

Right-wing smears against refugee aid workers in the Mediterranean

By Marianne Arens
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The closure of Italian ports to civilian rescue ships by Lega Interior Minister Matteo Salvini goes hand in hand with the lies and slanders made against non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their rescue ships. Politicians and journalists are attempting to isolate volunteer aid workers and turn popular opinion against them.

On June 10, Salvini turned away the ship *Aquarius*, which was carrying 630 shipwrecked refugees. The ship, operated by NGOs SOS Méditerranée and Médecins Sans Frontières, then took its passengers on a dangerous and lengthy journey to Valencia, Spain. A few days later the interior minister expanded the landing ban to include all NGO ships with the explicit consent of the governing Five Star Movement (M5S).

This decision represents an open violation of international maritime law, which includes the obligation to rescue those in distress at sea and transport them to the nearest safe harbour. The *Aquarius* did nothing but fulfil this duty: She rescued castaways. These people had previously fled Libya, where they were exposed to the worst human rights violations. They were stranded at sea in the international waters off the coast of Libya and, had the crew of the *Aquarius* not found them at the right time, they would have drowned.

An immense tragedy has been playing out for years in the Mediterranean. SOS Méditerranée reports that in the last four years alone, more than 13,000 people have drowned. Médecins Sans Frontières has documented more than 500 drownings since the start of 2018. That more people have not faced the same fate is thanks to the NGO ships, which have saved tens of thousands of lives in recent years.

In the process, the NGO ships off the Libyan coast have come into conflict with the official policy of Italy, Germany and the entire European Union (EU). These governments are currently working to completely seal off the external borders of Europe and deport desperate refugees back to North Africa. There, the EU will finance new “hotspots” which will serve as nothing less than concentration camps for hundreds of thousands of stranded refugees. At the same time, Italy and the EU are paying the Libyan coast guard to intercept refugees and drag them back to Libya where they are further exposed to torture and mortal danger.

This was confirmed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel

(Christian Democratic Union, CDU) on Monday when she pledged to Italy the “solidarity” of the German government during the new Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte’s visit to Berlin. Merkel listed the issues at hand, saying: “How can we achieve a stable government in Libya, how can we better train the Libyan coast guard, and how can we, if necessary, carry out asylum proceedings there?” Merkel intends to collaborate closely with the Italian government on these issues. Italy and Germany, she said, were in “complete agreement on border protection: Frontex must be strengthened further.”

The imperialist powers consider the Mediterranean Sea a deployment zone for their wars in the Middle East and North Africa. By now, numerous ships from the Italian, American, British and German navies traverse the sea as part of the NATO anti-terror mission, the EU’s Operation Sophia, the Bundeswehr’s Operation Sea Garden, and Frontex.

The NGO sea rescuers are obviously getting in the way of this policy and military deployment. That is why the voluntary aid workers are being placed under increasing pressure and are being forced out. At the same time, politicians insult them by calling them human traffickers and blame them for the situation facing refugees.

Salvini originated this himself when he linked the NGO ships with human trafficking. He declared on Twitter the same day he decided to close the ports: “As of today, Italy, too, will say no to human trafficking.” On June 17, Salvini announced on Facebook that Italy would no longer be “an accomplice in the business of illegal immigration” and accused the NGOs of collaborating with smugglers.

Transportation Minister Danilo Toninelli of M5S tweeted that the presence of the NGO ships *Sea Fox* and *Lifeline* in Libyan waters created a dangerous situation. These ships, used by the German NGOs *Sea-Eye* and *Mission Lifeline*, operate under Dutch flags. Toninelli called on Holland to withdraw the ships. During the election campaign, M5S party chief and Deputy Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio called the NGO ships “taxis of the sea” and claimed that it was unclear how they were financed.

On June 17, Sicilian prosecutor Carmelo Zuccaro said during a conference in Catania on the topic of migration: “The NGOs are part of a deeply failed system which ceded the gateways to

Europe to the human traffickers, who are unscrupulous criminals.” Zuccaro had earlier levelled the accusation that refugee aid workers would operate as smugglers.

The accusation that the NGOs are in league with smugglers and human traffickers is a brazen lie. Nothing of the sort has been uncovered by the investigations that Zuccaro has carried out against the NGOs since February 2017. He has since claimed that the mere presence of NGO ships off the coast of Libya created a so-called “pull factor,” i.e., it caused more people to risk the dangerous voyage across the sea.

The German media has also taken up these and similar lies. For weeks an unprecedented smear campaign has been carried out against refugees and immigrants in Germany, which criminalizes all those who respond to refugees with sympathy and assistance. This was an “anti-deportation industry,” according to the cynical designation given to refugee aid workers, volunteer translators, attorneys, doctors, sea rescuers and other helpers by Alexander Dobrindt (Christian Social Union, CSU).

CDU politician Barbara John wrote a June 17 *Tagesspiegel* commentary titled “Do the refugee saviours want to prevent the return to Africa?” She criticized the crew of the Aquarius because they “did not even head for the much closer Tunis.” John had nothing to say about the official ban on repatriation to Tunisia, which even the European Court of Human Rights has affirmed. She angrily posed the question: “Do the rescuers only smuggle into European asylums?”

On June 12, the Social Democratic Party-sympathizing *Die Zeit* made the grotesque allegation that human rights activists in the NGOs were to blame for the electoral victory of the right in Italy. In a commentary titled “The good, the evil and Salvini in between,” Ulrich Ladurner asks, “What do those Europeans who see themselves as non-racists, as idealists and defenders of human rights actually have to offer the Italians?” The NGOs “should consider the consequences for Italy if hundreds of thousands of people arrive on shore with their help.”

Ladurner then accuses the NGOs of sharply criticizing the ethics of former Democratic Party Interior Minister Marco Minniti and having placed his deal with Libyan militias “on a par with fascism and racism.” According to the author, “he had done nothing but engage in realpolitik.” He continues, “Before human rights activists waste all their energy on attacking the new Italian interior minister Salvini over his cruelty, they should ask themselves how much they have contributed to his success with their apolitical idealism. They have insulted Minniti, instead of acknowledging that the work of the NGOs must be coordinated. ... Salvini is now the interior minister and they must recognize that their share in his rise is not so small.”

This is truly astonishing cynicism! According to this logic, international maritime law and the UN human rights convention are only valid for “apolitical idealists” and the dirty deal between the Italians and the EU with the Libyan torturers is “nothing but realpolitik.” The NGOs are blamed for the

“hundreds of thousands of people arriving on the shores.” This tirade truly stands reality on its head.

It is entirely absurd to claim that refugees only climb aboard inflatable rafts because the possibility of rescue by an NGO ship creates an attractive “pull factor” for them. They know very well that they may drown. “We are only out there because there is no safe and legal path toward Europe,” explained Ruben Neugebauer, spokesperson for Sea-Watch.

The refugees are making a desperate attempt to escape the absolutely murderous situation in Libya. Today there are rival militias living on the thriving business of kidnapping for ransom. The EU sanctions and supports a vast prison network to keep refugees out of Europe. The NATO war of 2011, which destroyed and completely destabilized a functioning society, transformed the country into a hell for refugees.

The website of the Sea-Watch organization documents the story of a 25-year-old Ethiopian who left his country for political reasons. He was captured in Bani Walid and spent 10 months in a Libyan torture prison. He reported that he was locked up with about 500 people and he watched as 82 people died, one after the other. “We were forced to dig mass graves in the desert so the bodies of the people who gradually died off could be buried. ... The corpses were not taken away until at least three bodies were found in the room where we were crammed together.”

The same young man also confirmed the reports circulating about slave markets. There are special venues into which people in groups of 10 to 40 are brought. They are divided up according to nationality and sold for 200 to 800 Libyan dinar (US\$145-\$590). “They sell us like goats,” said the young man. He was rescued by SeaWatch-3 on April 21, 2018. It was his third attempt to escape Libya by sea.

The current smear campaign against the NGOs is taking place because volunteer aid workers enjoy great sympathy and support in the population, and because they are the only ones who rush to help oppressed refugees who are threatened with death.

While politicians and journalists drop all principles and stand with Salvini, a growing section of the population is moving in the opposite direction, searching for a way to fight. This is evident in demonstrations like the “Never Again!” mass protest of 70,000 people against Alternative for Germany in Berlin and the recent protests in Italy held under the motto “Open the ports!”

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