

## **For a European system of rescue at sea! Opening up legal and non-dangerous routes to Europe**

*The operation Mare Nostrum has to be continued. In view of the approx. 3000 deaths since January 2014, an operation under EU leadership must not just replace the present operation of the Italian navy, it must be expanded to avoid further deaths. Europe has proposed a Frontex operation called Triton but it cannot perform this central task. Even Frontex does not tire of emphasising that the focus of its operations is border controls, not rescue at sea.*

### **Shift of refugee routes**

The Frontex statistics for irregular border crossing in 2013 show a clear trend towards the dangerous sea route. More than half of all persons picked up (107,385) were fleeing over the seas. 40,304 boat refugees were rescued in the central Mediterranean alone, and in the Aegean just under 11,000.<sup>1</sup> Over 15,000 Syrian refugees used these two dangerous routes last year – in 2012 it was only about 1500. The number of Syrian boat refugees has increased tenfold in a very short time and this trend is continuing in 2014 in dramatic fashion. In Italy alone about 15,000 Syrian boat people had arrive by the end of July, while the overall number of refugees coming ashore at this time was about 85,000.<sup>2</sup> By the end of August a total of over 108,000 refugees had taken the dangerous sea rout to Italy. Meanwhile the number of deaths has risen to about 3000, with each week seeing new dramatic disasters happening due to unseaworthy boats.

### **Mare Nostrum must be Europeanised**

Through the Italian operation *Mare Nostrum* over 110,000 refugees have already been rescued in the central Mediterranean. Now the Italian government intends to terminate the sea rescue operation in October of this year. In the summer, the European governments had still refused to allocate make funds to turn *Mare Nostrum* into a European sea rescue operation. About EUR 9 million per month was too much for the European governments to save tens of thousands of human lives. In spite of the rescue operations of *Mare Nostrum* over 2500 boat refugees have lost their lives in the last four months alone – a downsizing of the operation would have had dramatic consequences: even more deaths would be the foreseeable consequence.

Now a Frontex operation is to be deployed. European Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström promised this to Italian interior minister Angelino Alfano on 27 August.<sup>3</sup> The presently discussed plans allow us to fear the worst: instead of more sea rescues it looks like a *Mare Nostrum* light – with a strong focus on border controls and protection. Frontex itself admits that it will not be possible for it to “replace” *Mare Nostrum*. The financing of Operation *Triton*, sometimes even called *Frontex Plus*, will be clearly below the funds spent on the Italian operation – according to Frontex the costs will be about EUR 2.8 million per month.<sup>4</sup> The deployment area is also to be reduced. While *Mare Nostrum* undertook rescue actions in Libyan coastal waters, *Triton* is only to cover the previous area of *Hermes* and *Aenea* – i.e. the Italian coastal waters. Frontex interim director Gil Arias confirmed at his presentation of the new operation to the European Parliament on 4 September 2014: “Neither the mission,

<sup>1</sup> Frontex 2014: Annual Risk Analysis 2014.

<sup>2</sup> CIR 2014: [http://www.cir-onlus.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1363:sbarchi-arrivate-85mila-persone-finora-25mila-domande-d-asilo&catid=13&Itemid=143&lang=it](http://www.cir-onlus.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1363:sbarchi-arrivate-85mila-persone-finora-25mila-domande-d-asilo&catid=13&Itemid=143&lang=it)

<sup>3</sup> Statement by Commissioner Malmström after the meeting with Italian Interior Minister Alfano, 27 August 2014: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_STATEMENT-14-259\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-14-259_en.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Frontex: Concept of reinforced joint operation tackling the migratory flows towards Italy: JO EPN-Triton to better control irregular migration and contribute to SAR in the Mediterranean Sea, 28.8.2014, p. 13: <http://www.avvenire.it/Cronaca/Documents/JOU%20Concept%20on%20EPN-TRITON%20%282%29.PDF>

nor the resources permit a replacement". There is a "fundamental difference", he said, between *Triton* and *Mare Nostrum*. While the latter was a "seek and rescue operation", *Triton* would focus on "border controls".<sup>5</sup>

Cecilia Malmström likewise confirmed on 3 September 2014, that *Frontex Plus* could not replace *Mare Nostrum*.<sup>6</sup> These opinions leave no doubt that with *Frontex Plus* (or *Triton*, a Joint Operation) the death toll will continue to rise.

### **Saving lives – receiving refugees with solidarity**

Only a Europeanisation of sea rescue can prevent this happening – and Frontex is not a sea rescue agency! Hence the urgency of establishing a civil European sea rescue service. The European Parliament supervises the EU budget and can thus immediately allocate the necessary resources to set up a European sea rescue service. Until this plan is implemented, *Mare Nostrum* must be continued, strengthened and, above all, fully financed by the European Union and its member states. The Mediterranean is not only our common sea - action to rescue boat refugees is a common European responsibility.

An intra-European solidarity mechanism is necessary to flank a comprehensive sea rescue operation. Refugees who arrive e.g. in Italy, Malta or Greece, must get the opportunity to travel on to another EU member state. This must be made possible particularly in cases in which there are family connections or community networks in certain countries. It would be an act of humanity but also a contribution to more solidarity between EU member states.

### **Opening up legal and non-dangerous routes to Europe**

We are greatly concerned about the initiative by the interior ministers from Germany, France, the UK, Spain and Poland, who wrote to Cecilia Malmström<sup>7</sup> on 9 September 2014. In their letter they outline how they see the solution "of the migration problem in the Mediterranean". One priority would be action for better supervision of the external borders and migration flows into the EU, they wrote, also a stronger effort to thwart gangs of people smugglers and stronger cooperation by the EU and the transit states and countries of origin affected by the migration issue. Instead of requesting improved sea rescue and the creation of legal ways for refugees to reach Europe, they focus on more efficient protection of the borders.

Thousands of refugees from Syria, Eritrea and Somalia strand in Libya, where they are exposed to serious human rights violations – the only option remaining to them is the perilous and regularly fatal voyage across the Mediterranean. Refugees in Libyan transit should be rapidly evacuated and receive protection in Europe.

Over 3 million Syrian refugees have fled their country by now. Many of them have family members who already live in European countries. In view of the suffering of refugees at the gates of Europe, the European Union is obliged to take coordinated action to receive persons seeking protection (with the aid of humanitarian reception programmes or resettlement).

Furthermore, the European Union must guarantee that there are no more push-backs at its land and sea borders: such refoulement is an infringement of international law.

Lampedusa must introduce a change of course in European refugee policy! *Mare Nostrum* must be Europeanised and expanded. In order to prevent refugees taking to these boats at the risk of their lives, Europe must open safer routes for refugees.

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<sup>5</sup> Europaforum, 4.9.2014: <http://www.europaforum.public.lu/fr/actualites/2014/09/pe-comm-libe-frontex-triton/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> EU Observer, 3.9.2014 : <http://euobserver.com/justice/125456>

<sup>7</sup> Then she was still serving as commissioner for home affairs. On 10 September she was given the trade portfolio in the Juncker Commission.