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EU refuses to accept hundreds of refugees rescued in the Mediterranean

More than 400 refugees are waiting in the central Mediterranean off Sicily for assignment to a safe haven. The weakened and partly injured refugees were saved from drowning last week by the private sea rescue ships Louise Michel and Seawatch 4. The Louise Michel, which had taken in more than 200 of the shipwrecked refugees, was so overcrowded that it was unable to maneuver on the waves for more than a day.

Calls for help to the Maltese and Italian authorities remained unanswered. In addition, 27 migrants, including children and a pregnant woman, have been waiting on the Danish tanker Maersk Etienne for almost four weeks without being able to go ashore.

Due to the discontinuation of all state sea rescue missions in the central Mediterranean, accidents involving refugee boats, often with fatal results, have increased sharply in recent weeks. Due to the illegal detention of private sea rescue vessels such as the Ocean Viking, the Alan Kurdi and the Sea Watch 3, no civilian sea rescue vessels patrolled the central Mediterranean for weeks.



The Louise Michel after a rescue operation on August 29 (AP Photo/Santi Palacios)

But just how dramatically the humanitarian catastrophe in the sea area between Libya and Italy has developed is shown by the rescue missions of Seawatch 4 and Louise Michel, financed by the British street artist Banksy.

The Seawatch 4 departed from Burriana in Spain on August 15 and rescued more than 200 refugees from the sea within 48 hours after arriving in the destination area on August 22 and 23. “Most of the people rescued this morning were weak and disoriented, smelled strongly of fuel and showed symptoms of fuel inhalation. More than 90 people needed emergency showers because they were exposed to the gasoline that powers the engine, generates harmful fumes and is highly corrosive in combination with salt water,” wrote the medical project coordinator of the relief organization MSF on board the Seawatch 4, Barabara Deck.

A few days later the Louise Michel also set sail from Burriana. The former patrol boat of French customs, only 31 meters long, is too small to accommodate and care for hundreds of refugees for several days. With a maximum speed of 27 knots, however, it is much faster than other civilian rescue ships and can therefore initiate rescue operations on the spot. The crew has thus supported the recovery of more than a hundred refugees by the Seawatch 4.

Last Thursday the Louise Michel had to take in 89 refugees. The next day, the ship responded to an emergency call from the reconnaissance aircraft Moonbird, which is operated by refugee aid workers. The Moonbird had discovered a rubber dinghy that was no longer moving and was full of water. “We were shocked when we saw the rubber boat—it was incredibly overcrowded and people onboard were trying to shuffle water out of the boat with their bare hands. We knew this was a grave emergency situation and decided to send out a mayday relay to all authorities and actors in the vicinity. Responsible European authorities failed to react to our distress call and only the Louise Michel responded to this serious distress case,” explained Neeske Beckmann from the Moonbird.

While the European authorities did not fulfill their duty of sea rescue and ignored all distress calls, the Louise Michel rescued 130 refugees from acute distress at sea on Friday morning. One refugee could only be recovered dead from the dinghy, three others had drowned before. Many of the rescued have severe burns from the mixture of gasoline and salt water in the boat, explained Lea Reisner, who was responsible for the operation of the Louise Michel.

Since the Louise Michel could not accommodate 219 refugees on board, the crew attached a life raft to the hull, but this rendered the ship unmaneuverable and it needed help itself. For hours the emergency call of the Louise Michel was ignored by the rescue control centers in Italy, Malta and Bremen. It was not until Saturday that an Italian coast guard ship came to the aid of the helplessly drifting Louise Michel near the Italian island of Lampedusa and took over 49 refugees who were in urgent need of medical assistance. Later, the Seawatch 4 took another 150 refugees and is now waiting with 350 refugees on board to reach a safe haven.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) called on the European Union to immediately provide a safe haven for the more than 400 refugees on the high seas. In a joint statement, the two organizations emphasized that “it is a humanitarian duty to save human lives.” The lack of EU-wide cooperation to take in refugees is “no excuse for denying vulnerable people a safe haven and the assistance they need, as required by international law,” the declaration goes on to say.

But the authorities in Malta and Italy refuse to comply and block the landing of the refugees. In Italy, the government of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte continues its racist and anti-refugee policy even without the extreme right-wing Lega and its former Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini. In July, the new independent Minister of the Interior, Luciana Lamorgese, declared that Italy was facing serious health problems due to uncontrolled immigration during the COVID-19 pandemic and ordered military units to Sicily.

In doing so, she fuels racism in the style of Salvini and tries to blame refugees for the renewed increase in the number of cases, for which in reality the Italian government is responsible. Although in Italy tens of thousands of people died of COVID-19 in the spring, the Conte government is also pushing ahead with the reopening policy pushed by all European governments, thereby endangering the health and lives of millions. The refugees are declared scapegoats in order to enforce the opening of schools and the maintenance of production in the factories.

In fact, it is clear that the refugees who make the crossing from Tunisia or Libya to Italy are no risk for the spread of the virus. But instead of being systematically tested and placed in safe and humane conditions, they are held for weeks on quarantine ships or in completely overcrowded refugee camps. Only a week ago, the president of the Italian

region of Sicily ordered that all the reception centers on the island be closed and all refugees deported. Regional President Nello Musumeci also justified this barbaric plan with fear of rising COVID-19 infections.

In his order, Musumeci, who had been hoisted into office by right-wing and right-wing extremist forces, further decreed that no refugee was allowed to enter, pass through, or stop on the island. Also affected by the order are the civilian sea rescue ships of the aid organizations, including now the Seawatch 4 and the Louise Michel.

Since the beginning of the year, almost 19,000 refugees from North Africa have landed in Italy, with a particularly sharp increase in the proportion of Tunisians fleeing their country. According to official figures, 359 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean. The actual number of victims is probably far higher. Since the European Union has withdrawn from sea rescue and at the same time civil sea rescue has been largely blocked—rescue ships are repeatedly being moored for flimsy reasons—many boat accidents in the central Mediterranean go unnoticed.

This is also suggested by reports from the Alarm Phone organization, which registers calls for help and forwards them to the sea rescue services. Between August 16 and 23, Alarm Phone received four calls for help from refugees in a single week. The organization assumes that at least 100 refugees drowned in these four accidents. Another 160 refugees are missing.

This is an incomplete list of recent tragedies.

- On August 18, an inflatable boat with at least 95 passengers bursts in international waters off the Libyan coast. However, the emergency response service in Rome does not want to intervene, since the Libyan coast guard is supposedly responsible. The coast guard in turn points to technical problems and cannot provide a boat. Hours later an EU reconnaissance plane circles over the scene of the accident, but does nothing. Only the next day does a Libyan fishing boat pick up 65 survivors and take them back to Libya.
- On August 16, an inflatable boat with 82 refugees on board is fired upon off the Libyan coast and catches fire. Forty-five people die, the survivors are brought to Libya and interned in camps although they need urgent medical attention.
- The same day another boat capsizes off the Libyan coast. Only one of the 40 refugees on board survives.

- On August 18, a refugee boat gets into distress off the Tunisian coast. Three of the 18 occupants die.

The indifference of the European Union to the thousandfold death of refugees in the Mediterranean—since 2014 alone, more than 14,000 refugees have officially drowned in the Mediterranean—is a blatant violation of international law and constitutes a humanitarian crime. Under the German Council Presidency, the murderous policy of “Fortress Europe” will be further intensified. There are plans to intern refugees at the EU’s external borders and to carry out fast-track asylum procedures and massive deportations.

However, the essentially racist and fascist actions of the European elites are meeting with ever-increasing resistance. The donation of the Louise Michel by the British street artist Banksy, reportedly after a conversation with the captain and sea rescue worker Pia Klemp, is only one expression of this development.

The Louise Michel adorns a variation of Banksy’s famous graffiti “Girl with a Balloon” in the form of a refugee child pointing to a heart-shaped life ring. In a video published on Instagram, Banksy justifies the foundation of the ship, named after a French author and anarchist who defended the Paris Commune in the 19th century, with the words: “Like most people who have made it in the art world, I bought a yacht to cruise around the Mediterranean. It is a French Navy ship that we converted into a lifeboat because the EU authorities deliberately ignore distress calls from ‘non-Europeans.’”

A petition on [Change.org](https://change.org) entitled “Impunity for Sea Rescue,” which was initiated last year after an Italian court prosecuted Klemp, has now received over 460,000 signatures.

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