

# Thousands of refugees forced onto death march into Sahara desert

Bill Van Auken  
26 June 2018

More than 13,000 refugees and migrants, including pregnant women and children, have been force-marched into the Sahara desert by Algerian security forces over the past 14 months, where many of them have died from hunger and exposure.

The shocking revelation by the Associated Press was substantiated by videos showing hundreds of migrants stumbling through a sand storm and others being driven in massive convoys of overcrowded trucks to be dumped at Algeria's southern border with Niger and forced into the desert at gunpoint.

As the AP itself makes clear, the murderous policy of the Algerian government is being carried out at the behest of the countries of the European Union, which have increasingly sought to induce North African regimes to act as their border guards, impeding the flow of migrants by means of intimidation, violence and death.

The refugees are being forced by Algerian security forces into the Sahara without food or water and, in many cases, after being robbed of their money and cellphones. They are pointed in the direction of the nearest settlement in Niger, over nine miles away, across empty sands where the temperature rises as high as 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

The migrants told AP of "being rounded up hundreds at a time, crammed into open trucks headed southward for six to eight hours to what is known as Point Zero, then dropped in the desert and pointed in the direction of Niger. They are told to walk, sometimes at gunpoint."

Two dozen different migrants who survived the crossing told the news agency that in their groups a number were unable to go on and died in the desert. "Women were lying dead, men ... Other people got missing in the desert because they didn't know the

way," said Janet Kamara of Liberia, who was pregnant when she was forced across the border. "Everybody was just on their own."

Kamara's baby died at birth and she was forced to bury him in a shallow grave in the desert. "I lost my son, my child," she said.

While the world's media has focused on the dangerous crossing from northern Africa to southern Europe having turned the Mediterranean into a watery graveyard for countless thousands, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), for every refugee who drowns in the sea, two more succumb to the relentless heat and harsh conditions of the Sahara. It estimates that the death toll in the desert exceeds 30,000 just since 2014.

The migrants expelled by Algeria come from countries throughout sub-Saharan Africa, including Niger, Mali, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Liberia and others.

"They come by the thousands ... I've never seen anything like it," Alhoussan Adouwal, an IOM official in Assamaka, Niger told AP. "It's a catastrophe."

A spokesperson for the European Union told AP that the EU is aware of what Algeria is doing with refugees and migrants, but that its view is that "sovereign countries" can carry out such expulsions so long as they comply with international law.

The revelations about the horrors inflicted upon refugees in the Sahara desert come on the eve of a summit meeting of EU member states on Thursday to discuss the issue of immigration.

On the eve of the summit, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini has been urging EU member states to put more money into an Africa trust fund with an eye toward financing the construction of "migrant screening" camps in North Africa. At the top of the EU

summit agenda is expected to be a proposal for holding asylum seekers at such camps in countries that include Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia.

In the run-up to the summit, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the right-wing, anti-immigrant Lega party and Italy's new interior minister, flew to Tripoli on Monday to praise the regime for its "excellent work" in "rescuing" nearly 1,000 people on Sunday after the Libyan Coast Guard intercepted them. The purpose of the coast guard, which is financed, trained and to some degree directed by Italy and other European powers, is not to rescue refugees trying to reach Europe, but rather to drag them back to Libya. There they face imprisonment in camps where torture and executions are commonplace and even being sold into slavery.

Salvini said that Italy would work with the UN-recognized regime, which controls little outside of Tripoli, to stop a "full-on invasion" of Libyan waters by aid groups seeking to rescue refugees at sea. He also called for migrant detention centers to be placed at Libya's southern border in the Sahara desert.

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Salvini has become infamous for refusing to allow rescue ships carrying refugees to dock at Italian ports. He ordered the *Aquarius* carrying over 600 refugees, including pregnant women and children, turned back earlier this month, forcing it to make a dangerous voyage to Spain. Presently, there are two ships in limbo in the Mediterranean carrying hundreds of refugees, a boat operated by German aid group Mission Lifeline with 234 aboard, and the Danish-flagged *Alexander Maersk* cargo ship with 100. In a statement laying bare the depth of the racism and reaction of the new Italian government, Salvini referred to the refugees as "human meat."

Meanwhile the new PSOE government in Spain, which allowed the *Aquarius* to dock and condemned the Italian response, dispatched its own interior minister, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, to Morocco with much the same mission as Salvini's in Libya, securing cooperation for immigrant detention camps.

Spain's new development minister, Jose Luis Abalos, told Cadena Ser radio that, while Spain is taking "a respectful humanitarian approach" toward the refugees' plight, it had no intention of becoming "Europe's maritime rescue organization."

Human rights groups have warned that refugees will be subject to abuse and denied asylum rights if kept in camps in Libya, Egypt and other North African countries with records of massive human rights abuses. EU Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos, who is playing a central role in plans for setting up these centers, responded to these concerns last week, declaring, "I want to be very clear on that. I'm against a Guantanamo Bay for migrants." He was referring to the Guantanamo Bay Naval base prison camp where those rounded up in the US "war on terror" were subjected to systematic torture.

In Europe, as in the US—where President Donald Trump has expressed his own desire to throw Central American refugees back into the desert without any asylum proceedings—the number of refugees and migrants has actually fallen steadily, even as the political hysteria whipped up by right-wing governments and politicians has sharply escalated.

According to the UN refugee agency, the number of migrants arriving in Europe is on track to reach just half the number for last year, and less than a quarter the number in 2016.

The "immigration crisis," both in Europe and America, is a noxious political invention, aimed at dividing the working class and scapegoating the most oppressed layers of the population and the victims of imperialist war and oppression for the continuously worsening conditions created by capitalism.



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