

Right-wing Italian authorities threaten migrant rescuer with 20 years in prison

By Allison Smith
9 April 2019

Miguel Roldán Espinosa, a Spanish firefighter, is under criminal investigation and faces a potentially lengthy prison sentence and large fines and legal fees for rescuing thousands of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.

Espinosa is one of 24 men and women under criminal investigation by the Italian authorities for rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean. They are accused of facilitating illegal immigration and aiding human traffickers. Ten of them, including Espinosa, were serving on the *Iuventa*, a ship owned by the German NGO *Jugend rettet* [Youth rescue] that was seized on orders from an Italian court in the summer of 2017, halting its rescue operations. The ship had saved an estimated 14,000 lives over the course of one year.

Those investigated face sentences of up to 20 years in prison, fines of €15,000 [\$US16,900] per saved person and legal costs that could add up to €500,000.

Roldán Espinosa, who describes the plight of migrants as “one of continuous death and total mayhem ... helpless people who don’t get any support,” conducted his first rescue in 2017 off the coast of Lesbos, Greece, with the Spanish NGO PROEM-AID that helped thousands of migrants from drowning in the Aegean Sea.

The Spanish firefighter described to *Euronews* the moment during the summer of 2018 when the *Iuventa* arrived in international waters, off the coast of Libya, to save migrants drowning at sea. As per international law, the ship’s crew radioed the Italian authorities for permission to bring the migrants on board. Rome denied permission and told them to call Libyan authorities. The crew then radioed Libyan authorities and were eventually granted permission.

This delay cost the lives of more than half of the migrants that day. Roldán Espinosa, who watched

migrants drown while waiting for permission to save them, says he will never forget their desperate cries for help.

Right-wing Italian authorities are now conducting a probe into the *Iuventa* crew’s activities, with a view to bringing a case to trial by the end of this year. Neither the accused nor their attorneys have been able to get information about the investigation.

The criminal allegations fall under the vicious Decree-Law on Security and Immigration—known as the Salvini Decree, after ultra-right Lega leader and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini—that ends humanitarian protection for migrants, downsizes the protection system for asylum seekers and refugees, provides for longer detention times in repatriation centres and hotspots, enables Italy to withdraw citizenship for alleged terrorism, tightens restrictions for permits and allows the revocation of refugee status for those convicted of certain crimes.

In a March 7 interview with *Euronews*, Roldán Espinosa said he realised that the solution to the refugee problem was not the NGOs: “I am aware that it is [only] a patch ... but as long as European governments do not come up with a solution, NGOs are very good there in the Mediterranean, they do a very good job, they save many lives.”

It is estimated that as many as 3,000 rescued migrants have been denied entry to Italy since the Lega-M5S coalition government came to power in Italy in June 2018. Most recently, on April 5, Salvini denied safe port to the *Alan Kurdi*, a vessel operated by the German NGO *Sea-Eye*. “The ship is German property, with a German flag and a German crew ... It’s their problem, they must deal with it,” Salvini said on the sidelines of a meeting of G7 interior ministers in Paris. Salvini said he personally wrote to the captain of the

Alan Kurdi, warning him the ship would “not enter Italian territorial waters.”

This January, 49 stranded migrants rescued by German NGO-owned ships Sea-Watch 3 and Sea-Eye were finally allowed to disembark in the Maltese capital of Valletta. Malta’s prime minister said he planned to send the migrants to Italy, France, Germany, Portugal, Ireland, Romania, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. However, Salvini, who was in Poland at the time visiting leaders of the right-wing Law and Justice Party, said that he would not authorise the migrant arrivals in Italy and accused the European Union of “succumbing to the blackmail of smugglers and NGOs.”

Italy’s criminal prosecution of Roldán Espinosa and his comrades conforms to the Fortress Europe policy of sealing the borders, criminalizing humanitarian aid and terrorizing migrants with deportation and incarceration.

Last year, Hungary passed a law making it illegal for organisations and individuals to help asylum seekers and “irregular” migrants. Late last year, a court in France convicted four French citizens—part of the group known as the Briançon 7—for transporting migrants, in the face of fascist attacks, across the Alps from Italy to France.

In Spain, after making a big show of accepting the migrant ship Aquarius last June, the government is now reversing its brief “open-arms” policy and denying humanitarian vessels the right to depart, citing supposed failures to meet safety standards.

In a January 28 *El Pais* article, a source at Spain’s Interior Ministry is quoted as saying, “This is not a retreat. We are under enormous migratory pressure, and the rules are not being applied in the Central Mediterranean. We need a lasting solution for everyone.”

In the United Kingdom, a group of activists known as the Stansted 15 received suspended sentences or community orders for their work preventing immigrants from removal from London’s Stansted Airport in 2017. Upon receiving the verdict, defendant Alistair Tamlit, commented, “Not going to jail is a partial victory, but we are going to keep campaigning to end charter flights, immigration detention and the hostile environment.”

The US government is the first among equals in illegalizing humanitarian aid and vilifying immigrants

as “animals” and “criminals.” While President Donald Trump pursues billions of dollars in funding to build a wall to close off the border between Mexico and the US, volunteers with humanitarian aid group No More Deaths have been arrested for leaving bottles of water for undocumented immigrants from Mexico crossing the US border.

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