

The desert front.

Supported by Libya, the EU starts setting-up deportation and refugee camps in North Africa

(2005)

‘How can you forget the concentration camps built from Italian colonists in Libya into which they deported your great family – the Obeidats? Why don’t you have the self-confidence, why don’t you refuse?’ the Libyan intellectual Abi Elkafi recently asked the Libyan ambassador in Rome in an open letter. He had initiated his country’s orientation towards the West. ‘The reason I write to you are the odious new concentration camps set up on Libya’s soil on behalf of the Berlusconi government.’

In June 1930, the Italian governor of Libya, Marshal Petro Badoglio had interned the majority of the 700,000 inhabitants. Within two years more than 100,000 people died of hunger and diseases in the desert concentration camps. At the same time Badoglio fortified the 300 kilometre long Libyan/Egyptian border line with barbed wire fence. Thus, the Italian colonists destroyed the Libyan resistance. For years, they did not succeed - neither by bombing villages and oasis nor by using poison gas. The current Italian government laughs about any demand for compensation, writes Abi Elkafi.

Four years ago, the western press received first reliable reports about internment camps in Libya. In September and October 2000 pogroms against migrant workers took place in Libya. 130 to 500 Black Africans were killed in the capitol Tripoli and the Tripoli area. To escape these hunt downs, thousands of building workers and employees from Niger, Mali, Nigeria, and Ghana fled to the South. A lot of them were stopped at road blocks in the Sahara and taken to Libyan military camps. ‘Le Monde Diplomatique’ reported on several camps where migrants and refugees have been held since 1996 – about 6,000 Ghanaians and 8,000 people from Niger are supposed to be in one of them. The Ghanaian president Jerry Rawlings visited the camp to bring back some hundred compatriots. On 22 February 2004, the Somali Consultative Council appealed to Ghaddafi ‘free the Somali prisoners arrested in your country and on hunger strike for two weeks and do not send them back into the civil war in Somalia.’ At the beginning of October the Italian state television RAI showed pictures from a Libyan refugee camp - hundreds of people in a yard – heavily guarded. No places to sleep are supposed to be inside these barracks. Latest reports from Somalis, recently deported from Italy to Libya, confirm the existence of these camps.

Did the Libyan government originally set up these camps to supply big projects in the South (e.g. ‘landscape the desert’) with workers, if required? Or were these measures to repel refugees in transit? Anyhow, some time ago the Libyan government announced that people entering the country uncontrolled are to be detained in the South of Libya and deported. Quite recently the Libyan minister of the interior Mabruk announced that Tripoli had deported about 40,000 migrants during the last weeks.

Internment and deportations are the presupposition for the off-shore-camps of the European Community propagated mostly from Otto Schily (German minister of the interior). Libya is the first non-European country integrated into the deportation policy of the EU. First facts have been established with the airlift to Tripoli deporting African refugees from Italy since 2nd October. Beginning of October at the European parliament in Strasbourg the designated but later failed EU commissioner Buttiglione announced in his hearing that the EU would not build ,concentration camps‘ in North Africa but use the already existing camps ,where refugees live under most difficult conditions‘. At their informal meeting in Scheveningen on 30.09./01.10.2004 the EU ministers of justice and interior agreed in principle that the EU plans to set up ,reception centres for asylum seekers‘ in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, and Libya – not operated by the EU but by the said countries.

Mostly unnoticed from the public, the EU countries next to the European outer borders work on a new deportation system. Up to now, refugees and migrants stopped by the border police were put into the country after a few days. Now, enormous capacities exist in camps on the Canary Islands and islands south of Italy and east of Greece. From there no way should lead to European towns and European laws, however meagre they are. The advantages of sites at the European periphery are: their location at the edge of airports on former military areas, guarded by paramilitary troops and difficult to access even for the UNHCR. Outside contact is very difficult, if not impossible. The sites are secured by modern prison dispositions. On the Canary Islands four camps are set up with a total of 1,950 places, and camps of similar size in Southern Italy and the East of Greece.

The camps represent a societal turn initiated by the EU countries: In the 1990‘s, the reception of the boat people by the Mediterranean population was on the whole friendly. On arrival of large refugee ships, a state of emergency was declared and the refugees were locked up in sport stadiums. This was, however, a public occurrence and lots of people came with clothing, covers and food. The administration systematically separates boat people and population through the new prison sites, thus creating conditions for mass deportations across the EU outer borders – beyond any legal control. Extraterritorial and unlegislated areas develop on Europe‘ s edge.

Since the beginning of the 1990‘s, hints to deal with asylum procedures outside Europe can be found in strategy documents concerning Western Europe‘ s refugee policy. Provisions have to be made world-wide to prevent refugees and unwanted migrants from Africa, Asia, and South America from reaching Europe. The core of the concept are camps encircling Europe.

So far, this could not be accomplished. At the beginning of the 1990‘s after the Iraq war, when flying across a certain area of Iraq-Kurdistan was prohibited, German authorities made various attempts, but did not succeed: They wanted to declare this area a ,safe haven‘ for Iraqi refugees, thus making mass deportation possible. The fanatics did not succeed until the NATO war in Kosovo. Within a few weeks, the war zone was surrounded by refugee camps, thus stopping hundreds of thousands on their flight to the EU.

At the beginning of the current Iraq war, Tony Blair suggested to set up refugee camps under EU direction but outside EU borders. His ,New Vision for Refugees‘ dated March 2003 stated that refugees applying for asylum in the EU are to be deported across the outer borders. In Transit Processing Centres (TPC) outside the EU gates, EU officials, UNHCR, and the notorious International Organisation of Migration (IOM) should build a ‘camp universe‘. From there refugees could be taken to ,safe‘ zones near their home countries and few could be

singled out for entry into Europe. When that plan became known to the public, it went down in a storm of protest.

In summer 2004, Otto Schily and Giuseppe Pisanu, the German and the Italian minister of the interior, took up that idea. The European commission together with the responsible Schengen committee (the Strategic committee on migration and asylum) were to test preliminary measures of 'a European asylum office with interception functions', in Northern Africa (stated Schily in the newspaper FAZ, issue dd. 07.23.04). In practice that meant: return the Mediterranean boat people to camps in Arabian states – as a collective measure, without checking nationality, flight route, and flight reasons of each individual. This is 'refoulement' and is exactly what the Geneva convention for refugees is opposed against. The constitutions of the European countries as well as the European human rights convention confirm that ban. However, not only the human dignity of asylum seekers is hurt. Migrants, whether they fled due to poverty and hunger or due to other 'economical' reasons, suffer the fate from which they had fled in the internment camp. They are threatened by arrest, maltreatment and death.

The most recent international developments have changed the political, military and economical landscape. Now the desert camps are almost within reach for Schily and Pisanu. According to the EU's outer border policy unwanted refugees and migrants are supposed to fail there. Since the EU enlargement and the war against terrorism, conditions for this policy have changed. In 2001, the German and Italian ministers of the interior agreed to set up an EU border police in EU documents. Thus, having centralised control over unreliable colleagues. Their first aim were the new Eastern borders. The new countries, however, are not enthusiastic about the plan that especially Germans together with other EU polices guard their Eastern border. They fear that a total closure will irritate their Eastern neighbours. Moreover, the methods of the German border police on Oder and Neisse are not very popular amongst the population in the new countries and the massacres of German troops in the Bug region are also still remembered.

Politicians of the South European front states – as they are called in official EU documents – have less scruples. The anti-terrorist measures against the Arab-Moslem population has enforced development of strong outer borders. The operative core of a future EU border protection is based on the greater Mediterranean region. The Mediterranean Sea is a new challenge for the control fanatics. The goal is the 'virtual' forward move of the European borders to the North African coasts. Even the departure of the wooden boats is to be prevented. Furthermore, the border polices long to control the Sahara-Sahel-zone together with the military and European and American secret services, thus setting up a second 'rejection' ring around Europe. Besides stopping refugees, the oil and gas production in the desert has to be secured. Thus, the border surveillance agreement between Italy and Libya provides for an internationalised control of the 2,000 kilometres long coast line and also the 4,000 kilometres long desert border of Libya.

This can hardly be achieved by boat and jeep patrols. In addition control techniques, tested in the most recent wars, are used. Aerial control using optronic and radar techniques is currently tested searching refugees in the Mediterranean sea.

The Spanish Guardia Civil has newly invented the surveillance tower. From above, the visual and electromagnetic identification technique can constantly scan the Strait of Gibraltar and the Moroccan coast. Due to the earth curvature only the open sea can be seen from above on other coastal sections. Nevertheless, the Canary Islands and the Spanish South Coast are equipped with the tower technology. Tests are made to link all accessible data in real time in

order to identify and follow all ships in the controlled area. This technology known as SIVE (Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior) is now exported to the Greek islands.

Meanwhile, Italy is testing drones which could later be used at the Libyan desert borders. In October, air force general Leonardo Tricarico announced that Italy bought five predator drones from the Californian weapon company General Atomic Aeronautical Systems, San Diego at a price of 48 Mio. \$. One of the five crashed while tested in the US. The predator is used to chase Al Kaida, the unmanned flying object can also fire rockets. Tricarico explained that the Italian air force will use the drones to fight terrorism and irregular migration. The Italian air force claims to have tracked down the first ship with refugees at the end of October 2004.

Testing of the new technologies at the south European ,front‘ is co-ordinated by the so-called ad hoc centres of the EU preceding the future EU border agencies. Two sea surveillance centres are based in Spain and Greece, one air surveillance centre in Italy. Another one is responsible for ,risk analysis‘. Taking the insurance business as an example and with the assistance of Europol, it is calculated where the greatest damage by irregular migration is imminent. There, surveillance is strengthened.

The ad hoc centres will to be joint with Schengen committees which should have been merged into the institutions of the Amsterdam treaty long ago. These circles have launched new power centres to create an EU border protection within five years. Thus, SCIFA+ unifying the Schengen round with all EU border polices was founded in 2002, and in 2003 the PCU – the co-ordinating unit of the practitioners.

The latter sees itself as a crisis centre using focal points at the outer borders to push through the centralised command structures, regarding the development of preventive measures and stringent controls of national border polices as its duty.

It is hard to say whether these EU co-ordinated methods have so far been failures, or whether they have fatal effects. On the one hand it is reported that an EU manoeuvre of various national naval units planned to take place in the Strait of Gibraltar and around the Canary Islands had to be stopped because of communication difficulties, on the other hand high tech is regarded as a magic potion to motivate border police and marines who think their work is more valued. Due to the intensified search with technical equipment in the strait, boat people are now using more dangerous waters. However, it can be assumed that EU offices took part in declaring the arrival of boat people on the Italian island of Lampedusa ‘a state of emergency‘ requiring extraordinary measures.

Fact is that according to official estimates 400,000 to 500,000 people secretly cross the Southern EU border year after year. Whoever can afford it, arrives by plane with a false passport. Whoever has relatives and friends might go on one of the ferries engaged in the massive holiday traffic. Only the poor enter wooden boats. According to reliable calculations more than 10,000 people drowned in the Mediterranean Sea since 1992 - since visas have been obligatory for the EU’s southern neighbours. However, the European governments did not declare the state of emergency because of the huge figure of deaths on sea but because of the arrival of app. 30,000 boat people per year. In late summer 2004 app. 1,800 people reached the island of Lampedusa. Obviously a high figure for a small island but small compared to the Mediterranean figure. The Italian state and the EU use them as a warning to others. Deterrence is the goal.

The second aspect which bringing the Libyan desert camps to the attention of Pisanu and Schily is of economical nature. Since the mid-1990's, Ghaddafi has slowly opened up Libya's economy and thus the oil and gas industry to foreign investors. Besides Russia, Libya is the most important non-European oil supplier for Germany, whereas Germany is the most important goods supplier to Libya after Italy. In 2002, the German minister for trade and commerce announced an 'export offensive' in the Middle East and North Africa - meaning investing in the oil and gas industry in these regions. Libya's potentials have first priority. In the 70's, before the economic co-operation was cut down, most of the German investments in North Africa and the Middle East were made in Libya. Now, the German Association of Chambers of Commerce and Industry does not only see good possibilities in the energy sector but also in infrastructure, telecommunication and health. Another big market is the food supply for the population because most has to be imported.

7 October 2004: Italian president Silvio Berlusconi visits Libya for the fourth time this year. This time to open the pipeline 'Greenstream' of the 'West Libyan Gas Project'. Build and operated by the Italian 'energy giant' ENI, the number one of the foreign companies in Libya. 6.6 billion dollars were invested into the 520 kilometres long pipeline now supplying gas from Libyan Mellitah to Sicily.

14./15. October 2004: Chancellor Schröder accompanied by German industrialists visits Ghaddafi. Schröder signs a bilateral investment agreement and is present when oil and gas concessions are granted to the German Wintershall, a subsidiary of the BASF group, represented in the country since 1958 and one of the leading foreign producers with an investment of 1.2 billion dollars. During the chancellor's visit the German RWE group also started business in the oil and gas production, and the German Siemens group received orders with a value of app. 180 Mio. Furthermore, the German government is interested in orders for 'technical material like night vision aids or thermal cameras for the border protection'.

The third reason for Schily and Pisanu to be interested in the desert concerns the military. It is strictly connected with border fortification, camp policy and oil and gas production. The German economy openly links economic aims in North Africa and the Middle East with military planning. Because the markets in question are supposed to 'have specific security risks'. Coming February, the foreign policy will join strategies regarding refugees, military and economy in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Like Pakistan and Turkey, Libya could soon be a privileged partner of the West as a stronghold against Islamism and Africa's failing states. Because of his leading role Africa's integration, Ghaddafi has a special influence in a lot of depending states. British officers will operate as consultants to the Libyan army. A military co-operation with Greece is agreed upon.

As agreed with Italy in 2003, Libya is currently purchasing boats, jeeps, radar equipment, and helicopters for the border surveillance. Italian trainers and consultants are already in the country. According to press reports, Rome supplied tents and other material for three camps in Libya in the first days of August. 'The camps are being set up', said Pisanu in an interview with the newspaper 'La Repubblica', 'they were never under discussion'. Meanwhile, the Italian navy guards large areas of the Libyan coast. Under pressure from Rome, Egypt is controlling the Red Sea for refugee ships. Funded with money from Italy, Tunisia operates 13 deportation prisons of which 11 are kept a secret from the public. A lot of deportees from Italy are supposed to be transported into the Tunisian-Algerian desert and there abandoned.

The German government is also responsible for arming the North African coast. According to the Ministry of Defence, Tunisia receives six Albatross speed boats from the German navy. Two years ago delivery of five speed boats to Egypt was agreed upon. In 2002 Algeria received surveillance systems at a value of 10.5 Mio. EUR, Tunisia communications and radar equipment for approx.. 1 Mio., Morocco military trucks for 4.5 Mio EUR.

The Western industrial countries have described the assumed danger in and from the Mediterranean region in two scenarios: One focal point being the Islamic fundamentalism, the other uncontrolled migration. It is surprising, how two completely different social aspects amalgamate in this vision of threat. Agreements of the EU countries state that Al Kaida and the boat people use the same North African networks. In the meantime, search units are formed to fight both enemies.

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