

# EU summit approves sealing off the Mediterranean from refugees

By Martin Kreickenbaum  
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At the European Union's special summit in Malta last Friday, European heads of state adopted a 10-point plan aimed at blocking off the central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy. The key components of the plan are the upgrading and training of the Libyan coastguard, which is to seize refugees in Libyan territorial waters and return them to the African coast, and the establishment of internment camps in North Africa.

The hypocrisy with which the EU is carrying out its defence against refugees is breathtaking. In the run-up to the summit, several European heads of state and governments criticized US President Donald Trump for his plans to build a wall along the border with Mexico and to impose an immigration ban from seven predominantly Muslim states in the Middle East and North Africa.

Leading European politicians attempted to outdo one another, praising the EU as "the last bastion of liberal democracy." But the isolationist policies the EU employs against refugees are in essence no different than the inhumane measures of the US government.

According to the summit resolutions, a double wall against refugees is to be built in Libya. The EU wants to train Libyan border officials, coast guard and marines, and equip and finance them to cordon off the southern border of the country as well as the maritime border with Europe. This will strand tens of thousands of refugees in the desert regions of Central Africa or, if they cross the Mediterranean by boat, will force them back to devastated countries.

Because the ships of the European border protection agency Frontex and the NATO mission Sophia are not permitted to operate in Libyan territorial waters, the Libyan coast guard will take on the EU's dirty work, even though it is notorious for its extreme brutality

against refugees. In addition to training, the Libyan coastguard will receive several patrol boats and technical equipment from the EU.

For the care of refugees, "appropriate reception facilities" are to be established in Libya that will operate jointly with the UN Human Rights Commission and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). These are in reality internment camps for refugees.

For months, German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière has been calling for camps in North Africa to stop refugees on the way to Europe and to enable mass deportations from Europe to Africa. However, only a small fraction of African refugees ever reach Europe. More than 86 percent of all refugees remain in the immediate vicinity of the regions from which they originate, where they linger hopelessly under disastrous conditions in miserable mass camps.

Instead of improving refugee camps, the EU will increase its police presence in North Africa to block refugee escape routes. Libya's land borders with transit states Niger, Algeria, Sudan and Egypt will be strictly monitored and guarded with the support of European border protection agency Frontex.

Finally, the collaboration of the police and secret service will be deepened. Above all, Europol and Frontex are to provide data with which smugglers and their boats already in coastal towns can be located. The trade with motorboats and inflatable boats is to be permanently destroyed.

Following the closure of the Balkan route and a deal with Turkey, Libya is back in the focus of European isolationist policy. More than 90 percent of all refugees begin their journey to Europe there. In the last year, 181,000 refugees reached Italy by this sea route, while more than 4,600 drowned on the central Mediterranean

route alone.

Although a majority of refugees leave home to escape war, civil-warlike conflicts, persecution and tyranny, and their rate of protection in the EU is correspondingly high, the letter of invitation to this EU summit states most refugees are “irregular economic migrants who may be sent back to their countries of origin.”

Provisions of the Geneva Refugee Convention and the European Human Rights Convention are being stretched beyond recognition in the campaign by the EU to block refugees. This includes the plan to seize refugees already in Libyan territorial waters to bypass the “non-refoulment” rule and the proposal to soften the concept of secure third states, in which even individual places and refugee camps can be declared “secure locations,” which de Maizière did a few weeks ago.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees and human rights organizations regularly list in their reports the inhumane conditions in Libyan refugee camps. The deportation of refugees there will mean torture and death for thousands of people.

Employees of the German diplomatic service in Niger have also come to this conclusion. In a report to the German government, they write that in Libyan detention facilities “the worst, systematic human rights violations” prevail. “Executions, torture and rape” are a daily reality for refugees. “Authentic cell phone photos and videos prove the concentration camp-like conditions in these so-called private prisons.”

The report goes on to state, “Eyewitnesses describe exactly five executions per week in one prison—with announcements always made on Fridays to make room for new arrivals, which is to say, to increase the human delivery rate and, with it, the profits of the operators.”

In these prisons, refugees get neither sufficient nourishment nor clean drinking water, and the medical care is completely inadequate. An asylum system does not exist in Libya, either in law or in practice.

None of this has deterred the EU, however, from developing the closest collaboration with the Libyan government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. On the eve of the summit, al-Sarraj met with European Council President Donald Tusk and Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni to work out the details of the dirty deal against refugees.

Immediately prior to the EU summit, the Italian government secured a bilateral treaty with the government in Tripoli. Gentiloni and al-Sarraj reached an agreement on joint coastguard patrols along the Libyan coast to send refugees directly back to Libya. Moreover, the Italian government will participate in the construction and financing of refugee camps in Libya. In return, trade relations with the former Italian colony will be improved, above all in the energy sector.

Prime Minister Gentiloni is thus associating himself directly with a refugee deal that former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi made in 2008 with Muammar Gaddafi. Berlusconi commented at the time: “We will get more gas and petrol and fewer illegal immigrants.”

At the same time, the EU is working on a stronger military collaboration with the Libyan government. The German government has entrusted al-Sarraj with armoured vehicles valued at €15 million, while Italy will participate in the construction and upgrading of army and police organizations. The Italian army has stationed 100 paratroopers in Libya under the pretext of protecting a hospital.

NATO has also declared its willingness to fully support the Libyan government. “NATO is ready to help with the construction of more effective security and defence organs,” declared NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg after a meeting with al-Sarraj. Stoltenberg also offered to assist the EU in the development of the Libyan marines and coastguard.

The EU’s campaign against refugees from North Africa is increasingly a means of subordinating Libya and other countries in the region to military control and returning them to the status of colonies.

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