

As Mediterranean drownings continue, European Human Rights Commissioner condemns EU refugee policy

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17 March 2021

A report published this week by the European Human Rights Commissioner confirms the criminal and murderous character of the European Union's refugee policy, which consists in deliberately allowing refugees to drown in the Mediterranean Sea as a means of blocking them from claiming asylum on the continent.

The report comes as the incidence of mass drownings between Africa and Europe has continued unabated in the opening months of 2021. The events reported in the media include:

- Last week, on March 9, the Tunisian defence ministry announced that at least 39 people drowned when two boats travelling to Europe capsized. The death count was based only on the number of bodies that rescuers retrieved before they were forced to suspend rescue operations. The dead included at least nine women and four children. Another 165 people were rescued.

- Three weeks earlier, on February 24, 41 people drowned in the central Mediterranean, according to a joint statement by the UN and International Organization of Migration. At least 120 people had left Libya on a small dinghy on February 18, which began to take on water after 15 hours at sea. The missing, presumed dead, included three children and four women, one of whom leaves behind a newborn child that has since been taken to Lampedusa, Italy.

- On February 12, the Tunisian navy confirmed that it had rescued 25 people from a small capsized boat that had set off from the Tunisian port of Sfax that day. All of the passengers were thrown into the water when the boat sank. The survivors reported that 48 people had been

aboard when the boat departed. Of the 23 missing, only one body was recovered.

- On January 19, a dinghy carrying more than 50 people capsized after leaving the Libyan port city of Zawiyah, in the west of Tripoli. At least 43 people drowned. The survivors said that everyone on the boat had come from West Africa. The survivors were then transported back to detention camps in Libya.

The Missing Migrants Project, which tracks refugee deaths internationally, has counted 291 deaths since the beginning of this year in the Mediterranean alone. The count of the people who drowned in the Mediterranean since 2014 is more than 20,000. But these horrific totals are themselves no doubt significant underestimates, as they do not include those who drowned without their journey being reported or their bodies ever being recovered.

To the extent that these deaths are reported in the media or acknowledged by European governments, they are treated as unfortunate tragedies, as though they had nothing to do with the policies that these same governments have implemented.

Yet every one of them is the direct outcome of the policies of the European Union. The EU has closed off safer routes for claiming asylum, closed down its naval rescue operations in the Mediterranean, sabotaged the operation of NGO rescue ships in the region, and financed and collaborated with Libyan coastguards to catch refugees and return them to prison, where they are forced to labor, beaten and assaulted, and in some cases literally sold into slavery to militias which hold them ransom to their families.

Those attempting to exercise their democratic and legal

right to claim asylum in Europe are fleeing conditions of poverty and social breakdown that are the outcome of neo-colonial interventions and economic exploitation by the European powers and the United States.

This week's report by the European Commissioner for Human Rights confirms the responsibility of the EU for this social crime. Entitled "A widening gap in migrant protection in the Mediterranean," it is a follow-up to a report the agency produced in 2019, calling for a series of actions by the EU to protect refugees attempting to reach Europe. In the two years since, the authors write, the restriction of rescue operations in the Mediterranean has only been tightened.

"Already since August 2018, no military ship has carried out any rescue operation in the Central Mediterranean under [Operation Sophia], whereas between January 2016 and July 2018 the operation rescued over 35,000 refugees and migrants," the authors state.

In another passage, they note that the successor to Operation Sophia, Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, was established in April 2020. Yet its focus was shifted to the eastern Mediterranean "between Greece and Egypt, reducing the likelihood of encountering refugees and migrants in distress at sea and of being obliged to carry out rescues and disembarkations in a place of safety." Explaining this shift, they point to a clause inserted into the operation's mission statement that its interventions should not cause a "pull effect on migration."

In other words, nothing should be done that would lead migrants to believe they might be rescued if their boat sinks, as this would encourage them to attempt the crossing to Europe.

Meanwhile, the authors state, "NGO-run search and rescue activities have continued to be hindered, either through administrative or criminal proceedings, or simply by preventing disembarkation, so that a number of NGO ships have not been able to resume rescue operations."

In March and May, for example, not a single NGO rescue vessel was reported to be present at sea. "In April 2020, just two NGO-operated vessels were present at sea, for a total of only five days. Since June 2020, a few vessels have resumed their rescue activities. However, at least ten NGO vessels had been confined to ports for specific periods, and some continue to be held at the time of writing."

Search operations have instead been transferred to Libyan coastguards, with the aim of returning refugees back to Libya. The United Nations Human Rights

Commission has called for an end to the practice of returning refugees to Libya, in the wake of widely-reported revelations of torture, murder and selling of refugees into slavery. Yet since then, the EU's use of the Libyan coastguard as a border force has intensified. In 2019, the authors note, 9,225 people were involuntarily returned to Libya. In 2020, this rose by 34 percent to 11,891.

Even as the report was handed down, the EU was meeting to decide how to intensify its anti-refugee policies. The EU interior ministers held an online meeting on March 12, where they agreed to a proposal to threaten third countries with reduced access to visas if they refuse to accept the return of refugees whose claims are rejected in Europe. "If countries do not cooperate on repatriation, there must be consequences," said German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer. "Those who do not take back their own citizens cannot expect any visa facilitation."

EU Interior Commissioner Ylva Johansson complained that of around 500,000 rejected asylum seekers, only 140,000 to 150,000 were deported in 2019. "We really have to speed it up,"

The Commissioner for Human Rights is an arm of the Council of Europe, which was established in 1949 in the wake of World War II. Yet its latest report has received virtually no coverage in the major media publications and has been met with total silence among EU governments.

If an equivalent report were published showing that the Russian or Chinese governments were deliberately allowing refugees to die on their borders, it would be the subject of wall-to-wall media coverage, frontpage cover photos, and the shedding of crocodile tears in EU circles—in order to justify a diplomatic and military build-up against those countries.

The EU's anti-refugee policies are a political mechanism through which the far-right and neo-fascist forces are being systematically rehabilitated by the EU. The defense of immigrants and the right of all people to live and work in any country of their choosing, with full citizenship rights, is an elemental task of the European working class.



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