

EU policy responsible for the massive death toll in the Mediterranean Sea

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More than 100 refugees drowned in four shipping accidents in the central Mediterranean Sea last week. On the beach of al-Khums in Libya alone, 74 bodies were washed up on Thursday. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), just 47 refugees survived that day, after being rescued by fishing boats and the coast guard.

This means that the number of refugees drowned in the central Mediterranean has risen to over 900 this year. In total, more than 1,200 refugees have lost their lives trying to reach Europe in 2020. Many other incidents at sea with loss of lives are likely unrecorded. All of these deaths are a direct consequence of the criminal exclusion policy of the European Union, which rejects refugees at the continent's external borders using illegal and criminal methods.

Only a few hours after the bodies of the 74 refugees were discovered on the Libyan coast, the organisation Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) provided medical aid to three women in another shipping accident near the Libyan port city of Sorman. The women, who were pulled out of the water by fishermen, had witnessed 20 refugees drowning. "They are in shock and terrified," MSF reported on Twitter. "They had to watch how loved ones disappeared in the waves and died before their eyes."

The mild autumn weather in Europe has encouraged refugees to attempt the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean. However, since October 1 at least eight refugee boats have capsized, and at least 250 refugees drowned.

This total includes the case of a rubber dinghy that had set off from Sabratha in Libya with almost 100 men, women and children on board. The self-made dinghy quickly lost air and the boat literally broke apart, plunging all of the occupants into the sea. Aid workers on the "Open Arms" rescue ship confronted a dramatic scene, with almost all of the people desperately fighting for their lives.

The workers documented the rescue operation on video, including the panicked cries of a 20-year-old mother from Guinea, "Where is my baby? I have lost my baby!" The crew of the "Open Arms" eventually found the half-drowned baby named Joseph. Due to his serious condition, the rescue workers called for a rescue helicopter from Lampedusa. When it arrived, Joseph had already died of cardiac arrest. Five other refugees did not survive.

"We did everything we could to save the passengers," the helpers explained. "This incident happened only a few kilometres off the coast of an indifferent Europe. Instead of providing a well-organised sea rescue service, Europe just buries its head in the sand and pretends not to notice the graveyard the Mediterranean Sea has become."

A spokesman for the organisation "Alarm Phone," which operates an emergency telephone service for refugees in distress at sea, commented on recent tragedies to the British *Guardian* newspaper. "This is a bloodbath on Europe's external borders. What more can we say? We have been calling for fundamental change for years, but the dying continues. It is devastating."

A cold-blooded deliberate policy

The fact is that the European Union has deliberately withdrawn from sea rescue in the Mediterranean. The cold-blooded policy adopted by decision-makers in Brussels, Berlin, Paris and Rome regards the deaths of hundreds of refugees each year in the Mediterranean as a deterrent aimed at ensuring that others do not dare attempt the crossing.

This argument is both false and inhuman. The withdrawal of the state-organised European sea rescue service has not led to a decrease in the number of crossings. The number of refugees who have landed in Italy this year has tripled to 31,000 so far. In 2019 this figure stood at about 11,000.

The increase in attempts to flee to Europe is primarily due to the devastating conditions prevailing in Libya, where militias financed by Europe have been waging a bloody civil war for years over the exploitation of valuable oil and gas resources. Refugees stranded in Libya, who often come from other war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Sudan, have been caught between the fronts and are interned and kept as slaves under inhuman conditions. These people then resort to any means to leave their Libyan hellhole.

In order to prevent them from fleeing to Europe, the EU has not only stopped sea rescue operations, it is also preventing private sea rescue organisations from helping people in need.

Four rescue ships are currently being prevented from leaving port on the basis of the flimsiest excuses. In one case additional paperwork has been requested; for another further technical tests were required. The *Louise Michel*, sponsored by the British street artist Banksy, is stuck in a Spanish port; *SeaWatch 4* in Palermo, Sicily; the *Alan Kurdi* run by the organisation Sea Eye in Olbia, Sardinia; and the *Ocean Viking* run by SOS Méditerranée in Porto Empedocle, Sicily.

Only the Spanish vessel *Open Arms* was able to undertake a rescue mission but is now waiting with almost 260 refugees on board for permission to enter a European port. This has proven to be a tug-of-war over the past few months with both Italy and Malta using the COVID-19 pandemic to declare their ports unsafe. The *Open Arms* will therefore not be allowed to enter a port until other EU member states agree to accept the refugees on board. Responsibility for this tragic train of events lies with the EU and its deliberate calculation aimed at wearying private sea rescuers to the point where they give up.

The withdrawal of the European Union from rescue operations in the Mediterranean is a scandal and a blatant violation of international law, with fatal consequences for the refugees concerned. The EU has handed over sea rescue missions to the Libyan "Coast Guard," which it has trained and equipped. In reality, these guards are often the same militias who wage civil war and treat refugees worse than cattle.

More than 11,000 refugees on their way to Europe were "rescued" by the coast guard and brought back to Libya this year. They had sought to

make their way to Europe to find refuge from war, persecution and the Libyan henchmen who had robbed, blackmailed and mistreated them under the eyes of the EU. Now they are once again being interned and enslaved.

The Canary Islands

The sealing off of the European Union from refugees begins thousands of kilometres west of the central Mediterranean. Under conditions where the EU is exerting massive pressure on North African states, such as Mali, Niger and Algeria, to take action against refugees and migrant workers, escape routes are becoming increasingly dangerous.

One of these routes now leads along the West African coast towards the Canary Islands, which belong to Spain. On October 23, one boat broke apart on this route after its engine exploded, and 140 refugees drowned. Last weekend alone, more than 2,200 refugees landed on the Canary Islands within three days in small fishing boats that had undertaken the crossing of more than 1,000 kilometres. Since the beginning of the year, more than 14,500 have sought to flee via this route.

Most of the refugees were detected by the Spanish coast guard and brought to the port of Arguineguin on Gran Canaria. The camp, where refugees are housed for days, is completely overcrowded and has the nickname "Camp of Shame."

The camp "is completely unacceptable, degrading and even endangers the health of the migrants," Mustafa Galah Leman from Catholic Caritas on Gran Canaria told Deutsche Welle. "We call on the government and all those responsible to make more resources available and guarantee the humanitarian reception of refugees worthy of an EU country."

Although EU Interior Commissioner Ylva Johansson expressed concern about the increase in the number of refugees on this deadly escape route, she stressed it was now important "that those who have no right to international protection are effectively repatriated."

The route to the Canary Islands is the most deadly in the world. According to IOM estimates, one in 16 refugees does not survive the crossing. The number of unreported cases is extremely high, since boats repeatedly miss the islands and drift out into the Atlantic Ocean.

The role of Frontex

Despite the rising toll of death and misery, EU interior ministers agreed last week to further strengthen the sealing off of the external borders in the wake of the recent terror attacks in France and Austria. "We need to know who is entering and who is leaving," said German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer after the video conference.

The EU interior ministers also gave their backing to the European border protection agency Frontex, which has come under increasing fire in recent weeks for tolerating the illegal repatriation of refugees at borders, so-called "pushbacks." In some cases, Frontex officials were directly involved.

According to the European Charter of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention on Refugees, every refugee's application for asylum must be heard and examined individually. The brutal repression of people at the EU's external borders, without any examination of their reasons for flight, is a violation of the principle of equal treatment.

The media organizations *Der Spiegel*, Bellingcat, ARD, Lighthouse Reports and TV Asahi have collected material that clearly demonstrates

the involvement of Frontex officials in these pushbacks.

In one documented case, border guards brought a boat to waters near the Greek island of Lesbos. The guards then sabotaged the engine and forced refugees at gunpoint to tie their boat to a speedboat of the Greek coast guard. A Romanian Frontex boat observed this illegal action without intervening. A German Frontex boat documented the incident, which has remained without consequences.

"These pushbacks violate the ban on collective rejection and maritime law," according to Dana Schmalz, international law expert at the Max Planck Institute in Heidelberg. The EU Border Protection Agency, however, denies any involvement in the pushbacks. Apparently, the agency's internal files are being doctored to ensure that no human rights violations appear. This is how the pushbacks observed in the reports are transformed into legal "returns" (repatriations).

Within a few years Frontex has become a powerful EU authority that is not subject to any public control. With its billion-euro budget, the EU border protection agency can draw on its own ships and vehicles, order its own armaments and undertake ruthless measures against refugees at EU borders. The public has only limited information rights vis-à-vis Frontex, and refugees cannot legally defend themselves against it. Neither the EU Parliament nor the EU Commission is willing or able to fully control this bureaucratic monster.

The disenfranchisement of refugees has assumed staggering dimensions since Frontex was founded. Evidence of more than 800 cases of illegal pushbacks has now been collected in Croatia, documenting the brutal actions of European border officials.

In October 2020, the aid organisation Danish Refugee Council documented the statements of a group of 23 refugees and immigrants who related that men in uniform with balaclavas forced them to strip naked and then beat them brutally, one after the other with sticks, whips and kicks.

In Croatia, Frontex officials have observed massive human rights violations on the country's border with Bosnia-Herzegovina but have said nothing. The same policy of "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil" applies in Greece. At the governmental level, no EU member state considers it necessary to complain about violence against refugees at external borders. Brussels diplomats explained the official EU position to the internet portal Euractiv as follows: "These people are trying to cross the border illegally through forests. And there is sometimes violence when the police try to catch those who run away."

Frontex Director Fabrice Leggieri is due to respond by the end of November to the accusations of Frontex's involvement in pushbacks, in an appearance before the EU Commission. The border protection agency, however, has little to fear. The use of brutality and terror against refugees and their disenfranchisement is a consensus among European governments.



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