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European powers prepare to sink refugee vessels in Mediterranean

By Alex Lantier

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As hundreds of thousands of refugees flee to Europe to escape wars in the Middle East and Africa, the European powers are drawing up plans to block the flow of refugees into Europe by sinking their vessels in the Mediterranean.

A group of European countries led by Britain is circulating a draft resolution at the UN Security Council that would allow European warships to board and destroy vessels carrying refugees from Libya. Those aboard the refugee ships would then be detained and taken to Italy. Those suspected of being the vessel's crew would face prosecution, while refugees would be processed by Italian authorities and face expulsion.

“It would be for the Italians to work out which of them were refugees and which were not,” an anonymous Security Council diplomat told the *New York Times* .

Another Security Council diplomat said the current draft resolution could be adopted “in the next couple of weeks, before the UN General Assembly,” which is due to meet in late September.

This barbaric proposal highlights the stark contrast between broad popular sympathy in Europe for the refugees fleeing imperialist wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya and beyond, and the bloody, repressive policies of the European Union (EU). On Wednesday, many EU governments bitterly

opposed EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's proposal to welcome 160,000 immigrants, a figure that is less than a third of the number that have fled to Europe.

In coordination with the United States and other European powers, Britain and France are pushing aggressively for stepped-up bombings in Syria, and plans are circulating for a possible ground invasion. This new crime would only increase the flow of refugees out of the Middle East. The NATO powers plan to respond to the new catastrophes their wars would unleash by trying to prevent anyone from fleeing to safety.

The draft resolution before the UN Security Council is the continuation of a program launched this spring for an EU naval force, EUNAVFOR-Med, to attack refugee vessels in the Mediterranean. It was presented to the public as a plan to "break the business model of smugglers and traffickers of people in the Mediterranean." The plan was approved by a joint meeting of all the EU's foreign and defense ministers.

The operation, headquartered in Rome, was initially led by Italian Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino, who had commanded Operation Atalanta, part of the military intervention against pirates off the Somali coast. During these operations, NATO vessels raided Somali ports and killed pirates execution-style, without trial.

The first part of the mission, which involved monitoring refugee routes so as to allow for planning of naval operations, began in May. The UN Security Council is now being asked to approve the second phase of the plan, in which naval forces actually board and attack migrant ships.

Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin told AFP the draft resolution is "something more limited" than the original plan, which would have allowed European navies to violate Libyan territorial waters in pursuit of refugee vessels.

The initial plan was derailed by the escalating fighting among the rival Islamist militias that have dominated Libya since the 2011 NATO war that toppled the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. The puppet regime formally recognized by the European powers as the Libyan government does not control western Libya, from which migrant vessels are departing. The plan was therefore modified, to remove an explicit reference to violating Libya's territorial waters, which would require the approval of an entity recognized as the government of Libya.

The proposal to sink vessels transporting desperate refugees to Europe is politically criminal. Whatever crimes persons transporting refugees to Europe may have committed—and most have been convicted of none—these pale in comparison with those of the major imperialist governments. Their wars have cost hundreds of thousands of lives and forced tens of millions to flee their homes.

Attempts to package a policy of blocking these refugees from traveling to Europe as driven by concern for defending their well-being against people smugglers is a shameful fraud.

Predictably, the operation found support from among the reactionary governments of the Visegrad Group countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary). These have been criticized in the media for their statements aimed at justifying the refusal to grant asylum to refugees, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's infamous claim that refugees threaten Europe's "Christian roots."

On Wednesday, Czech Finance Minister Andrej Babiš demanded that NATO begin sinking refugee vessels in the Mediterranean, adding that he would discuss it with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg when Stoltenberg traveled to the Czech Republic.

"The behavior of people smugglers who do not shy [from] anything is comparable with that of the Somalian pirates against whom NATO launched Operation Ocean Shield in August 2009," Babiš wrote in a press release. "What about launching Operation Mediterranean Shield now?"

"I want to call on Stoltenberg to start the operation. With its joint forces, NATO should protect the Turkish border and the Mediterranean. It should sink the smugglers' empty ships and help in further operations against the dangerous criminals and murderers whose business is threatening both the refugees and Europe," Babiš added.

He denounced the refugees as potential terrorists and members of the Islamic State (IS) militia, adding that many were only "seeking the lavish social systems of Germany and Britain."

The pursuit of the brutal policy hailed by Babiš by the entire EU underscores the hypocrisy of those like Juncker, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande, who have tried during the refugee crisis to pose as defenders of the right to asylum. They are, in fact, as hostile to the refugees' fundamental democratic rights as Orbán or Babiš.