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EU summit moves to seal Europe's borders against refugees

By Martin Kreickenbaum

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Thursday's summit of European government leaders in Brussels moved to seal off the EU's borders by means of an agreement with Turkish President Recep Erdogan aimed at preventing more than two million refugees in Turkey from entering the EU.

European Council President Donald Tusk outlined the goal of the Brussels meeting in a letter to EU member states. "Let us be clear about one thing," he wrote, "the exceptionally easy access to Europe is one of the main pull factors" bringing refugees into the EU. "Even if the influx of refugees slows down during winter, we must be ready for spring and the threat of bigger waves flowing to Europe," he added.

Two incidents this week made clear that the European Union's policy of repelling refugees will lead to further deaths. In Bulgaria, an Afghan refugee was shot dead by border guards, and seven refugees drowned off the Greek island of Lesbos, including four children and a baby, when their boat was rammed by a Greek Coast Guard ship and capsized.

When Tusk was asked about the incidents at the Bulgarian border during the meeting in Brussels, he said cynically that the deaths were an “argument for how important our discussion was tonight.”

EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker declared following the summit that the agreement with the Turkish government provides that refugees in Turkey will remain in Turkey. Turkey would be obliged to reinforce its borders with Greece and Bulgaria, act ruthlessly against migrants and refugees and accept back refugees that had already travelled into the EU. To this end, Turkey would be included in the list of “safe countries of origin.”

In return, the EU is promising the Turkish government that the EU will speed up negotiations on visa facilitation, resume the stalled negotiations over Turkish membership in the EU and provide financial assistance. On Sunday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel will travel to Ankara to negotiate directly with Erdogan.

The cynicism of this turn-about in European policy towards Turkey is striking. For years, EU accession negotiations with Turkey have been blocked due to stated concerns about the observance of fundamental human rights. Chancellor Merkel had even excluded Turkish membership in principle, merely holding out the perspective of “privileged partnership” status. In recent months, the EU, and above all the German government, had sharply criticized the domestic and foreign policy of the Erdogan government.

But at the very moment when the Turkish government is using brutal military force against the Kurdish minority, in order to expel the pro-Kurdish HDP party from parliament, the European Union is currying favour with Turkey to enlist its support in shoring up “fortress Europe.” The president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz (Social Democratic Party), said, “Do not judge Turkey, they really have behaved very correctly.”

No mention is made of the brutal crackdown on the Gezi Park protests two years ago, or the removal and arrest of dozens of judges and state attorneys investigating the ruling AKP for alleged corruption. Even the massive restriction of the freedom of the press and the imprisonment of journalists, most recently after the bombings in Ankara, will not prevent the EU from concluding a deal with the Turkish government.

It is precisely because human rights are currently being trampled on in Turkey that the European Union regards the country as an ideal partner and sidekick in its barbaric isolationist policy in Europe. The EU is to provide funds for the construction of six refugee camps for a total of two million refugees. Merkel, who is under pressure in her own Christian Democratic Party because of her supposedly generous refugee policy, is ready to accept Ankara’s demand for €3 billion to that end.

The money would be used in the camps to provide refugees with food, medical care and schools. The argument is that this would moderate the refugees’ impoverishment in Turkey, and would make them less likely to flee to Europe. However, this is very doubtful, since the Syrian civil war refugees are regarded as “guests” in Turkey, without real protection status and are prohibited

from taking on any legal employment. They are forced into illegality and are victims of ruthless exploitation by unscrupulous employers.

Even an improvement in the miserable supply situation in the mass camps will change nothing about the hopeless state of affairs confronting the refugees. However, to prevent them from travelling to Europe, Turkey would seal off its borders with Greece and Bulgaria. The Aegean coast would be controlled more intensely. Refugee boats that are discovered would be escorted back to Turkey.

The classification of Turkey as a “safe country of origin” was not extensively discussed in Brussels. But according to the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, there is already a large majority among EU authorities in favour of such a move.

In Italy and Switzerland, the applications of more than 70 percent of all Turkish citizens seeking asylum status were upheld. If Turkey is now defined as a “safe country of origin,” however, these asylum applications could be rejected in expedited procedures. This would mainly affect Kurds, who are persecuted by the Erdogan regime. In addition, Turkey would be committed to accepting the return of refugees apprehended in the EU who had entered via Turkey.

The EU leaders also agreed to beef up the European border protection agency Frontex. It would receive a further 775 officials and also be given a mandate to deport rejected refugees under its own authority, a power that previously was exercised by individual member states. Refugees would thus be denied the possibility of legal recourse against plans to deport them. Frontex would also be given a leading role in the planned, but not yet conclusively agreed upon, creation of a European border police force.

The “Visegrad Group,” comprised of the governments of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, has already forged ahead and launched its own joint border police force, which is stationed at the Hungarian border to ward off refugees.

Part of this militarization of the EU’s external borders is operation “Sophia,” under which warships of EU member states stop refugee boats in the Mediterranean off the Libyan coast, destroy them, or force them back to the African coast. Talk of naval rescue operations, which the EU loudly presented as the “ultimate goal” of the operation, has largely been dropped.

Reception centres at the European external border in Italy, Greece and Bulgaria, known as “hotspots,” would be provided with more staff, since so far only the German and Austrian governments have sent their promised quotas.

There is still disagreement, however, on the operation of the “hotspots.” While the states concerned want to limit their task to the registration and pre-selection of refugees, the German government especially is putting the “hotspots” under pressure to turn them into huge detention centres where refugees can be detained and their application for asylum rapidly processed so that they would be deported as soon as possible again.

Together with the transit zones planned in Germany and the EU-financed refugee camps foreseen outside Europe, EU refugee policy would then essentially be to seal off the borders and to intern those fleeing from war and misery in concentration camps.

According to an article published by the BBC, the European Union also wants to accelerate the repatriation of rejected refugees in the coming months, and brutally deport up to 400,000 asylum seekers. Refugees without travel documents would be issued a “laissez-passer” paper to force their supposed country of origin to accept them back.

According to estimates by the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), so far this year about 600,000 of the world’s 60 million refugees arrived in Europe, of which 140,000 came via Italy and about 450,000 via Greece. At least 3,117 refugees have paid for the flight to Europe with their lives.

The proportion of refugees accepted by the EU this year amounts to just over 0.1 percent of the population. The poor countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, on the other hand, bear the brunt of the global refugee crisis and take in more than 86 percent of all refugees.

It is a declaration of political bankruptcy that the European governments regard themselves as unable to accept refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, and instead are pulling up the drawbridge. Of the €2 billion in aid promised just a few weeks ago for countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, who have taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria and Iraq, only €24.3 million has been received, with the largest amount coming from non-EU countries like Norway and Switzerland.