

European Union reduces maritime rescue operations in the Mediterranean

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After the European Union (EU) *de facto* halted rescue operations in the Mediterranean off the Libyan coast on Friday last week, ships from the EU Eunavfor Med Sophia mission sailed again on Monday. However, the mission has been saving fewer and fewer people from drowning for months.

In its three-year existence, the mission has saved at least 49,000 refugees from drowning and brought them to mainland Europe. Reducing official rescue operations, like the sabotage of private rescue missions, will immediately lead to a massive increase in fatalities.

Last Friday, the commander of the Sophia mission, Italian admiral Enrico Credendino, ordered all ships involved in the mission back to port. Although EU officials in Brussels had denied on Friday that the Sophia mission had been discontinued, the recall of the participating warships meant any organised sea rescues by the EU have been terminated.

On July 17, Italian Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi, an independent, sent a letter to the EU's high representative for foreign affairs, Federica Mogherini, who is officially responsible for the Sophia mission, saying that the Italian authorities would no longer accept refugees from EU vessels in the Mediterranean. The Italian government is demanding a distribution mechanism for refugees admitted into the EU.

After the Italian commander of the Sophia mission ordered the warships involved back to port, the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) decided at a crisis meeting to review and revise Sophia's operations for the next five weeks. In this way, the EU is essentially sanctioning the actions of the Italian government.

On Monday, the participants then agreed to allow the mission's ships to continue operations for the period of this review. However, it is questionable whether the

ships will even save refugees at all. The numbers of people rescued have already fallen sharply in recent months, probably because the ships avoid areas in which boats are most frequently in distress.

According to the *Tagesspiegel*, Brussels military circles say that the mission leadership wants any refugees to be picked up by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard and returned to Libya, in violation of international law, where they face imprisonment, torture and even slavery. Officially, the main purpose of this mission is not to conduct rescues at sea, but to fight against smugglers and train the Libyan Coast Guard.

By reducing the number of people rescued at sea, the EU has not only revealed its indifference to the fate of thousands of refugees, it is also openly breaking international refugee and maritime law and, at least through its failure to render assistance, is responsible for the mass deaths on the Mediterranean.

According to estimates by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), at least 1,490 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean this year. Although this is fewer than the 2,358 who died last year, in relation to the total number of refugees as a whole, the rate of drownings has increased significantly compared to the previous year.

With 629 refugees drowned in June, this was the deadliest ever. This is a direct consequence of the criminal policy of the Italian government and its partners in the EU, which has initially cracked down on private maritime rescuers and now virtually halted rescue operations.

Almost immediately after taking office, the government of Giuseppe Conte, comprising the right-wing extremist Lega and right-wing populist Five-Star Movement (M5S), initially refused to allow private

maritime rescue ships to enter Italian ports. For days, the *Aquarius* and then the *Lifeline* had to steam back and forth across the Mediterranean before they could dock at ports in Spain or Malta to land several hundred refugees in each. In Malta, the captain of the *Lifeline*, Claus-Peter Reisch, was arrested and interrogated.

The Conte government went even further and did not even allow the Italian Coast Guard ship *Diciotti* to dock with 67 refugees on board. Although the *Diciotti* was finally allowed to dock, shortly afterwards the Italian government prevented a ship of the Italian Guardia di Finanza and a boat that was used by the Frontex European border agency, with more than 450 refugees on board, from docking.

Although EU officials occasionally criticise the Italian government, they actually work closely with them to wage a barbaric war on refugees. At last month's EU summit, all the European governments agreed to build a comprehensive system of detention camps, the mass deportation of refugees and the massive expansion of border controls.

In this, the right-wing Italian government is setting the tone. The close collaboration with the Libyan Coast Guard is the best example of this. The Coast Guard apprehends refugees on the high seas and transports them under threat and use of violence back to Libya prison camps. The Italian government is deliberately violating the Convention on the Law of the Sea, which states that persons in distress must be unconditionally rescued and taken to the nearest port. The Geneva Refugee Convention also stipulates that refugees at the border must not be refused and certainly must not be returned to Libya.

Othman Belbeisi, who is responsible for the IOM in Libya, estimates the number of refugees there at 650,000. Nearly 10,000 are said to be in state and quasi-state prison camps. Since the NATO war against Libya and the murder of Muammar Gaddafi, all order has broken down in the country. The country is run by warlords and their militia, who act completely arbitrarily against refugees.

According to a confidential report of the EU border mission, which the broadcast programme "Monitor" quoted at the beginning of July, the officially recognised Libyan government of Fajes al-Sarradsch controls only "seven out of 32 refugee detention centres." "Human rights violations, extortion, sexual

abuse, enslavement, forced prostitution and torture" are commonplace there. Even the German foreign ministry described the Libyan prison camps as "concentration camp-like institutions."

The German government also supports the fight of the Libyan militias against refugees. At the end of June, Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned the work of the private maritime rescue services, saying they interfered with the work of the Libyan Coast Guard. "There is a commitment to let the Libyan Coast Guard do its work," she said. "And there is no right to just do things instead of the Libyan Coast Guard. Libya also has a right to protect its shores."

In fact, there are growing reports that the Libyan Coast Guard is acting with frightening ruthlessness and brutality. Militia leader Abd al-Rahman Milad, who rules west of Tripoli, has been accused by the UN of intentionally sinking refugee boats in order to bring the people on board back to Libya to the detention centres and enslave them.

The Spanish refugee relief organisation Open Arms, which operates off the Libyan coast with its own ship *Astral*, has now sued the Libyan Coast Guard for failing to provide assistance and the negligent killing of a woman and her four-year-old child. On July 16, a Libyan Coast Guard boat approached a dinghy full of refugees. The refugees made it clear that they did not want to return to Libya under any circumstances. The Libyan Coast Guard then used firearms to sink the boat and seize the desperate fugitives fighting for their lives in the sea to take them aboard and then on to a detention centre.

Two women, one with a toddler in her arms, doggedly refused to return to Libya. The Coast Guard simply left the two women and the child behind. Forty-eight hours later, in the remains of the dinghy, the *Astral* was only able to recover the bodies of the toddler and a woman.



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