Rescue of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea halted

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For twelve days earlier this month, the rescue ship Alan Kurdi, with 150 refugees on board, waited for permission to land at a European port. This is like a scene from the 1930s, when Jews fleeing Hitler were denied safe haven by all the great powers.

In a cynical act, Malta and Italy declared their own ports unsafe because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only last Friday were the refugees and crew of the Alan Kurdi, a German vessel, transferred to an Italian ferry, where they will be tested for coronavirus and spend a fortnight in quarantine.

The Alan Kurdi rescued 150 refugees from two wooden boats on April 6, but the ship was then prevented from entering a European port. The situation on board the vessel, which was not designed to accommodate so many people over such a long period of time, became increasingly acute.

The rescuing of the refugees itself had been extremely dramatic. On the morning of April 6, the Alan Kurdi, under Captain Bärbel Beuse, rushed to a wooden boat in international waters off the coast of Libya, with 68 refugees on board. During the rescue, a speedboat belonging to the self-proclaimed European Union (EU)-backed Libyan coast guard turned up. Without any warning, the Libyans fired into the air, and half the refugees jumped into the water in panic, without life jackets. The crew of the Alan Kurdi threw all available life-saving equipment into the sea, but the refugees could only be plucked from the water when the Libyan coast guard boat pulled away.

During this operation, the Alan Kurdi received notice of another maritime emergency further north. There, 82 refugees in another wooden boat were in distress. The offshore supply ship Asso Ventinove, which arrived at the scene several hours before the Alan Kurdi, refused to mount any rescue operation, claiming it had to stand ready for a possible accident on an oil rig. Therefore, the rescue ship evacuated this boat and asked the Italian authorities for permission to land at a safe harbour with the 150 refugees on board.

The Alan Kurdi set course for the waters north of the Sicilian port of Palermo, but was forbidden from landing. On April 8, the Italian government issued a new decree, stating that the country's ports were not safe havens for people rescued at sea by non-Italian flagged vessels during the coronavirus emergency. An almost identical decree had previously been adopted by the Maltese government. Malta and Italy also made it clear that they would not allow rescue vessels to land even if the distribution of refugees to other EU states had been agreed beforehand.

The reason given was that it would no longer be possible to help migrants, as the police and military were concentrating their resources on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, medical care could no longer be guaranteed, as the health system was already overburdened with the care of those suffering from COVID-19.

This argument cynically pits human life against human life. The suffering of the victims of the coronavirus crisis should not be the reason for "refusing help to those who are not in danger of suffocating in an intensive care bed, but of drowning," according to a joint statement by Médecins sans Frontières [Doctors Without Borders], SOS Méditerranée, Sea Watch and Open Arms.

Nevertheless, the countries bordering the Mediterranean have stopped providing all aid to refugees in distress at sea. They are also supported in this by the German federal government. The German Interior Ministry, headed by Horst Seehofer, has called on all refugee aid organisations in the Mediterranean to halt their sea rescue operations. "In view of the current difficult situation, we therefore appeal to you not to begin any voyages at present and to recall ships that have already set sail," the head of the ministry's Migration Department wrote to Sea-Eye, among others.

The chairman of Sea-Eye, Gorden Isler, told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, "These are the same politicians who have been stressing for weeks that those affected by the corona crisis must accept all restrictions on freedom, because the aim is to save lives—and every single life is precious. On the other hand, they say we should stop the rescue work? It's like saying, 'Let people die.'"

But that is precisely the aim and slogan of the European

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governments.

In the week before Easter, according to information from the aid organisation Watch the Med—Alarmphone, as a result of better weather and the worsening situation in Libyan refugee and internment camps, more than 2,000 refugees set off for Europe in around 20 vessels, with ten of them needing assistance.

The Alan Kurdi was initially denied urgently needed drinking water, food, and fuel. On April 12, the crew was promised that an Italian quarantine ship would receive the rescued refugees within a few hours. But it was not for another five days that the ship even set sail.

Due to the tense situation on board the Alan Kurdi, the cramped conditions and uncertainty, conflicts became more and more frequent. On Wednesday, a refugee who had been held for months in a Libyan internment camp and had experienced terrible violence tried to slit his wrists. He and his two cousins were taken aboard boats belonging to the Italian coast guard.

In the process, other refugees threatened to throw themselves into the sea. “People are totally desperate and have been held on the Alan Kurdi for ten days. They indicated that they wanted to jump into the water to reach the Italian boats. They could hardly be calmed down,” said Jan Ribbeck, head of operations at Sea-Eye.

The Spanish-flagged Aita Mari, with 47 refugees on board, is now also not being allowed to enter port.

Not only are the authorities refusing to allow rescue vessels to enter their ports, they have also virtually stopped all sea rescue operations themselves, with terrible consequences for the refugees.

The aid organisation Alarmphone received distress calls from four rubber dinghies packed with refugees during the night of April 9-10. While two boats were still able to reach the Sicilian coast under their own power, and one was evacuated by the Spanish Aita Mari, there was no trace of the last boat for days. While the Italian and Maltese coast guards took no action, the self-proclaimed Libyan coast guard declared that they “cannot carry out any rescue operations at present because they do not have any face masks.”

The situation on board one inflatable vessel, packed with 63 refugees, was deteriorating rapidly. Water was coming in; children were screaming from thirst. Only on April 14, four days after the first distress alert, when the inflatable boat finally drifted into the Maltese sea rescue zone, did the Maltese authorities give the order to look for the boat. The Portuguese cargo ship Ivan stopped a mile away from the dinghy and observed the further developments. However, due to its size and the high swell, the Ivan was unable to carry out a rescue operation itself.

Seven refugees jumped desperately into the sea to get to the cargo ship. All seven drowned. Hours later, the remaining 56 refugees were picked up by a fishing boat, which illegally returned them to Libya. Five refugees did not survive the journey and died of hunger and dehydration.

In Libya, the fighting between the militias of the internationally recognised government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and Gen. Khalifa Haftar continues unabated. Artillery fire is commonplace in Tripoli and sometimes so heavy that 280 refugees who had been picked up by the self-appointed Libyan coast guard could not be brought ashore.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is making the situation of refugees even more difficult. Many international aid organisations have withdrawn from Libya. Refugees report that the supply of food and drinking water for them has collapsed.

In this situation, to halt sea rescues and attempt to send stricken refugees to their certain deaths is a crime. Maltese military personnel are even said to have deliberately tried to kill migrants. The 70 refugees on board a rubber dinghy reported that the Maltese naval speedboat P52 stopped at the marooned people, but only to cut the cables of the engine and to say, “We’ll let you die here. None of you will get to Malta.” Only hours later were they rescued and taken to Valletta.

“The situation is the worst I’ve experienced in all these years,” said Britta Rabe, a member of the Alarmphone staff, in an interview with the daily *Die Welt* on Tuesday. “The coast guards in Italy, Malta and Libya are no longer saving anyone. No one who gets into distress at sea will be helped.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has thus become a wretched and dishonest excuse to halt aid to refugees and to abolish the fundamental right to asylum in the European Union. The chairman of the rescue organisation Sea-Eye rightly stated, “It is unacceptable that rescue packages worth billions are being made available for industry, but at the same time, it is claimed that there are no resources to protect migrants. Europe has created a situation where humanitarian disasters are played off against each other.”

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