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Malta agreement: The dying in the Mediterranean continues



On Monday, the interior ministers of Germany, France, Malta and Italy agreed on an “emergency mechanism” in European Union (EU) refugee policy. Refugees rescued at sea arriving in Italy or Malta should in future be distributed to other EU countries within four weeks.

The Malta agreement, celebrated in the media as a “breakthrough” and a “European solution,” is intended not to end the dying in the Mediterranean, but merely to remove the tragedy from the public eye.

The mechanisms used to seal up Europe’s borders and that drive refugees to undertake life-threatening voyages across the sea remain in force. Several NGO ships remain seized, the EU’s “Operation Sophia” will not be resumed, cooperation with the so-called Libyan

Coast Guard will continue and the development of camps in Africa will be pushed forward.

The agreement merely prevents ships with desperate refugees aboard from drifting for days or weeks at sea until the EU states have agreed on their distribution. Instead, a fixed distribution quota mechanism should ensure that they are allowed to land immediately.

In recent months, the scenes broadcast from such ships have increased resistance to the EU's inhumane refugee policy. Sea Watch Captain Carola Rackete won international acclaim and was honoured for having brought 53 refugees to Lampedusa island after weeks of waiting at sea, despite a ban by the Italian authorities.

Above all, the Malta agreement is a cheap PR gesture designed to undermine resistance to inhumane refugee policies. All news stations produced reports showing the "Ocean Viking" arriving in a Sicilian port with 182 refugees after a week on the high seas. The ship of SOS Méditerranée and MSF had rescued 218 people from four different shipwrecks in just one week, including many women, small children and a newborn. After a week on the high seas, their situation on board had become absolutely unbearable.

The new agreement was announced on Monday night at the Maltese port fortress of St. Angelo. Also present were EU Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos and the interior minister of Finland, which currently holds the EU presidency. The agreement provides that people arriving from Libya to Italy or Malta via the Mediterranean will initially be distributed to Germany, France, Italy, Finland and Malta using an agreed quota mechanism.

However, there are no fixed numbers. In the barely justified hope that more EU countries will join, the "emergency mechanism" will be presented to an EU interior ministers' meeting in Luxembourg on October 8.

The agreement is strictly limited geographically and applies only to refugees arriving from Libya rescued on the high seas. It does not apply to refugees who make their own way to Europe and are stranded in Malta, in Cyprus or on a Greek island.

Even for the people who fall under the agreement, the situation is far from secure. Isolated from the population, they are taken to Italian and Maltese reception centres, where they are first subjected to a security examination. The refugees are to be examined for links to terrorism, conducted by EU police teams, largely drawn from Germany. After that, they

should be distributed to the EU countries within four weeks, and only then does the actual asylum process begin.

As everyone knows, this can easily end in deportation. In Germany, far more than half of all asylum seekers are rejected, and the rate is significantly worse for new applications.

German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU) tried to sell the agreement as proof of a humane refugee policy. “I have always said that our immigration policy is also humane. We will not let anyone drown,” he claimed.

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In fact, nearly a thousand people have drowned in the Mediterranean this year alone. And these are just the numbers that are demonstrably documented by the project “Missing Migrants.” Responsibility for these deaths lies with the EU’s refugee policy and European governments, above all the grand coalition of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in Berlin.

To reassure right-wing critics within his own ranks, Seehofer anticipates that Germany is only committed to accepting a few refugees. Of 2,199 people rescued at sea by NGOs and the Italian and Maltese Coast Guard since July of last year, Germany had promised to take 565, but only 225 came to Germany, he said. “225 in 15 months,” he repeated. “That is light years away from a change in government immigration policy.”

The measures adopted in Malta are not aimed at saving refugees, but at gaining time to seal off fortress Europe.

As early as June 2018, the EU had **decided** to massively upgrade the border protection organisation Frontex, ruthlessly deport refugees and establish militarily fortified concentration camps (“hotspots”) inside and outside the EU. It is holding firm on all of this. As far as possible, these camps are to be built directly on the African continent. In future, refugees are to be held south of the Sahara. France and Germany are expanding their military presence in Mali and other countries.

Luigi Di Maio (Five Star Movement), the former deputy prime minister and now foreign minister of Italy, has established contacts with several Mediterranean countries this week. On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, Di Maio met with the Tunisian and Algerian foreign ministers. Both invited him to visit their countries in order to discuss “the control of migration flows.”

The Malta agreement also serves to stabilise the new, EU-friendly Italian government. Matteo Salvini, head of the far-right Lega and former interior minister in the old government, had used the refugee question deliberately to stir up sentiments against the EU. The new government, a coalition of the Five-Star Movement and Democrats (PD), wants to work closely with the EU.

Last week, Presidents Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Germany), Emmanuel Macron (France) and Sergio Mattarella (Italy) met in Rome. In Germany, Seehofer commented, “Thanks to the new Italian government, we now have a great opportunity in Europe to ensure the immigration concerns are met with a concept. If the Federal Republic [of Germany] does not seize this opportunity, that would be a big mistake.”

In contrast, the new government has not changed its course on refugee policy. The differences with Salvini’s anti-immigrant policies are purely cosmetic. For example, Salvini’s brutal decrees have not been lifted. As before, many NGO ships such as Lifeline’s Eleonore remain seized by the state. The captain of the Eleonore, Claus-Peter Reisch, had already been sentenced to a fine of €10,000 in Malta. On September 2, 2019, with 100 rescued refugees aboard, he headed for the Sicilian port of Pozzallo. For doing this he is now threatened with a fine of €300,000.

Europe “always talks about common values,” commented Reisch, “while out there on the sea people are drowning in a very unchristian way.”

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