

Refugees: EU strikes deadly deal with Libyan coast guard on refugees

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19 August 2017

The number of refugees arriving in Italy declined sharply in August. Despite favourable weather conditions, the number of people landing in Lampedusa and Sicily nearly halved in the first week of August. The decline is even more striking compared to 2016. According to a correspondent of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on August 16, 90 percent fewer refugees arrived in August than in the same period the previous year.

This decline is no coincidence. It is a result of Italy's deal struck with Libya, negotiated by Interior Minister Marco Minniti (Democratic Party). The hardliner, law-and-order politician has the backing of the EU, and especially German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere (CDU). In Italy, all political parties—from Matteo Renzi's Democrats, Beppe Grillo's Five-Star Movement and the fascists—support the measures of Minniti, a former member of the Italian Communist Party and now a social democrat.

In mid-August, Minniti stated at a press conference that the security of Italy was threatened if the state did not control the flow of fugitives. He added that such control was “a concern of the left.”

His dirty deal means that the Libyan coast guard apprehends refugees and prevents them from reaching Europe. To achieve this, the Italian government led by Paolo Gentiloni, along with the German and French governments, are working hand in hand with their satrap in Tripoli, Fajis al-Sarradsch. Italy and the EU finance his Libyan coast guard, equip them with ships, weapons and all necessary equipment, and train their crews.

The coast guard of the Sarradsch regime in Tripoli comprises the same Islamic forces as the country's militia and its people smugglers, i.e., precisely those groups the EU professes to combat. Their task is to return refugees to Libya and keep them there. In so doing they carry out the dirty work of the EU and permit politicians in Rome, Berlin and Brussels to display a clean pair of hands on the basis of the “non-repatriation” principle.

The non-repatriation principle is a central element of international refugee law. It states that persons cannot be sent back to countries where they face torture or other serious human rights violations. It is anchored in both the Geneva Convention on Refugees and the European Convention on Human Rights. The EU and its member states have signed up to

the law, but in practice they violate it on a daily basis.

Refugees are now disappearing from the streets of Europe and from political and media attention. But where have they disappeared to? Rather than being “rescued,” as cynical journalists claim, they have been returned to the camps of the militia, which resemble nothing other than a “hell on earth.” This is confirmed by all those who have had access to the camps and prisons.

The conditions which prevail resemble a “concentration camp.” This is the verdict of a report issued by the German Foreign Office. The report was drawn up by the German ambassador in Niamey, the capital of Niger, and has been passed on to the German chancellor's office and several ministers.

According to the paper *Welt am Sonntag*, which has possession of the complete text, the report refers to “the most serious, systematic human rights violations in Libya.” It states: “Authentic mobile phone photos and videos are evidence of the concentration-camp-like conditions in the so-called private prisons. Executions of impoverished immigrants, torture, rape, blackmail and abandonment in the middle of the desert are the order of the day ... witnesses have referred to precisely five executions per week in one prison—announced in advance and carried out on Fridays in order to make room for new arrivals, i.e., to increase the intake of persons and thereby drive up profits for the camp operators.”

In a report broadcast on German television July 9, journalist Michael Obert reported on a camp in Zawiya, 50 km west of Tripoli. “In my entire life I have never seen or experienced such appalling conditions as in these camps,” Obert said. He described in detail the conditions prevailing: refugees herded together in cells with barely enough room to stretch out to sleep, kept in the dark, suffering thirst and hunger, lacking any sort of sanitation and subject to torture, beatings, rape and murder. Other eyewitnesses have reported that the warlords and armed militias sell off the refugees as slaves.

The German government and the EU are well aware of the appalling conditions. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democratic Party, SPD) visited one of the camps in June—the same camp referred to by Obert. But this has not deterred the political elite from striking a deal with the

murderous bureaucracy in Libya, which run the camps.

The EU and its member states are paying out hundreds of millions of euros to curb the influx of refugees to Europe. From February this year, following Minniti's Italian-Libyan agreement, European politicians have worked closely with Sarradsch and his ministers. They have invited him to Paris and Rome and have visited him in Tripoli. At the same time, they are constantly developing new plans to expand EU influence in Libya and establish "hot spots" on Libyan soil controlled by Europe.

In July, they extended the EU maritime mission "Sophia" in the Mediterranean. On August 3, the Italian government sent the frigate Commandante Borsini into Libyan territorial waters.

In the current German election campaign, politicians from all the parties are embracing xenophobia. The SPD's leading candidate, Martin Schulz, has presented a program to improve the security of the external borders of the Schengen area and increase cooperation between the Europol and Frontex police agencies. The Left Party supports this policy and has set its sights on forming a coalition government with Schulz!

On August 10, Libya arbitrarily extended its territorial waters beyond the regular 12-mile zone. The new Libyan "Search-and-Rescue" (SaR) zone, in which no ships are allowed under a foreign flag, now covers 74 nautical miles.

This measure is not directed against the authorities in Rome, but rather against volunteer NGOs which have played the main role in rescuing distressed refugees at sea. For the past two weeks NGO ships have been systematically harassed and driven out of the Mediterranean. The main reason behind the move is to remove them from the sites of crimes where they could act as witnesses.

At the end of July, Marco Minniti presented the NGOs with an ultimatum, a so-called "code of conduct." The measures had been previously approved by EU ministers at a conference in Tallinn. Among other measures, the code calls upon NGOs to take on board armed police officers and Frontex officials. The NGO ships are also forbidden to transfer refugees to larger vessels.

Most NGOs have refused to sign up to such conditions. As a result, their ships have been prevented from leaving port in Italy and are threatened and harassed by the patrol boats of the Libyan coast guard on the high seas.

On August 15, the Libyan coast guard stopped the rescue vessel Golfo Azzurro, threatened its crew and held them for several hours. The Spanish relief organization Proactiva Open Arms, which owns the ship, stated the incident occurred in international waters—and this is not the only case. On August 7 another ship belonging to the organization was subject to warning shots, once again in international waters.

Following such incidents, more and more NGOs are withdrawing from the Mediterranean. Up to August 13, Sea Eye, Doctors Without Borders and Save the Children had all announced their withdrawal from sea rescue operations. All

these organizations have saved tens of thousands of refugees from drowning. Proactiva Open Arms has rescued 26,000 refugees and Sea Eye about 12,000 since April 2016. Sea Eye founder Michael Buschheuer told the press that his volunteers could not be expected to face the risks involved in continuing operations. "We leave behind a deadly vacuum," he said.

A fascist organization, the so-called Identity Movement (IB), has also participated in the expulsion of the NGOs. It boasts that it contributed to the expulsion of the Golfo Azzurro with its operation "Defend Europe," carried out in collaboration with the Islamic coast guard. It is clear that the fascists are on the same page as fanatical Islamic militias when it comes to abusing refugees.

A broad alliance of European social democrats, conservatives and fascists are now collaborating with Sarradsch's Libyan coast guard to repulse and intimidate refugees. Their brutal mishandling of immigrants is linked to their policies for dealing with their "own" working class. The very same politicians who hermetically seal off the Mediterranean Sea and condemn refugees to torture, death and war are carrying out brutal welfare cuts and the militarisation of society throughout Europe.

In 1940, the Fourth International wrote in its manifesto on imperialist war: "Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our Planet into a foul prison."

The working class must respond with its own answer: It must unite internationally, defend the democratic right of every worker to live and work in the country of his or her choice, and fight for a socialist program. This is the program advocated by the Socialist Equality Party.



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