

Italian government closes refugee camp on Lampedusa

By Marianne Arens
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The Italian government is preparing to deport hundreds of North African refugees. According to an interior ministry report of October 2, more than 600 Tunisians were to be flown from Palermo in Sicily to Tunis over the past few days. The refugee camp on the Italian island of Lampedusa was completely cleared 10 days ago.

On September 20, some 800 refugees escaped from the camp following the outbreak of a large fire. They were then hunted by police throughout the whole island, rounded up, and eventually evacuated on ferries, naval vessels and air force planes within a few days.

Some 200 Tunisians were deported immediately, and the rest taken to other Italian refugee centres. For a whole week, 352 people were detained on two ships in Palermo harbour, without being allowed any contact with the outside world. The last of them have apparently now been deported.

These people, who had already suffered dire deprivations on their Mediterranean odyssey before reaching Lampedusa, have been held in refugee camps under inhumane conditions for weeks and even months.

The camp, located in a valley behind the town of Lampedusa, was initially completely closed off from the island's community. No journalists were allowed entry, and Carabinieri stationed on the surrounding hills made escape over the fence impossible. The people spent their time mainly waiting in cramped conditions, where they were provided with very little food and extremely poor sanitary facilities.

The site, designed to hold up to a maximum of 850 people, had been hopelessly overcrowded for years; often as many as 3,000 were crammed into it.

About 54,000 people from North Africa have already landed on Lampedusa this year. About half of them are Tunisians—mostly young people, who broke away from the country to find work in Europe, following the overthrow of the Ben Ali dictatorship in the spring. In April, however, the Berlusconi government reached an agreement with the Tunisian transitional government to have them returned. In mid-August, this horse trading was renewed to include an

agreement on the removal of all Tunisian refugees in exchange for financial support for the Transitional Council in Tunis.

Also fleeing Libya every week were hundreds of people, mostly migrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa, trying to escape from the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) war against the country or racist attacks by the so-called “rebels”. In mid-August, another 1,800 people from Janzour near the Libyan capital of Tripoli landed on Lampedusa.

Most recently, about 1,300 people were reported to be in the Lampedusa camp, some 480 more people from North Africa having reached the island in mid-September.

When the fire broke out on September 20, hundreds of refugees vainly tried to find safety somewhere on the island or to get away from it. Most of them were recaptured within a few hours.

About 300 refugees finally gathered near the commercial port of Lampedusa. They held up sheets used as banners, on which were painted broken chains and “Freedom—Libertà” and “Scusa Lampedusa” (We’re sorry, Lampedusa).

They spent the whole night together near an old petrol station guarded by armed policemen. No one gave them water or anything to eat, and journalists were not allowed near them.

Since then, the authorities have been reacting very nervously, and the island's airport has been closed to civilian traffic. Interior Minister Roberto Maroni appeared before the press in Rome to say he would ensure that the island would be completely cleared within two days. Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa also promised to deport all the migrants “as soon as possible”.

Maroni and La Russa are typical representatives of the current Italian government: Maroni is a member of the separatist and racist party Lega Nord, and La Russa comes from the Alleanza Nazionale (the successor party of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI), which has teamed up with Silvio Berlusconi's ruling party.

No party, not even any of those from the centre-left, is concerned that the government has completely eroded the

right of asylum in recent years. It has declared illegal entry into Italy to be a penal offence, extended the detention of refugees in the refugee camps from 2 to 6 months, and turned the reception centres into militarily guarded camps reminiscent of concentration camps, even naming them in Italian after the German word for “camp”.

According to journalists’ reports, the police on Lampedusa were augmented by forces from the mainland during this latest confrontation. Some of these wore shirts with the inscription “Genoa 2011—I was there”—an allusion to the bashing orgy at the time unleashed by the police against anti-globalisation protesters—and other fascist symbols. It was obvious that a violent confrontation with the defenceless refugees was deliberately allowed to take place.

In the early morning of September 21, the police confronted a group of frightened, exhausted refugees on the port side of Lampedusa. The police were accompanied by various types of Italian thugs, loudly demanding the expulsion of all refugees, whom they reviled as “animals” and pelted with stones. They told the police: “If you can’t get rid of them, we’ll take care of it ourselves.” They prevented several journalists from approaching group of refugees, and smashed the camera of a reporter from the local Tg3 television station.

Bernardino de Rubeis, the mayor of Lampedusa, appeared on the scene at 10 p.m. After speaking with the police and the thugs, he went over to the refugees and told them they were all to be deported. Some of the Tunisians apparently then threatened to explode a number of gas bottles.

The area was completely cordoned off immediately. The police then moved against the refugees from all sides, herding them with truncheon blows. In doing so, the police made no objection to being aided by fascist thugs who were armed with iron bars.

To avoid the onslaught, many refugees jumped over a three-metre-high wall, whereby several were injured falling deeply on the other side. A filming of the scene by the blogger Gabriele Del Grande was shown on the Internet.

All the North Africans were arrested and expelled from Lampedusa within a short period. A ferry brought 221 people to the Elmas camp on Sardinia. Two other ships, the Moby Vincent and the Audacia, set out for Palermo, Sicily, with a total of 352 on board.

Giuseppe Bisogno, head of police in Agrigento, made assurances to the press on the Friday evening of September 23: “The situation on Lampedusa is completely under control.” A refugee boat with 75 people was discovered off Lampedusa on the same Friday. It was directly escorted by the coast guard to the Sicilian harbour of Porto Empedocle, and thus prevented from landing on Lampedusa.

As photos and film footage of the evacuated refugees

show, the people who had painted broken chains just a few hours earlier, were packed into planes and ships, their hands bound with strips of cable.

On September 22, two boats full of refugees reached the port of Palermo, where they initially remained as floating prisons. They were cordoned off from the outside world, neither journalists nor lawyers being allowed to go on board. The prisoners appeared at the windows, holding cardboard signs with the word “Libertà” (freedom).

Last Saturday, human rights groups and residents of Palermo demonstrated at the port for the release of these refugees. They shouted “Freedom for all” and “We are all illegal”, and carried a banner inscribed “The port is not a prison”. Thereafter, such demonstrations and sit-ins took place every night. Nevertheless, the refugees were forcibly deported after a week.

On September 30, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva criticised the closure of Lampedusa, claiming it increased the risk of boat people losing their lives. The sea route to Lampedusa, which is only 130 kilometres from Tunisia, is much shorter than the one to Sicily (200 kilometres).

Gabriele Del Grande, the Italian journalist, has been using his blog “Fortress Europe” to publicise the plight of refugees for years. He has also analysed the reports of all the news agencies regarding shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. In mid-August, Del Grande verified that 1,931 refugee boat people had been killed on the sea lanes to Europe. Some 1,674 of these died in the channel between Sicily and North Africa.

Overall, his documentation contends that almost 6,000 people have drowned or died of thirst along the way since 1994. The year 2011 is therefore by far the worst to date, especially since many of these people died attempting to escape the war in Libya.

If Lampedusa remains closed, the number of boat people who die is sure to increase.

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