

European Union and Italy step up pressure on organisations assisting refugees

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On July 25, Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti (Democratic Party) ordered representatives of nine non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in the rescue of refugees to attend a meeting at his ministry. There they were called upon to sign a “Code of Conduct,” restricting their activities in the Mediterranean Sea.

As the WSWs noted two weeks ago, the new code violates “existing law”: “On the high seas international maritime law prevails, which obligatorily demands the rescue of people in distress ... this is precisely what the ‘Code of Conduct’ is designed to prevent the NGOs and their rescue boats from undertaking.”

Should NGOs fail to sign the sinister, illegal code, Italy has threatened to close its ports to their ships. This is the latest disgraceful attempt by Italian authorities to rein in the activities of voluntary aid organisations and thereby reduce the number of migrants arriving from Africa. They want to restrict the NGOs and drive them out of the Mediterranean—or at least transform them into reliable adjuncts of the European Union (EU) Frontex operation and the Italian coast guard.

The migrant flight route across the Mediterranean is extremely dangerous. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), as of July 23, 2,361 people had either died or gone missing in 2017, while some 95,000 migrants had reached Italy by sea. The dead include an estimated 300 children.

Without the NGOs, the number of drowned and missing people would be considerably higher. Currently more than 40 percent of refugees rescued at sea owe their lives to organisations such as Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye, MOAS (Migrant Offshore Aid Station), *Jugend Rettet* (Rescuing Youth), Save the Children, Doctors Without Borders, SOS Méditerranée, Proactiva Open Arms, etc.

“We are just in mid-July,” noted Timon Marszalek, the director of SOS Méditerranée Germany, “and we’ve saved as many people in the Mediterranean as we did last

year. In view of the failure of the European Union, the intervention of civilian organisations like our own is indispensable to prevent the deaths of thousands of people.”

Marszalek pointed to one recent incident on July 11, in which a baby was born during a rescue operation. Mother and child were still connected by an umbilical cord when they were brought on board the *Aquarius*. This was the fifth birth at sea on this one rescue ship alone. “What would have happened if our team had not been there on time?” the SOS Méditerranée official asked. Such examples also show how desperate people must be to take to sea.

The “Code of Conduct” that NGOs are now being required to sign by the government of Paolo Gentiloni (Democratic Party) is a crude and deliberate attempt to sabotage rescue efforts. It establishes harsh guidelines and demands that refugees be transported directly to the Italian mainland instead of being transferred to larger ships belonging to the coast guard, merchant marine or navy. This forces the small NGO ships to undertake longer journeys and restricts their presence in the most dangerous waters where their work is most necessary.

Ruben Neugebauer of Sea-Watch told Deutschlandfunk (German radio): “What they want to achieve is obvious: they are trying to keep ships out of the danger zone because we undermine the concept of dying on Europe’s borders.”

NGOs are also forbidden to enter Libyan territorial waters, even if refugees’ lives are at stake. They must look on as people drown, without being able to intervene. NGOs must also accept Italian police accompanying their vessels to track down smugglers among the refugees. This can only lead to a worsening of relations between the rescue teams and refugees.

The “Code of Conduct” is not merely the work of the Italian authorities. It was agreed upon at a meeting of EU

ministers in Tallinn, Estonia in early July. At that meeting German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière repeated his slanderous claim that NGOs were working with so-called people smugglers.

German newspapers have also run articles accusing NGOs of collaboration with smugglers. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* claimed, for example, that the rescue organisations were “involuntarily becoming an important element in the smugglers’ strategies.”

The *Berliner Zeitung* scandalously asserted that the NGOs’ role was not rescuing those in need at sea, but rather “assisting refugees and the transfer of emigrants.” The newspaper referred disapprovingly to Sea-Watch, based in Berlin. That organisation, which has not signed the “Code of Conduct,” rightly argues that there is already an International Law of the Sea, which obliges every boat owner to assist in sea rescue when necessary.

The *Berliner Zeitung* complains, however, that while it is “self-evident” that shipwrecked persons be saved, “this does not answer the question as to where to land those rescued. Sea-Watch 2 does not return the stranded to Libya, but brings them all to Europe.”

This slanderous article and the steps taken by the various EU interior ministers against the NGOs reveal there is a concerted campaign to drive private organisations out of the seas along the Libyan coast.

This campaign is bound up with unprecedented military deployment taking place in the Mediterranean off the North African coast. Taking part in the operation, which has been ongoing since June 2015 under the innocuous name of “Operation Sophia” (formerly known as EUNAVFOR [European Union Naval Force] Med), are the navies of Germany, Italy, Great Britain and other European countries.

On the same day the NGOs were summoned to the Italian Interior Ministry, the EU decided to extend the “Sophia” mission to the end of 2018. Officially, the remit of the operation is to combat “smuggler criminality on the Mediterranean” and thus prevent deaths at sea. In fact, the combined navies are responsible for just 8 percent of sea rescue operations.

In reality, mission “Sophia” is an important part of Europe’s plans for imperialist intervention in Africa. The Great Powers regard Africa as a strategically crucial area, with huge oil and natural gas deposits and other resources. With the war against Libya in 2011 and the fall of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the new colonial “scramble for Africa” entered a new phase.

For the past six years the imperialist powers have been

trying to install a new, reliable and loyal regime in Libya, which is key for access to Africa as a whole. This explains the background of a third important meeting in Paris on July 25: the new French president, Emmanuel Macron, invited the two main rivals in the Libyan civil war, Fayed al-Sarraj, the unelected head of the Western-backed Libyan Presidential Council, and Khalifa Haftar, head of the so-called Libyan National Army and an “asset” of the CIA since the 1980s. The two men subsequently agreed to suspend their armed struggle and hold parliamentary elections in the spring of 2018. On Wednesday, Sarraj visited Italian government officials in Rome.

The EU has committed itself to continue financing the Libyan coast guard and equipping it with weapons. The European Union is supporting an organisation notorious for trafficking in human beings, torture and murder. At the request of the EU, the Libyan coast guard forces refugees into Libyan prisons, where around 300,000 people are currently being held under appalling conditions.

For their part, NGOs must decide whether or not to cooperate with the Italian government and sign the “Code of Conduct.” The NGOs rely on private donations and young volunteers. Their efforts demonstrate a widespread willingness to assist and defend refugees.

This readiness was confirmed a few weeks ago in a poll carried out by the European Broadcasting Agency. Almost 1 million young people between the ages of 18 and 35 were interviewed. Nearly three quarters (72 percent) said they were willing to actively support immigrants. Some 78 percent of respondents in Germany said they noticed growing nationalism, and considered it a bad thing. More than two-thirds (67 percent) of young people in Germany and the overwhelming majority of young people surveyed said they were not ready to fight in a war.

The poll demonstrates the abyss between the vast majority of the population and establishment politics. Millions of workers and young people express their solidarity with the refugees and are ready to help them, while the political elite and governments are permitting thousands to drown in the Mediterranean.



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