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After the refugee tragedy off Crotona, Italy: Brussels and Berlin further restrict sea rescues

Some two weeks after the refugee tragedy off Italy's Calabrian coast near the town of Crotona, the death toll has risen to 74. On Saturday, the body of a young girl was recovered from the water. Among the victims are 29 minors, 20 of them children under 12. While 79 refugees were rescued from the Mediterranean, around 30 people are still missing.



Relatives cry on the coffin of one of the victims of last Sunday's shipwreck at the local sports hall in Crotona, southern Italy, Wednesday, March 1, 2023. [AP Photo/Giuseppe Pipita]

The cruel deaths of the refugees could have been avoided if a rescue operation had been launched in time. The tragedy throws a harsh spotlight on the murderous policies of the European Union, which deliberately accepts such victims in order to prevent other refugees from reaching Europe. For example, the German government is planning to drastically reduce civilian sea rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

The breakup of the wooden boat with presumably about 200 refugees on board, just a few dozen metres from the beach, caused worldwide horror. The coffins of the those who died were laid out in a sports hall in Crotona, where many came to pay their respects. At least 57 of the victims were refugees from Afghanistan. Many had relatives in Germany and other European countries who travelled to Crotona to identify their relatives and say goodbye.

Italy's government, led by fascist Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, denies any responsibility for the horrific disaster. Matteo Piantedosi, the nonpartisan interior minister, even blamed the victims themselves. "They shouldn't have set off in this weather in the first place," he declared cynically. Desperation did not justify "putting your own children in danger."

In the meantime, however, it is known that a surveillance plane from the European border protection agency Frontex had spotted the boat in the late evening of February 25. Based on footage from the thermal imaging cameras on the aircraft and the detected draft of the vessel, the crew concluded that there must be around 200 people on board. Frontex did not launch a rescue mission, however, but informed the Italian financial police, the Guardia die Finanza, which prosecutes "illegal border crossings." However, military vessels dispatched by the financial police struggled in a force eight wind and four-meter waves before they could reach the refugee boat.

"A small, overloaded boat, and in a sea state that forces two military ships to return, cannot but be in danger," concluded the daily *il manifesto*. Nevertheless, the Coast Guard in the port of Crotona, with its practically unsinkable ships, was not sent to the rescue. It was not activated until about 4:30 a.m. on February 26 and did not reach the wrecked ship until an hour later. By that time, dozens of refugees who could not swim had drowned.

During a state visit to the United Arab Emirates, Meloni nevertheless said "the situation is as simple as it is tragic: we did not receive any distress signals from Frontex." Rather, she said, everything was done "to save lives after we were alerted to the problem." She added, "I wonder if anyone in this country seriously believes that the government deliberately let more than 60 people die, including many children."

In fact, not only do many believe this, but it is the terrible truth. What happened Sunday night off the Calabrian coast was “not a tragedy, but the result of this nefarious policy,” as Orlando Amodeo, a doctor and long-time aid worker in shipping accidents who was also on the scene during the February 26 operation, told La7 television. It was “what was wanted,” he said.

“Fortress Europe”

This applies not only to the Italian government, but to the entire European Union. The dead of Crotona are victims of the deadly “Fortress Europe” policy, organized from Brussels and supported by all EU member states.

In 2013, when two refugee boats sank off the Italian island of Lampedusa, dragging 500 people to a horrific death, the European Commission was still promising that such a tragedy should never be repeated. But these were nothing more than empty promises. The “Mare Nostrum” mission launched by the Italian government at the time, which was supposed to pick up refugee boats and escort them back to Libya, was discontinued at the insistence of the European Union just one year later, after nearly 100,000 refugees had been rescued from distress at sea and brought to Europe.

Instead, the EU trained militias in Libya, equipped them with fast boats and appointed them as coast guards. This has since served as a European mercenary force, intercepting refugees before they reach international waters in order to bring them back to Libya. There, they are interned in facilities that German diplomats attested were “concentration camp-like conditions” in 2017.

When private aid organizations, which are financed solely by donations, tried to close the gap left by the withdrawal of the EU and the Mediterranean states from sea rescue, they were repeatedly thwarted. Under the false accusation that the presence of these sea rescue boats was fuelling the movement of refugees across the Mediterranean, the ships belonging to private aid organizations were chained up and prevented from leaving port.

In 2019, then-interior minister and now Transport and Infrastructure Minister Matteo Salvini of the far-right *Lega* ordered Italian ports closed to private sea rescue boats and threatened draconian fines and confiscation of the vessels. The regulations were largely rolled back in October 2020, but were reintroduced in a modified form by the new fascist-led government just days before the new refugee tragedy.

Under these rules, private rescue boats must immediately head to their assigned port after a rescue mission, even if it is not the closest port. There must also be no other rescues along the way. Moreover, since the assigned ports are far away, a quick return to the

search and rescue area is not possible—with the consequence that considerably fewer refugees can be rescued.

The ink on the government's decree had not yet dried when the “GeoBarents,” operated by the organization Doctors Without Borders, received a penalty notice for rescuing 48 refugees, allegedly in violation of the new regulations. The “GeoBarents” was detained for 20 days and fined €10,000.

German government cracks down on sea rescuers

The German government also wants to take massive action against civilian sea rescuers. According to information from broadcaster ARD's magazine programme *Monitor*, the federal Ministry of Transport under Volker Wissing (Liberal Democrat, FDP) is planning to tighten the Ship Safety Ordinance. According to the draft bill, ships undertaking “political ... and humanitarian activities or comparable idealistic purposes” should no longer be classed as part of the leisure sector.

Consequently, aid organizations that operate these ships will face enormous costs due to requisite conversions, additional technology, different insurance conditions and further requirements. The smaller ships that can be on the scene quickly and rescue drowning people from the sea will be particularly affected.

“For the majority of civilian sea rescue ships under a German flag, this regulation will mean they will have to limit or stop their life-saving work,” a statement from the NGOs Mare*GO, Mission Lifeline, r42-sailtraining, Resqship, Sarah Seenotrettung, Sea-Eye and Sea-Watch said of the planned measures.

With the new regulations, the coalition government was “deliberately widening the drastic rescue gap in the Mediterranean,” the statement by the civilian rescuers continues. “In the absence of a government rescue operation and safe and legal escape routes, people on the run will pay the price for the planned legal changes with their lives.”

The Transport Ministry rejected these accusations to *taz*, claiming that the plan “is not aimed at hindering private sea rescue in the Mediterranean, but on the contrary, it is about safeguarding their work.” The supposed safety deficiencies of the ships deployed should be prevented and thus the “protection of life and limb guaranteed.”

Since the beginning of rescue missions by civilian ships, there has not been a single accident in hundreds of missions, with many thousands of rescued persons, in which a crew member on board the ships has been injured. In reality, the tightening of the rules of engagement for civilian sea rescuers is aimed at restricting the rescue of refugees from distress at sea.

In doing so, the Transport Ministry is following guidelines developed by the EU Commission together with Frontex in the “Contact Group for Search and Rescue.” According to information from *Neues Deutschland*, on January 31 this contact group called on the EU member states to “jointly consider” how private sea rescuers could be regulated. It suggested tightening security requirements under the guise of “public order and security.”

The German government is acting as a driving force here, like the way it pushed through the EU’s dirty deal with Turkey back in 2015 to prevent refugees from reaching Europe via Turkey. This cynical arrangement, under which the EU pays the Turkish government billions of euros for its stooge services in fending off refugees, proved to be the undoing of the refugees on the boat that has now capsized off the Italian coast.

Alauddin Mohibzada, who lost his aunt and three cousins, aged 5, 8 and 12, in the accident, told refugee charity ProAsyl the reasons why they had embarked on the crossing despite knowing of the risk:

They had no other choice. They had to flee Afghanistan several years ago because my uncle was being persecuted there and was not safe anywhere. For the last few years, they lived in Turkey. But they didn’t have a residence permit, they were there illegally, they were threatened with deportation to Afghanistan.

Even now, when the Taliban are in power in Afghanistan, Turkey is deporting people en masse back to Afghanistan. They had therefore worked illegally in a textile factory for a pittance to somehow make ends meet. On the side, they saved money to continue their flight to Europe.

Legal channels were not open to them and “they didn’t get a visa. And of course, fleeing from Turkey to Greece sounds easier at first. But everywhere, the borders have been closed. And they heard from Greece that refugees don’t get any protection there but are stuck for years under miserable conditions. No one wants to put their children through that.”

Even Syrian refugees, who have once again become homeless because of the catastrophic earthquake in Turkey and are left with nothing, are not granted entry permits in Germany. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who in 2020 described Greece as Europe’s protective shield and thus justified the use of live ammunition in shootings against refugees, is now also explicitly praising the Italian government for its ruthless actions against refugees. In a letter to Giorgia Meloni, she states that Italy’s actions to

“offer safe and legal routes to people in need of protection with humanitarian corridors” was a crucial contribution to the further development of European migration policy.

In fact, the EU is waging an outright war against refugees. As early as February 9, after consultations among EU heads of government, Ursula von der Leyen announced: “We will better protect our external borders and prevent illegal migration.” In this context, the strengthening of the closure policy includes not only the erection of kilometres-long border fences but also shameless cooperation with North African despots.

In her letter to Meloni, von der Leyen reiterated this plan and promised to support Libya and Tunisia, in particular, in securing their borders against refugees. “We will continue to support Libyan maritime border security and search and rescue capabilities and build similar land border control capabilities with Egypt,” she said.

Meanwhile, the Italian government has announced it will provide Tunisia with 100 pick-up trucks worth €3.6 million to strengthen its border controls against refugees. In the process, the Tunisian security authorities have acted even more brutally against refugees since they were incited to do so by President Kais Saied in a violent and racist speech.

Since then, thousands of refugees have been trying to leave the country as quickly as possible. In the process, at least 14 people drowned off the coastal town of Sfax last week, when two boats capsized. This brought the number of refugees who have drowned in the Mediterranean this year to at least 346. More than 25,500 refugees have died in the Mediterranean since 2014.

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