

Europe steps up crackdown on refugees in Mediterranean

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The grisly balance of the European Union's refugee policy in the first six months of 2017 amounts to close to 2,400 people who have either died or are missing in the Mediterranean. And if the wishes of the EU and its member states are realised, this number will rise significantly.

The "Sophia" mission, jointly conducted by Germany, France, Italy and other EU members, is allegedly supposed to reduce the number of drownings by combating people smuggling. Warships have been deployed equipped with the most modern drones and satellite technology, enabling them to carry out surveillance on every centimetre of the Mediterranean. In spite of this, 2,385 people either died or went missing in the Mediterranean this year by the end of July, according to the International Organisation of Migration.

Only some 8 percent of those who survive the Mediterranean crossing in one piece are rescued by the "Sophia" mission. By contrast, some 40 percent of those who reach the European coast are rescued by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, Italy, with the backing of Germany and the EU, is adopting a series of new measures to bully these organisations.

The latest attempt at harassment, the code of conduct, is equivalent to a blatant attempt to block the rescue of refugees at sea. NGO ships will have to accept armed Frontex police on board. The ships will also no longer be allowed to transfer rescued refugees to larger ships, meaning they will waste much more time sailing to and from ports, instead of providing aid on location. All of this is aimed at hampering the NGOs and keeping them away from the most dangerous waters where the most people face emergencies.

Five aid organisations—Doctors Without Borders, Sea Watch, Sea Eye, Jugend Rettet (Youth Rescue), and SOS Méditerranée—have rejected the code of conduct. "We could not sign it due to our principles," said Titus Molkenbur of Jugend Rettet. The organisations invoked the law of the sea, which applies to all captains.

Italy is now threatening to close its ports to them, and the Austrian Interior Minister has added another threat: "These

NGOs are automatically placing themselves outside of the organised rescue system in the Mediterranean, with all of the consequences that brings for their security." The conflict will further restrict their rescue work, with deadly consequences for refugees.

The EU states, led by Germany and Italy, continue to adopt new measures against refugees. Their proposals are increasingly aimed at keeping refugees in North Africa and preventing them from even reaching Europe.

The Italian government agreed July 28 to send its navy with 1,000 sailors and soldiers into Libyan territorial waters to support the Libyan coastguard in "combating people smugglers." Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni (Democratic Party, PD) described the move as a "possible turning point in the refugee crisis." Parliament still has to agree to the proposal.

The move means that shortly after they start out from Libya, refugees will be intercepted by the Italian navy, brought back to Libya and turned over to the Libyan coast guard's notorious prisons and those run by other warlords.

These prisons are among the worst imaginable. Refugees are confined by the hundreds in spaces which are far too small and exposed to violence, including beatings, rape, and even death. The necessities of life are often entirely absent—washing facilities, clean drinking water and food—and disease is frequently rampant. The Libyan coast guard, which is corrupt and brutal, is enriching itself through the smuggling business. With its support, the EU is making itself complicit in torture, people trafficking and murder.

The Libyan government has protested Italy's move. The presidential council (the Libyan cabinet), led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, immediately denied having requested military assistance. Libya is a sovereign state, it said, and Italy did not have permission for such an intervention within Libyan territorial waters. Only further cooperation with the coast guard in training and the provision of equipment had been agreed in the latest talks in Paris and Rome, it added.

Shortly before the Gentiloni government's decision, a proposal by French President Emmanuel Macron hit the

headlines. Macron declared suddenly on July 27 that before the end of the summer he would ensure that hot spots for refugees would be established on Libyan territory as reception centres for refugees.

The proposal is not new. European politicians have been suggesting for months that Libya be turned into a bulwark against refugees and that reception centres, or “hot spots”—it would be more accurate to say concentration camps—be established on African soil. This has been coupled with the implicit assumption that setting up such camps would require the deployment of European soldiers in North Africa.

Macron invited Libyan Prime Minister al-Sarraj, a UN puppet, and his rival, General Khalid Hafta, to Paris. He subsequently declared that the two parties in Libya’s civil war were ready to end their armed conflict. Macron went public with his proposal for hot spots in Libya shortly afterwards. This prompted significant disquiet in Italy, which as Libya’s former colonial power sees itself as responsible for Libya.

French-Italian relations have also become tense over the STX shipyard in the French port city of St. Nazaire. Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri, a joint venture with a Chinese consortium, was originally set to take control of a large proportion of the shipyard’s shares. The world’s largest cruise ships are built there, but it is also important for the navy. Macron has now annulled the deal with Fincantieri and moved swiftly to “temporarily nationalise” the shipyard, as the government put it.

On August 1, German Social Democrat (SPD) politician Boris Pistorius, who is responsible for domestic security in the SPD election campaign team, called for reception centres in North Africa. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Saxony’s Interior Minister declared, “People who have fled their homes must be kept outside of Europe’s borders. The people should not sit waiting in Italy, but already have advisers to speak to outside the EU if possible, in processing camps,” Pistorius said. Asked who would operate these camps, he said, “Either the Europeans or the UN would have to operate them.”

Chancellor Angela Merkel and Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (both Christian Democratic Union, CDU) have already proposed holding refugees in internment camps in North Africa. They are thereby reviving the worst traditions of colonial rule.

Camps where masses of people are confined have a grim historical record in Libya. Around 100,000 people were interned in concentration camps, where one in two people died, under the Italian occupation of 1911-1942. Libya’s legendary Omar Muhtar was executed in front of the prisoners. Under fascism, the occupation was accompanied by widespread terror, with more than 100,000 dying in

Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, now Libya. The latest plans by European governments to detain refugees en masse revive the terrible memories of these crimes.

Several weeks ago, de Maizière and his Italian counterpart, Marco Minniti, presented a plan to the EU to militarily seal off Libya’s southern border with UN and EU troops.

The latest proposal from German and French defence ministers Ursula Von der Leyen and Florence Parly is also the result of the same neo-colonial policy. They intend to create a joint military force for the Sahel zone and station soldiers in Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Mauritania. The German army already has troops deployed in Mali, Western Sahara, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and in the Horn of Africa, while France has secured its supply of uranium from Niger and has troops deployed throughout Central Africa.

The goal, according to Von der Leyen, is to combat Islamist groups and “stabilise the region.” Germany’s new great power policies are being packaged with the slogan of “more security and stability.” At the same time, all of the European powers are rearming so as not to leave North Africa to the United States, the main imperialist plunderer, or the rising power China.

Their efforts are part of a new imperialist scramble for Africa to secure strategic positions and oil, gas and other raw materials. The latest phase of this scramble began six years ago with the destruction of Libya and the murder of then-leader Muammar Gaddafi. This was the chief factor in the destabilisation of North Africa.

For the imperialist powers, the refugees are merely a cost factor. They view them as they view the working class: as material for exploitation or cannon fodder, or as an irritating burden that must be dispensed with. Without batting an eyelid, they are permitting thousands to drown or die of thirst in the desert. Instead of assisting refugees, they are sending tanks, bombs, warships, submarines and drones to Africa, and ensuring that more people will be turned into refugees.



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