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Italy strands rescue ship Lifeline as EU refugee summit collapses

On Saturday, the Italian government stranded the German charity rescue ship Mission Lifeline off its coast with 239 refugees aboard, amid mounting conflicts inside the European Union (EU). The rescue ship was still in limbo yesterday in waters west of Malta, which sent emergency food and water but did not let the refugees come ashore on its territory.

Now, two weeks after Rome turned back the French rescue vessel *Aquarius*, stranding 629 refugees with insufficient food and water aboard, the refugees on the *Lifeline*, including 14 women and four infants, are again being held hostage, under inhuman conditions, to the diktat of the EU powers.

This is only one of the horrors taking place in Mediterranean waters between Italy and Libya, as the EU moves to block refugee flows and deny the right to asylum to masses of people who hope to flee war in the Middle East and Africa to Europe via Libya. Last Thursday, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 220 refugees had drowned in these waters in three days.

Yesterday, EU-backed Libyan coast guard ships intercepted two vessels carrying 460 migrants, including 110 women and 70 children, and took them to a naval base near Tripoli and then a refugee camp in the town of Khoms. This camp has operated since the 2011 NATO war that destroyed the Libyan government and plunged the country into civil war between rival Islamist militias. It was cited in a 2014 Human Rights Watch (HRW)

report which found that NATO-backed Libyan authorities torture asylum seekers with “severe whippings, beatings, and electric shocks.”

The crisis unfolding in the waters of the central Mediterranean is an unanswerable indictment of the barbarism of the EU, whose member states are planning a vast escalation of attacks on migrants across Europe and the Mediterranean. Italy’s far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who took office pledging to deport hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Italy, has launched a census of the Roma ethnicity in Italy. This poses the threat of mass expulsions of the Roma from the country.

Yesterday, in Brussels, an EU mini-summit on immigration to prepare the June 28-29 EU Council meeting collapsed. The countries in attendance were unable to agree to a common statement, as top EU officials and heads of state publicly traded insults over the refugee crisis.

In the run-up to the meeting, German Chancellor Angela Merkel sought to talk down expectations about what these summits could produce, warning that there would be no all-EU agreement on migration. Calling the mini-summit “no more and no less than a working and consultative meeting,” Merkel warned that “no solution will be reached on Thursday and Friday at the level of the 28 member states ... on the overall issue of migration.” She said that “bilateral, trilateral and multilateral” agreements between various EU member states might instead be agreed upon.

Indeed, the mini-summit almost did not take place, and ultimately failed to reach an agreement when it did go ahead. Two weeks after the unprecedented collapse of the G7 talks, where US President Donald Trump vetoed the final proposed communiqué backed by the EU powers, the EU itself stands on the brink of collapse amid rising nationalistic and xenophobic conflicts between the major EU powers.

In the end, only 16 of the EU’s 28 member countries attended the mini-summit. The Visegrad group countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) boycotted the meeting in order to protest the possibility that the EU might decide at the mini-summit to try to send refugees to their countries. Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte threatened not to come after an EU draft statement to be considered at the summit was circulated on Wednesday.

The statement, backed by EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, called for a massive expansion of the EU’s Frontex border police. This is Merkel’s preferred strategy to repress migrants and block their arrival in Europe as she faces a challenge to her government from German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, who has threatened to defy her

authority and unilaterally re-establish German border controls to keep refugees already inside Europe from coming to Germany.

Conte put forward what he called a “completely new proposal,” dubbed the “European Multilevel Strategy for Migration.” Conte claimed that this proposal would “completely overtake” the EU’s Dublin agreement on how to handle asylum cases, which dictates that refugees in the EU should be handled by the first EU country where they arrive. This has left Italy responsible for large numbers of migrants arriving from Africa, whom France and other EU countries have refused to allow onto their territory.

At the same time, the Italian government unleashed a filthy torrent of abuse against the refugees aboard the *Lifeline*, as Salvini infamously referred to the hundreds of desperate people trapped aboard the vessel as “human meat.”

The *Lifeline*’s crew shot back a message on Twitter declaring, “Dear Matteo Salvini, we have no meat on board, but humans. ... We cordially invite you to convince yourself that it is people we have saved from drowning. Come here, you are welcome!” The small vessel also signaled that it is hoping to rendezvous with the massive Danish container ship Alexander Maersk, which might offer it more protection in case of heavy storms.

Various EU heads of state and government issued competing reactionary proposals for attacks on refugees. French President Emmanuel Macron and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez called for “closed detention centers” within Europe. These would be concentration camps in all but name.

Salvini responded by denouncing Macron’s hypocrisy and demanding France do more. “650,000 landings in four years, 430,000 applications” for refugee status in Italy, he complained, “170,000 apparent refugees currently based in hotels, buildings and apartments at a cost exceeding €5 billion. If for the arrogant President Macron this is not a problem, we invite him to stop the insults and to demonstrate generosity by opening the many French ports and ceasing to push back women, children and men” refugees coming across the Franco-Italian border at Ventimiglia.

Macron would not make any change to his policies, however, which include a law drastically attacking the right to asylum and ongoing expulsions of Roma from France. Instead, he retaliated by threatening sanctions on EU countries who refused to take in refugees, apparently including not only the Visegrad group but also Italy, and saying that France “does not take lessons from anyone.”

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz for his part warned that if Seehofer put up German border controls in order to block refugees from reaching Germany, he would do the same in Austria.

In the end, the various governments at the EU migration summit failed to agree upon a common statement, and Juncker and the EU Commission abandoned their proposed resolution. Conte reacted by saying he was “really satisfied” with the outcome.