

Mass casualties in latest refugee tragedy off Libyan coast

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More than 100 refugees are feared drowned off the Libyan coast during a crossing to Europe. According to a spokesperson for the German aid organisation Jugend Rettet (Youth Rescue), Pauline Schmidt, volunteers discovered an empty inflatable boat off the Libyan coast capable of carrying up to 140 people. In addition, Doctors Without Borders crew members on the chartered ship Prudence pulled five bodies from the sea a few nautical miles away.

On Saturday, the Italian coast guard reported a distress call from a refugee boat in foggy conditions with high waves, prompting the ship Juventa from Jugend Rettet to initiate a search. The crew then discovered the empty inflatable boat near the Libyan port of Suvara.

One could assume an accident had occurred, Schmidt said, because the wreck had not been long at sea and did not show the typical signs left behind by rescuers. It was also unlikely that Libyan fishermen had saved the occupants, since the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has not reported any such operations over recent days. The IOM was also informed about the discovery of some 30 bodies on a beach just 30 kilometres from Suvara.

Following the latest catastrophe, the number of refugees drowned on the central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy this year rose to almost 1,150. At the same time, around 38,000 refugees have reached the Italian coast via this route, more than in the same period last year. Over the Easter weekend alone, around 8,500 refugees were rescued from the Mediterranean and brought to Italy.

Leading politicians in the European Union (EU) respond with indifference to the daily dramas and tragedies facing refugees on the Mediterranean. They continue to militarily fortify Europe's external borders to seal them off against refugees. At the same time, they are turning conditions for refugees in the camps on the Greek and Italian islands, or on the Hungarian-Serbian border, into a living hell. Refugees are being deported en masse, and nationalism and xenophobia are being deliberately provoked.

The major powers, France, Germany, Italy, Britain and the United States, have laid waste to entire countries in the

Middle East and North Africa with their imperialist wars, forcing millions of people to flee. But in its boundless cynicism, the EU makes smugglers responsible for the movement of refugees towards Europe. The EU is criminalising refugees as illegal immigrants, even though there is no legal route to Europe and the refugees are dependent on the unscrupulous services of the smugglers.

The EU-led operation "Sophia" has been ongoing in the Mediterranean for two years to take action against smugglers and close off travel routes. Warships, planes, helicopters, drones and border guards from 22 European countries have been deployed since then to prevent refugees from reaching Europe. Shortly before, the Italian mission "Mare Nostrum" was halted under pressure from the EU after it was denounced as an additional "pull factor" encouraging refugees to set out by sea.

The Sophia mission was never planned as a rescue operation. Those politicians responsible within the EU consciously accepted the fact that casualties in the Mediterranean would rise drastically. This was even welcomed as a means of deterrence.

Despite this, the number of refugees on the central Mediterranean route has continued to rise, which has not stopped the same arguments from being repeated—this time against the rescue ships owned by international aid organisations operating off the Libyan coast.

In December 2016, the EU's border and coast guard protection agency, Frontex, filed its first complaint against the activities of international aid organisations in the Mediterranean. In February, Frontex head Fabricio Leggeri went further. He told the daily *Die Welt* that the work of the aid organisations resulted in "smugglers forcing even more people onto unseaworthy boats than in previous years."

Yet it is not the smugglers who force refugees onto unseaworthy boats, but the wars and civil wars, repression and persecution by despotic regimes that are closely collaborating with the EU to deter refugees, and the basic struggle to survive.

The "pull factor" is not the rescue boats, but the EU's own

policies of deterrence. Samer Haddadin, head of the UNHCR in Tripoli, stated recently that the more the EU shouts about the invasion of refugees and calls for their deportation, the more refugees are prepared to set off for Europe.

But the attacks on aid organisations have been welcomed by the media and anti-immigrant parties in Europe. A leading role in this has been played by Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, which described the boats as "taxis" and accused the aid organisations of being paid by the smugglers.

The M5S received backing from Sicilian state prosecutor Carmelo Zuccaro, who accused the aid organisations in Italy's *La Stampa* of having direct contact with people smugglers in Libya, without presenting a single scrap of evidence to back up this claim.

In addition, Frontex head Leggeri complained that the aid organisations were now conducting 40 percent of all rescue missions in the Mediterranean, whereas a year ago it was just 5 percent. "We should review the current concept for rescue measures off the Libyan coast," he told *Die Welt*.

An idea of how this would look was provided by a Frontex employee in an interview with *The Intercept*: "So as not to become a 'pull factor', our ships only patrol north of Malta. We do not travel down to Libyan waters." This results in refugees being discouraged from setting out for Europe. In other words, Frontex is deliberately abandoning rescue operations so as to deter refugees by allowing them to drown.

Support for Frontex has come chiefly from the Italian, German and Austrian governments. On behalf of his fellow European ministers, Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz spoke of "NGO madness"; relying on private rescue operations at sea was "undoubtedly the wrong path." Austrian Interior Minister Wolfgang Sobotka went so far as to demand "the immediate closure of the Mediterranean route."

During a surprise trip to Tripoli, Kurz reiterated his demand to immediately send refugees rescued at sea back to Africa. "Rescue in the Mediterranean ought not to be linked to a ticket to Central Europe," Kurz told journalists during the trip. They should instead be sent to asylum centres outside Europe, he added.

However, there are conflicts within the EU as to whether such centres should be established in Libya, or in Egypt, Tunisia or Algeria. While Kurz excluded Libya, the last EU meeting of interior and justice ministers agreed to create so-called legal islands in Libya. According to the German daily *Tageszeitung*, in these legal islands, "especially well-armed police" will be responsible for supervising the camps and repatriating refugees to their homelands.

To this end, Frontex has already expanded the support mission for the strengthening of Libya's borders (EUBAM Libya) and begun the search for appropriate locations for internment camps. In addition, the EU has made available €90 million to help Libya strengthen its borders and prevent refugees from setting out for Europe.

Italy has also promised to supply 10 patrol boats to the Libyan coast guard. The official unity government supported by the EU, under the leadership of Fayiz as-Sarraj, has dispatched another shopping list to the EU, demanding 130 coast guard boats, including five 100-metre-long offshore speedboats, and weaponry.

However, voices are growing within the EU of not working solely with Sarraj, who controls only a fraction of the war-torn country. The French and Italian governments are currently negotiating with his opponent, General Chalifa Haftar, who controls the east of the country and thus the most important oil ports.

One of the main aims in this is to push back Russian influence in Libya so as to enable the Western powers to exploit the country's rich energy resources. The Russian oil company Rosneft agreed on a cooperation agreement with the Libyan oil corporation, which is controlled by General Haftar.

EU Foreign Representative Federica Mogherini issued mixed messages on the cooperation with the Libyan unity government when she commented, "We always want to ensure that we train the right people and supply the right equipment." The EU is therefore continuing to expand its military intervention in North Africa. The refugees face the prospect of being ruthlessly crushed between the interests of the local militias and the closed border policy of the EU.



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