

German captain of refugee rescue ship Sea Watch 3 arrested in Italy

By Marianne Arens
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Carola Rackete, 31, the German captain of the refugee rescue ship Sea Watch 3, was arrested at the Italian port of Lampedusa on Friday night after safely landing 42 people rescued at sea. The Italian government ordered her to be taken away in handcuffs and threatened her with heavy custodial sentences and fines.

A total of 53 people were rescued from a dinghy on June 12 by the Sea Watch 3. One day earlier, on June 11, the Five Star Movement-Lega coalition government in Rome adopted a new law threatening rescue workers with fines of between €10,000 and €15,000. The government is charging the captain on the basis of this “Decreto Sicurezza Bis.”

A wave of solidarity with Rackete has been seen in Italy and around the world since her arrest.

German TV satirist Jan Böhmermann immediately launched a fundraising appeal. Under the slogan “Saving lives is not a crime,” the Sea Watch legal fund received almost €400,000 in donations by Sunday night. The online petition “Freedom for Mrs. Rackete” was signed by more than 92,000 people within a few hours.

A few hours after the arrest, mayor of Naples Luigi di Magistris dedicated a sailing boat parade to the brave captain “and all other men and women being unfairly persecuted.” As he led around 60 ships out to sea, di Magistris said that he was ashamed of the government. The ships carried banners and placards reading, “We’re standing with you, Carola,” and “Arrest all of us as well.”

Even some leading Social Democrats felt compelled to make hypocritical criticisms of the Italian government. Italy is “not just any state,” said German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in ZDF’s summer interview. “Italy is at the heart of the European Union,

a founding member of the European Union. And that’s why we can expect Italy to deal with such cases in another way.”

Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who only recently supported the failed coup in Venezuela together with far-right Brazilian President Bolsonaro, sought to portray himself as an apostle of “human rights.” He wrote on Twitter, “Saving lives is a humanitarian obligation. Emergency rescue at sea must not be criminalised.” It is up to the Italian judiciary to “swiftly clarify the accusations.”

Luxembourg’s Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn, known for the ruthless imposition of EU austerity dictates against Greece, urged Italy via Facebook to release Rackete. “Saving people’s lives is a duty and should never be an offence or a crime,” wrote Asselborn.

These statements by capitalist politicians are cynical and the height of hypocrisy. The reality is that they come from representatives of the very EU and German governments that bear responsibility for the catastrophic conditions in the Mediterranean and refused until the last to accept the Sea Watch refugees. While they publicly criticise Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini and the rest of the Italian government, they fully support their stance on the refugee issue.

Exactly a year ago, an EU summit agreed to seal off “Fortress Europe,” prohibit rescue at sea, and deport refugees to the war-ravaged and crisis-ridden Middle East and Africa. Both the EU and Italy subsequently suspended their rescue operations. According to a complaint filed in The Hague by a group of lawyers on June 3, the policies of the EU and its member states have led to the deaths of at least 14,000 people over the past five years.

These decisions, which amount to a deliberate policy of mass murder, are supported by all governing parties, including the Social Democrats in the grand coalition in Berlin, and the governments in Spain and Malta. The Syriza government in Greece, which is aligned with the German Left Party, also signed the deal. They are all responsible for policies that have transformed the Mediterranean into a mass grave.

The German government adopted a tougher immigration law almost simultaneously with its Italian counterpart Interior Minister Horst Seehofer's "Orderly Repatriation Law," which makes the deportation process easier and illegally permits the detention of totally innocent people. It was rushed through parliament on June 7 with the votes of the Social Democrats.

Significantly, the Spanish social democratic-led government has not protested against the arrest of the Sea Watch captain. The reason for this is that the PSOE is taking legal action against NGOs and preparing to substantially scale back its rescue missions. It was reported this week that another 22 people drowned on the route from Morocco to Spain on 19 June.

The Sea Watch 3 had its own bitter experience with the EU. Official talks with the EU Commission on distributing the rescued people resulted in no government being willing to accept them. After the Italian government allowed just 13 children, pregnant women, and severely ill passengers to land, the remainder, including several young people and a 12-year-old boy, were forced to wait at sea with the captain and crew. Serious problems, including dehydration, hygiene, and even thoughts of suicide affected several.

Thirty-six of the remaining refugees then appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), calling for an injunction to protect their legal rights. But the ECHR opposed this request on 25 June.

This led to the situation in which the captain decided to land on Lampedusa in spite of the explicit prohibition of the Italian government. She was informed of the ban by a patrol of the Guardia di Finanza. The letter from Rome was signed by Lega leader and Interior Minister Salvini, as well as two members of the Five Star Movement, Transport Minister Danilo Toninelli and Defence Minister Elisabetta Trenta.

On Friday, the public prosecutor in Agrigento, Sicily initiated proceedings against Rackete. At the same time, the authorities declared they would do nothing to remove the rescued refugees from the ship. "That means," Rackete said of the comments, "that we are waiting on a solution that is nowhere to be seen. That's why I have decided to dock at the port independently."

The captain added that she knew what she was risking. "But the 42 rescued refugees are worn out. I'm bringing them to safety now." She said that she could no longer bear responsibility for the physical and mental state of those on board. "I have no other option but to sail into Italian territorial waters." The Sea Watch 3 thus entered Lampedusa harbour on Friday night.

A small boat from the financial police sought repeatedly to block the ship. This boat created a dangerous situation in the harbour for some time, as it remained between the Sea Watch 3 and the pier, before it cleared the way for the rescue ship to dock. This was immediately exploited by Salvini not only to charge Rackete with "assisting illegal immigration" and "violating the law of the sea," but also "resisting a warship" and "war-like acts." These charges could result in her facing years in prison.

Both police officers, who manoeuvred themselves into the position between the Sea Watch 3 and the pier, subsequently apologised to Rackete through their lawyers. "The situation was hopeless," Rackete told *Corrierra de l la Sera*. "My goal was merely to bring worn-out and desperate people to dry land." She previously told *Der Spiegel* in an interview, "If the courts don't clear us, then the history books will. Until then, I'm ready to bear the consequences."

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