EU holds Paris conference to set up detention camps for migrants in Libya

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Yesterday, heads of state of Germany, France, Italy, and Spain and of the African states of Niger and Chad, together with UN-backed Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj of Libya attended a summit on immigration hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris.

The purpose of the summit stamped it with a politically criminal character. It discussed how to deny the right of asylum to hundreds of thousands of refugees and block their travel through Africa north to Libya and across the Mediterranean to Europe. The conference, attended by European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, discussed using the armed forces of the African regimes to detain refugees and send them back toward the countries they had fled, thus keeping them in Africa and deterring further migration.

The conference was an attempt above all to deal with the disastrous consequences of the 2011 NATO war in Libya, which destroyed the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and unleashed a bloody civil war that rages to this day. The summit also tried to contain escalating tensions among the European powers over which armed factions to support inside Libya.

Last week, the UN released a devastating report highlighting the horrific fate of vast numbers of refugees trapped in the civil war conditions of post-2011 Libya and exposing the forces that the EU is proposing to rely on to police refugees.

The UN reported, “Migrants continued to be subjected by smugglers, traffickers, members of armed groups and security forces to extreme violence; torture and other ill-treatment; forced labour; arbitrary deprivation of liberty; rape; and other sexual violence and exploitation. On 11 April 2017, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) denounced the presence of slave markets in Libya, where sub-Saharan migrants were bought and sold and women were traded as sex slaves.”

Based on reports from the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), the UN painted a portrait of conditions in detention camps set up for migrants in Libya to halt and deter migration. The UN found that victims of brutal conduct from the various warring militias that rule post-Gaddafi Libya “had little avenue for redress, due to a general state of lawlessness and the weakness of judicial institutions.”

It wrote, “UNSMIL visited detention centres under the control of the Department for Combatting Illegal Migration in Gharyan, Tripoli, Misrata and Surman, where thousands of migrants have been held arbitrarily for prolonged periods of time with no possibility to challenge the legality of their detention. UNSMIL had documented cases of torture, ill-treatment, rape and other forms of sexual violence. Detention centres remained overcrowded, and detainees were often malnourished, living in poor hygienic conditions and with limited or no access to medical care.”

The UN also documented the brutal conduct of EU-backed armed forces in Libya, who try to catch refugees to return them to these detention camps. Its report noted, “UNSMIL received numerous reports of dangerous, life-threatening interceptions by armed men believed to be from the Libyan Coast Guard. UNSMIL has been reviewing its support to the Libyan Coast Guard in line with the United Nations human rights due diligence policy.”

The conference issued a brief resolution late last night, calling for the EU to bring “particularly vulnerable” migrants from Libya to Europe, while relying on the armed forces of Niger and Chad and the various militias in Libya to keep refugees from reaching the Mediterranean. The conference also

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proposed to provide more equipment to the Libyan Coast Guard for its anti-refugee missions.

Macron said he wanted to "identify" which migrants are true refugees in Niger and Chad, before they could reach Libya on their journey north, so that others could be turned back. He blamed the terrible conditions that exist for refugees in Africa on people smugglers, declaring: "Certain trafficking groups that traffic in weapons, in human lives, and in drugs, and groups linked to terrorism have turned the desert in Africa and the Mediterranean into a graveyard. These same people are profoundly linked to terrorism."

These are political lies, designed to falsely present a brutal EU policy of denying asylum rights to refugees based on outright armed repression as respecting human rights. It is not people smugglers or refugees that are responsible for civil war conditions in Libya, but the NATO powers, which bombed Libya and armed various Islamist militias in a war for regime change. As in imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, Libyan society rapidly disintegrated.

Wars across the Middle East and Africa have now produced the greatest refugee crisis since World War II, with over 60 million people displaced from their homes. The reaction of the imperialist powers is not to halt the war drive or to seek to address the military conflicts and the poverty that is driving tens of millions to abandon their homes. Rather, they aim to work more closely with military dictatorships and irregular militias to prevent this unprecedented wave of migrants from reaching Europe.

Despite the European powers' criticisms of US President Donald Trump, including his call to build a wall to block Mexican immigration north into the United States, their own policy towards African refugees is equally ruthless and brutal. As thousands of refugees crossed in the Mediterranean, EU officials sought to limit rescue operations, hoping news of refugees drowning at sea would deter migrants from trying to reach Europe.

Rescue operations encourage migration, one British diplomat explained, and "create an unintended 'pull factor' thereby leading to more tragic and unnecessary deaths." The solution was to eliminate the "pull factor" created by rescue measures and discourage migration by allowing refugees to drown. Since then, thousands of innocent refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean—2,400 in the first eight months of 2017 alone.

Under these conditions, the EU's claim that it will bring "particularly vulnerable" migrants to Europe is another utterly cynical gesture. Any refugee in Libya is vulnerable due to the civil war conditions in the country, and promises to bring those that are "particularly vulnerable" only amounts to giving EU authorities the right to cherry-pick which refugees they will grant asylum.

According to initial reports, European officials at the conference summarily dismissed arguments by African heads of state that migration would continue so long as large parts of Africa are very poor. "The problem is poverty," Mogherini said, but she ruled out launching "a new Marshall Plan" to devote substantial funding to create jobs in Africa. European officials are reportedly thinking of spending €6 million initially on poverty programmes, or up to €50 million in the long term—a drop in the bucket in a poverty-stricken region inhabited by hundreds of millions of people.

The summit not only reflected the EU's militaristic and anti-refugee policy, but featured growing rivalries among the European powers over who would set the agenda and announce more ambitious plans to limit immigration to Europe. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is seeking re-election and trying to burnish her anti-immigrant credentials, announced yesterday a deal with the bloody Egyptian military dictatorship of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to limit migration to Europe.

Macron was compelled to abandon his plan to build French "hot spot" detention centres in Libya, presented in July amid sharp tensions with Italy, the former colonial power in Libya, as Paris and Rome backed rival armed forces inside Libya, led by General Khalifa Haftar and the Misrata militias, respectively.

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