

France refuses to let Aquarius dock as EU seeks to block refugees

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The French government refused to let the migrant vessel ship Aquarius dock in French ports on Tuesday, as it carried 58 desperate refugees fleeing war-torn Libya. This came as the European Union (EU) sought to block all rescue operations for refugees in the Mediterranean, where thousands have drowned, and Rome successfully put pressure on Panama to de-register the Aquarius, which was flying a Panamanian flag.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said that Paris would refuse the Aquarius permission to dock in the port of Marseille. “For the moment it’s ‘no’,” Le Maire told BFM-TV, claiming that EU rules mandate rescue vessels must dock at the nearest European port. “On matters of migration, the issue must be handled firmly and clearly, and European rules respected.”

Speaking to AFP, a source at the Elysée presidential palace also denied permission to the Aquarius to dock: “We are clear on the fact that it shouldn’t spend four to five days at sea going towards France or Spain or anywhere. It needs to dock soon and it is close to Malta at the moment.”

The passengers of the Aquarius were reportedly mostly better-off Libyans, trying to flee the city of Tripoli amidst escalating clashes between tribal or Islamist militias and abductions for ransom in the city, conditions that are the product of the civil war, which followed the 2011 NATO war that destroyed Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s government. A recent surge in fighting in Tripoli since August, which has killed at least 100 people, is driving people to flee in ever larger numbers.

One passenger on board the Aquarius, Malak, reported that her husband was kidnapped “a month ago in Tripoli. ... He was working in food sales and so he had money.” She took the decision to flee at that point

with her children, but as it was “impossible to obtain a passport with a visa,” she decided to risk crossing the Mediterranean by boat.

Ibtissem said that her family initially fled Tripoli to Zawiya for safety, but decided they had to move after their son was abducted by kidnappers armed with Kalashnikovs at a roadblock. They had to sell their two cars to raise the €8,750 ransom the kidnappers demanded to release their son, who had to spend two days in the hospital after the kidnappers beat him. “In Libya, we are dead people who are still breathing,” Ibtissem said. “We had to leave, there was no other solution.”

Yesterday, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal reached an agreement to divide up the refugees aboard the Aquarius. The Aquarius, they insisted, would not be allowed to dock. However, they decided that each country would take in 18, 15, 15 and 10 refugees, respectively.

Maltese authorities indicated that they would not allow the vessel to dock in their ports either, and that the refugees would be transferred to Maltese ships in international waters, at which point the Maltese ships would transport them ashore.

The EU powers are illegally trampling upon the fundamental right to asylum, moving aggressively to block the flow of refugees from North Africa across the Mediterranean to Europe. Only 38,140 people have attempted the Mediterranean crossing to Europe so far this year, compared to 121,000 last year, but already at least 1,260 have died. Under these conditions, the EU is stepping up attempts to end all rescue efforts for refugees in distress in the Mediterranean, financing the Libyan coast guard so they will forcibly return refugees to Libya, even though the country is in a state of civil war.

It has been widely reported that Libyan coast guard vessels regularly return refugees to EU-funded concentration camps in Libya, where they are subjected to horrific treatment. UN and Amnesty International officials have reported that inmates in these camps are subjected to assault, sexual assault, being sold into slavery, and even murder.

Last week, the Aquarius—the last remaining private rescue ship in the Mediterranean—was caught in a bitter conflict with Libyan coast guard vessels. The crew of the Aquarius told *Le Monde* that the commanders of a Libyan ship had threatened to take them all prisoner: “Do you know Tripoli? Do you want to go for a little visit? You’re not following our instructions! We told you not to intervene and not to get too close to the refugees. Now you will have major problems. You are encouraging migrants to come to Europe. Now we will approach and tell you what to do.”

The bullying and intimidation of the Aquarius is the product of the neo-fascistic turn and the contempt for the right to asylum shared by European bourgeois politicians of all stripes. Over a quarter century of NATO imperialist wars in Libya, Syria, Iraq and beyond, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, have forced 60 million refugees to flee their homes. Yet now, with more refugees than at any time since World War II, the EU powers are vindictively seeking to deny the right to asylum.

On the one hand, they are rapidly building a vast network of EU concentration camps, not only in Libya, but also in EU states such as Greece and beyond. For now, at least, they are being used to house tens of thousands of refugees under horrific conditions. Under pressure from the far-right Italian government, this apparatus of police terror directed against refugees and the entire working population is soon to massively escalate its activities.

The stage is being set for police raids and ethnic cleansing on a scale not seen in Europe since World War II and fascist rule. On Monday, the Italian council of ministers adopted a decree, dubbed the “Salvini decree” after Italy’s neo-fascist interior minister who drafted it, blocking Italian authorities from issuing or re-issuing humanitarian visas to refugees in Italy.

The impact of the Salvini decree would be to create large numbers of undocumented migrants and then prepare large-scale police raids in order to deport them

all. The number of refugees deported each year from Italy could surge from 5,000-7,000 to as many as 50,000. At the same time, Salvini has said that he is in talks with municipal authorities in cities across Italy to prepare the destruction of Roma camps and mass expulsions of Roma people.

Christopher Hein, a professor of law and immigration policies at Luiss University in Rome, told the *Guardian*: “The ultimate aim is to have no refugees at all in Italy through a combination of efforts: closure of seaports, criminalising migrant rescue NGOs, enhancing collaboration with the coastguard and now, with this decree, they target those who are already here, or who may come in future and not get any kind of protection—it is a deterrent measure.”

At the same time, EU and allied authorities are continuing to attack and terrorize ships in the Mediterranean who obey maritime law and seek to rescue refugees in distress that they encounter on the high seas. Yesterday, after close coordination of EU and Moroccan anti-migrant operations, a Moroccan warship fired on a refugee vessel, killing a 22-year-old woman and wounding three other refugees.



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