Over 450 refugees stranded in the Mediterranean for weeks as EU bars entry

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20 August 2019

For between one and three weeks, more than 450 refugees aboard two humanitarian rescue ships in the Mediterranean Sea have remained stranded and in increasingly desperate conditions, as European Union (EU) governments continue to bar them entry to the continent.

A total of 356 people are aboard the Ocean Viking, jointly operated by Doctors Without Borders and the SOS Mediterranean. The ship has been sailing back and forth between Italy and Malta in international waters, 32 miles off the European coast, since August 12, awaiting a port at which to land. France, Spain, Malta and Italy have all refused. The passengers, mainly hailing from Sudan, include 259 men, four women, and 103 minors (of whom 92 are unaccompanied), who had set sail for Italy from Libya before they were rescued.

A second boat, the Proactiva Open Arms, run by the Catalan-based humanitarian organization of the same name, has been stranded in search of a safe port for 19 days. Since Thursday it has been anchored less than 300 meters off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. The Italian government and its Interior Minister Mateo Salvini have refused to allow the ship to land, with Salvini placing his foul attacks on the ship at the center of his efforts to whip up a fascistic movement through anti-immigrant chauvinism and racism.

On Sunday, Proactiva announced that it had rejected the cynical and fraudulent offer by the Spanish Socialist Party government, which for weeks has refused requests to allow the Open Arms to board at its ports, to land at Algeciras.

Oscar Camps, the founder of the organization, wrote in a Twitter post that the government of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez was offering "the farthest-away port of the Mediterranean." In reality, the Spanish government, which six days earlier had contemptuously dismissed an appeal by Proactiva to take in 31 minors from the ship, was making an offer it knew would be refused. The same day, following the Spanish announcement, France's Macron administration announced that the country of 67 million people could accept a maximum of 40 refugees.

Laura Lanuza, a spokeswoman for the organization, stated that the refugees were "in a state of extreme humanitarian emergency. What they need is to be disembarked now. There is anxiety, bouts of violence, control is becoming increasingly difficult… It is unthinkable to navigate for six days; that is what it would take for us to arrive at Algeciras."

Camps posted a video on Sunday, showing four refugees who had jumped into the water in an attempt to swim to Lampedusa being rescued and returned to the boat shortly after. "If the worst happens, Europe and Salvini will be responsible," Proactiva said in a Tweet.

On August 7, Proactiva had written a letter to the governments of France, Spain and Germany, requesting that they activate a so-called "formal coordination petition" through the European Commission in order to distribute the refugees throughout the continent.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted on August 14, the EU governments' barring of refugee rescue ships from their shores recalls nothing so much as the infamous fate of the MS St Louis' "voyage of the damned," whose passengers, overwhelmingly German Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, were refused haven by the governments of Europe and America 80 years ago.

The EU powers are acting with a definite strategy. The publicized refusal of refugee ships is aimed at dissuading asylum seekers in Africa from exercising their democratic and legal right, recognized under

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international law, to seek asylum in Europe.

Secondly, the holding of the rescue boats captive in the Mediterranean leaves them unable to conduct any further rescue operations. This serves the broader efforts of the EU to prevent rescues in the Mediterranean that would transport asylum seekers to Europe, and ensure that refugees either drown or are captured by Libyan militia forces, who transport their captives to EU-funded concentration camps, where they are forced to labor or directly sold into slavery, robbed, beaten, raped or killed.

While the French, German and Spanish governments have made mild criticisms of Salvini's crude anti-immigrant demagogy against Open Arms, the reality is that they have no significant differences with his policies. They differ only tactically, believing that the barring of refugees from Europe can be carried out more efficiently and provoke less outrage in the population than via Salvini's fascistic strategy.

French President Macron hosted a meeting of European ministers on July 22 to discuss a proposal from Paris and Berlin to establish a so-called "solidarity mechanism" for refugees. As is typical of the pious hypocrisy of the European ruling class, the humanitarian name of the initiative is in direct proportion only to its reactionary content.

Macron, announcing the agreement of eight countries to the accord (including France, Germany, Portugal, Luxemburg, Lithuania, Croatia and Ireland) made clear that it would have nothing to do with accepting more refugees into Europe. Rather, those who arrive will be more rapidly transferred to member states for processing, in order to allow for the more efficient rejection of claims and deportation of refugees.

"We are going to step up our work under the authority of the [immigration] commission, with all the relevant services, including Frontex, to create mechanisms for the return to their countries of origin of those who do not have the right to asylum, in a manner that is much more rapid and much more efficient than that which we have today," Macron said.

They would additionally permit the "voluntary return of those who do not have the right to reside in Europe, so as to avoid the costs being borne only by the [EU] country of arrival." This will be accompanied by a stepped-up attack on private rescue operators. Macron said that they would "enforce as well the obligations of rescue ships, including to respect the instructions given by the center of rescue coordinations or the banning of complicating the mission of the Libyan coast-guards."

Macron's anti-immigrant program is supported by the entire French political establishment, including the Socialist Party and Melenchon's Unsubmissive France. Melenchon has maintained a radio silence on the fate of Ocean Viking and Open Arms, not posting so much as a single tweet on the matter.

Amidst a rise in working-class strikes and opposition to social inequality, the European ruling class is utilizing the attacks on immigrants to elevate the far right and as a means of dividing the working class.

Beginning earlier this year, the EU has withdrawn all ships that had conducted rescue missions in the Mediterranean under Operation Sophia. The operation now does not have a single ship at its disposal, but uses aerial drones to monitor the Mediterranean Sea. Frontex watches from above as refugees drown or provides instructions to Libyan militia to catch them.

Since 2014 alone, an estimated 14,000 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean attempting to reach the European continent. Charity and humanitarian ships that have stepped in to fill the void have been systematically persecuted and charged with "aiding illegal migration," or had their sailing rights stripped.

The two ships involved in the current standoff are one example. The Proactiva Open Arms was unable to operate in the central Mediterranean for seven months because of a ban by the Sanchez government, which cynically declared that the vessel was not seaworthy or safe to operate long journeys. The ship's crew decided to defy the ban and set sail in June.

The Ocean Viking is the successor to the Aquarius, which was operated by the same two French-based organizations. The Aquarius was permanently docked at Marseille in October, after three years of operations during which it had rescued more than 30,000 people stranded at sea. The ship was refused a flag to sail under by all the governments of the EU, leaving it unable to legally leave the port.

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