

As refugee death toll mounts, EU and US plan new military actions in Libya

By Martin Kreickenbaum
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The European powers and Washington are responding to the mass drownings of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea with an intensification of the same criminal policies that caused the disaster in the first place.

The general line adopted by government officials and promoted by the media is to place the blame for the humanitarian catastrophe on smugglers who seek to profit off the mass misery in Libya, Syria and other countries in the region, while ignoring the fact that the catastrophic conditions in these countries are the direct result of the wars and regime-change operations carried out by the United States and the European powers. With consummate hypocrisy, European government heads and EU officials shed crocodile tears for the victims of their own war crimes.

The media says virtually nothing about the so-called “humanitarian” wars for “democracy” and “human rights” carried out by Washington and its European accomplices in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen that have destroyed entire societies, killed hundreds of thousands of people, and left chaos and unending bloodshed in their wake. UN statistics show that the flow of migrants to Europe from North Africa and the Middle East via the Mediterranean began to swell after 2011, the year of the US-NATO war that toppled Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi and ended with the latter’s murder by Al Qaeda-linked Islamist proxy forces of Washington and its European allies, led by France and Britain.

The criminal elements engaged in the smuggling of Libyans, Syrians, Iraqis and others fleeing the horrors resulting from imperialist wars and plundering operations are small fry compared to current and former government officials such as Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy, who are politically and morally responsible for the

deaths of millions, including the drowned refugees.

At a special meeting of European Union foreign and interior ministers held in Luxembourg on Monday, plans for a new imperialist intervention in Libya were discussed. The governments of the EU member states are seeking a United Nations mandate for the use of warships along the Libyan coast to destroy refugee boats and capture smugglers. Behind the scenes, far bigger military options are under consideration, including the seizure of oil rigs and refineries in Libya.

The ministerial meeting was convened after the Mediterranean drownings, in the space of one week, of at least 1,200 refugees from North Africa and the Middle East seeking asylum in Europe. The number of migrants killed this year en route to Europe has risen to almost 2,000, nearly 50 times the number during the same period last year.

“I hope today is the turning point in the European conscience, not to go back to promises without actions,” declared the EU’s foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini.

The ten-point plan agreed by the European ministers, to be approved Thursday by EU heads of state and government, involves an expansion of police and military operations to block refugees from reaching European shores. Funding for the “Triton” mission run by the European border agency Frontex is to be doubled, along with the number of boats at the disposal of the agency. This will enable Frontex to expand its operational area from the coast of Italy to the coastlines of Libya and Tunisia.

Despite large doses of humanitarian rhetoric, the primary aim of the operation is not the rescue of refugees, but the defense of “Fortress Europe.”

“Search and rescue alone is not a silver bullet,” said German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere. “If you

just organize search and rescue, criminals who get the refugees on board will send more boats.”

The core of the proposals advanced Monday by the EU commissioner for migration, justice and home affairs, Dimitris Avramopoulos, is the “systematic effort to track down and destroy the boats used by smugglers.” The model for such an effort is the “Atalanta” operation, in which naval forces hunt down pirates’ inflatable boats off the coast of Somalia and destroy their camps on land.

Although no details of planned military operations have been provided, Mogherini noted that the EU was seeking a mandate from the UN Security Council to destroy refugee boats along Libyan beaches and in the country’s harbors.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi welcomed the decision to put the fight against the smuggling of refugees at the top of the European agenda. While the British government has refused to provide any resources to aid in the rescue of refugees, Cameron signaled London’s readiness to support military action. “We have got to crack down on the terrible traffickers and people smugglers who are at the heart of this problem,” he said.

The British *Guardian* newspaper quoted military leaders who provided a glimpse of operations under consideration. British Commander Graham Edmonds raised the possibility of a joint naval blockade by European and US naval forces.

He told the newspaper: “There is a duty to help people in distress. It is international maritime law. You cannot let people drown. You could enforce a blockade and stop these boats from coming.”

He added that the US Sixth Fleet could also be involved. “The Americans have been very silent,” he said. “If they are in international waters, the sixth fleet could deal with it.”

The former leader of Britain’s Liberal Democrats, Paddy Ashdown, called for a “fresh strategy” to tackle people smugglers, including the use of “Special Forces of interdiction to destroy the boats before they leave port.”

Although Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has said a direct military intervention in Libya is currently not on the agenda, he declared this week, “Attacks against the gangs of death, attacks against people

smugglers are among the considerations.”

The ruling elite in Italy has been pushing for military action in its former colony of Libya for some time. According to Reuters, detailed plans for a much broader military intervention have already been developed by the staff of EU foreign policy head Mogherini. A spokeswoman for Mogherini said EU member states would submit proposals to use EU military resources to create a Libyan unity government.

There are also discussions about using European soldiers to secure Libya’s oil facilities. An EU operation would focus on Tripoli, but could, according to Reuters, “also intervene in the ‘oil arc’ to enable international companies to recommence operations.”

Oil production in Libya has dropped by 50 percent since the 2011 NATO war. Last December the country’s biggest oil terminals, Es Sider and Ras Lanuf, had to be closed following fighting between rival militias.

The German ruling elite, which abstained from the NATO war against Libya in 2011, is pushing for German participation in any military action in order to secure a share of the spoils. In a recent interview, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier asserted the need to “bring more stability to Libya” and “put an end finally to trafficking organizations.”

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