Even for the average member of the Egyptian population, the situation is extremely difficult, so there would be far fewer possibilities to provide for refugees in a country like Egypt than in Europe.” With the €8 billion Egypt would receive from the EU, Cairo would “focus on strengthening military units,” because border protection is in the main organized by the army.

Egypt has become a focus for the EU because Frontex has determined that it is the second most important point of departure for Europe after Libya. But those travelling from Egypt to Italy are resorting to a last act of desperation. Even with good weather and a boat engine in good working order, the crossing takes ten days. The cost of the journey and the likelihood of drowning are therefore high.

Just a few days ago, a boat carrying 600 refugees capsized near Alexandria. Only 163 people could be

rescued alive from the water. In April, 500 refugees who set out from Egypt drowned en route.

The situation is no better in the other states viewed by the EU as targets for repatriation agreements. Germany’s foreign ministry in Berlin was even compelled to acknowledge in a situation report the precarious security situation and severe violations of human rights in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the case of Libya, Amnesty International has warned of sustained war crimes and human rights abuses, particularly against refugees. “We all had to get out and were beaten with rubber hoses and bits of wood. Then they shot a man in the foot,” reported a refugee, whose boat had been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard.

In Mali and Niger, security forces arbitrarily employ violence against refugees. The EU’s claim that agreements with these countries will improve conditions for refugees is grotesque and absurd.

In reality, the policy of sealing off and strengthening Europe’s borders is leading to ever worsening humanitarian catastrophes. As a result of this policy, more than 3,500 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea this year. Tens of thousands more live in deplorable conditions on Europe’s borders.



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