

Special unit of the Maltese army storms refugee ship

By Martin Kreickenbaum
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Soldiers in military fatigues with machine guns, balaclavas and bulletproof vests stride across the deck of the tanker El Hiblu 1. They confront frightened, unarmed migrants, including women and children, whose only possessions are what they can carry.

This description of the tanker arriving at port in the Maltese capital La Valletta paints in graphic detail the inhumanity of the merciless European migration policy, which uses violence against refugees and makes their lives hell.

Shortly before, a special unit of the Maltese army had been deployed onto the 51-metres-long ship before it could enter Malta's territorial waters. A patrol boat from Malta prevented it from traveling on, and the highly armed special unit stormed it, supported by other naval units and a helicopter. This was supposed to "return the captain's control of his ship," as was officially said.

The El Hiblu 1 is registered in the Republic of Palau, an archipelago in the Pacific Ocean. The tanker had fished 108 refugees from the sea northeast of Tripoli and taken them on board. The refugees' two dinghies had capsized and they were in imminent mortal danger. They were discovered by a European naval aircraft, which could not reach the so-called Libyan Coast Guard, as seven Libyan sea rescue facilities were not occupied.

The sea rescue centre then ordered the El Hiblu 1 to save the refugees and take them out of the water. When the refugees came on board, they learned that they were to be returned to Tripoli, the tanker's destination port, and were extremely upset. The bridge crew of the Sea-Eye rescue service ship *Alan Kurdi* followed the rescue operation over the radio. According to Sea-Eye, the Turkish captain of El Hiblu 1 asked for support, but as the European Union (EU) has halted all sea rescues and systematically expelled private maritime rescuers from the central Mediterranean, no other ship came to his aid.

Without maritime rescue services, "merchant ships must rescue and bring completely frightened people back to Libya, so assisting [their] illegal repatriation," Gordon Isler, spokesman for Sea-Eye eV, told the *Mittelbayrischen Zeitung*. "Those rescued have gone through hell and confront a few overstretched and unprepared crew members of a cargo ship, who have to explain that they are being returned to exactly the place from which they were trying to escape at risk of their lives."

Just six nautical miles off Tripoli, the situation aboard the El Hiblu 1 seems to have intensified in the early hours of Wednesday. At 3 o'clock in the morning, the tanker abruptly changed course and headed for Malta.

Although the events are still unclear, Matteo Salvini, Italy's neo-fascist minister of the interior, immediately spoke of "piracy" and sarcastically said via Facebook: "Poor shipwrecked people are kidnapping a freighter which has saved them because they want to decide their own destination. I say to the pirates: you can forget Italy."

On Twitter, Salvini continued to incite matters, "These are not castaways, but pirates." He also claimed that it did not concern refugees, but criminal trafficking, and threatened that Italian waters were closed to criminals. They would only get to see Italy through binoculars.

The Maltese government immediately transferred control to the military for further operations. In a statement, the Maltese Army announced that it had contacted the El Hiblu 1: The captain has repeatedly stated that the ship is not in his control and that he and the crew are being "threatened by the migrants," they said.

After the ship was stormed at gunpoint by Maltese special forces, five alleged ringleaders were arrested and handcuffed.

The arrest of unarmed refugees, who had acted out of sheer desperation because they wanted to escape the hell of the Libyan internment camps at all costs, is symptomatic of the inhuman refugee policy of the EU.

The humanitarian disaster in Africa is, to a large extent, the result of the merciless exploitation of resources and mineral reserves, the instigation of wars and civil wars and the equipping of murderous militias by the European powers. Desperate people fleeing this chaos and misery have a machine gun held under their noses and are jailed like criminals.

The halting of "Operation Sophia"

On the other hand, the European governments now silently and secretly allow refugees to drown in the Mediterranean.

Almost at the same time as the drama on El Hiblu 1, it became known that the EU mission EUNAVFOR MED ("Operation Sophia") is being closed down. Although the EU member states have agreed to extend the operation by six months, vessels will no longer be provided for the naval mission. It now only consists of a surveillance aircraft and surveillance drones, with which the EU border protection organisation Frontex can observe as refugees drown.

Originally, Operation Sophia was supposed to be directed against people smugglers and not to rescue refugees. But in face of the ongoing humanitarian disaster in the Mediterranean, it also had

to take on board shipwrecked people. Fierce conflicts over the reception of refugees arose among European governments, which have systematically incited sentiments against refugees.

When the new, right-wing Italian government finally closed its ports to refugees, and Malta joined this move, the end of the sea rescue mission was sealed. The days-long wanderings of the NGO rescue ships Lifeline and Aquarius were a first consequence, followed by the confiscation of rescue ships and the arrest of the crews of private rescue organisations.

With the disappearance of rescue ships, the number of crossings that has ended with fatalities jumped again this year. Last year, the death rate was 10,475 attempted crossings, some 3.4 percent. According to official sources, 359 refugees drowned on their way to Italy. In the first three months of this year, the death rate rose to more than 10 percent of those attempting to cross the Mediterranean. Out of 1,605 refugees who left for Europe, 165 drowned in the Mediterranean. In the last 20 years, more than 25,000 refugees have died in the Mediterranean.

Hellish conditions in Libya

But it is not enough that the EU is responsible for mass deaths on its doorstep. It is organising a hell on earth for survivors and refugees stranded in Libya.

Since the US, backed by France and Italy, bombed the government of Muammar Gaddafi out of office in 2011, a civil war is raging in the country between rival militias. The officially EU-recognised government is located in Tripoli, but controls little more than its own government district. Just like the rest of the ruling militias, it is accused of grave human rights abuses. But that does not stop the EU from using these ruthless, marauding gangs to prevent refugees coming to Europe.

As early as 2017, the German Embassy in Niger reported to the Federal Chancellery on the indescribable atrocities being committed in internment camps holding refugees from all over Africa and the Middle East.

News weekly *Der Spiegel* quoted the report as saying, “Traffickers often imprison migrants in ‘private prisons.’ Executions of migrants unable to pay, torture, rape, extortion and exposure in the desert are commonplace. Eyewitnesses spoke of exactly five shootings a week in one jail—with notice given and on Fridays, to make room for newcomers.”

The more intensely the EU collaborates with the militias, the greater the atrocities. According to estimates by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), around 670,000 refugees are being held in Libya. Refugee aid workers rarely have access to the camps.

MSF (Doctors Without Borders) has recently visited the Sabaa camp in the capital, Tripoli. This camp is controlled by the EU-recognised government. It primarily houses refugees picked up on the high seas by the self-appointed Libyan Coast Guard.

According to MSF, nearly a quarter of the 300 inmates in this prison are malnourished, especially the children. Often, the refugees get food only every third day, newcomers only every fourth day. More than 30 people must share a space that measures barely more than 20 square metres. The prisoners are also forced to urinate in plastic bottles because there are no sanitary facilities.

Earlier this week, Andrew Gilmour, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, presented the report on torture and ill-treatment of refugees in Libya to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. Gilmour’s report is based on the personal accounts of refugees returning from Libya to Niger.

“Everyone, whether women, men, boys or girls, all have been raped, many several times, and tortured with electric batons,” says Gilmour. They were forced to call their relatives, who had to listen to their cries of pain. The families had to pay a ransom so that the refugees would not be tortured.

Equivalent reports were collected by members of the Women’s Refugee Commission from refugees arriving in Italy via Libya. Sarah Chynoweth, the author of a study also presented this week, told broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*, “The details of torture methods are hard to bear. Men and women are forced to rape others, penises are cut off, women are abused and raped until they bleed to death and die. Boys have to rape their sisters.”

“If someone had told me that before, I would never have believed it. You only believe it when you see it with your own eyes,” a survivor from Gambia said.

“These most serious violations of human rights are taking place by partners of the European Union,” Karl Kopp of the human rights organisation ProAsyl told *Deutsche Welle*. “In Libya it’s our camps, European-funded camps of the recognised government where the worst human rights violations happen.” Kopp concludes that “the EU is financing criminals who call themselves the Coastguard. Let’s be clear: that is part of European refugee policy.”

The internment camps where these unspeakable atrocities take place are usually operated by the same militias as those supported by the European Union and providing training to the Libyan coastguard. Since the EU also provides the Coastguard with boats, it supplies these militias with the means to enslave and torture the refugees. By leaving sea rescues in the central Mediterranean to these militias, it ensures that the refugees are taken directly back to Libya. And it covers up for the militias by idly watching their cruel activities and tolerating the system of internment camps.

Compared to other states, the EU likes to play the role of moral apostle and claims it defends human rights. At the same time, it bears responsibility for the most serious crimes against humanity inflicted upon hundreds of thousands of refugees. The victims of this cruel policy are then labelled “pirates” and “criminals” and handcuffed.

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