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European Union and Turkey reach deal to seal borders and expel refugees

By Jordan Shilton

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A summit between the 28 European Union (EU) heads of government and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu produced an agreement yesterday in Brussels aimed at hermetically sealing off Europe's borders to the millions of refugees fleeing war zones in the Middle East and North Africa.

Unveiling the deal after two days of talks, EU Council President Donald Tusk declared it would apply to refugees arriving in Greece after March 20. Refugees arriving on the Greek islands by crossing the Aegean Sea will be returned to Turkey, following the completion of a farcical asylum procedure in Greece. In exchange, the EU pledged to accept one Syrian refugee via legal means for every Syrian sent back to Turkey from Greece. This process will commence on April 4.

On top of the €3 billion offered to Turkey thus far, the EU has agreed to pay an additional €3 billion to Ankara by 2018. Turkey will also be offered the prospect of visa-free travel within the 28-state bloc for its citizens and the opening of a new chapter in negotiations over Turkish membership in the EU.

The claim that the deal is aimed at securing protection for refugees according to international law is a fraud. Turkey, a state gripped by a low-level civil war, where democratic rights are trampled under foot and political opponents of the regime suppressed, is to be declared a “safe country”, even though it has not fully implemented the UN Refugee Convention. This makes the asylum procedure formally offered in Greece practically irrelevant, since all refugees can be rejected on the grounds that they must first seek asylum in Turkey.

Moreover, Syrian refugees will only be accepted into the EU to the extent that others are prepared to risk their lives crossing the Aegean, which is patrolled by NATO warships and where well over 300 refugees have already drowned this year.

Expressing the indifference of the ruling elite to the plight of the millions fleeing war and poverty, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated in a blunt message to the refugees, “Whoever sets out on the dangerous route is not only risking their life, they also have no prospect of success.”

The deal’s reactionary character was expressed in the fact that even the far-right Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orban, whose country has been sealed off by border fences since last year, praised it for placing no obligations on individual EU member states to accept refugees.

Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu also hailed the agreement as “historic.”

Even reports in the mass media acknowledged that the deal effectively means the abandonment of any commitment to the right to asylum. An Associated Press story noted that the EU-Turkey deal meant the “outsourcing” of refugee protection to Turkey. Whereas an earlier draft instructed Turkey to treat refugees in accordance with international law, the final agreement merely contained the provision that Ankara adhere to those legal standards deemed “relevant.”

Refugees who do make it to Greece will be put to the back of the line when they return to Turkey, making it virtually impossible for them to make it to Europe legally.

In an indication of what is to come, reports emerged on Friday that Turkish coastguard boats and helicopters had detained 3,000 refugees on their way to the Greek island of Lesbos.

The deal agreed to unanimously by all EU governments is a blatant repudiation of the basic democratic right to asylum. In the wake of World War II and the horrific crimes of the Nazis, the capitalist powers felt compelled to establish the right to asylum as a fundamental tenet of international law. The UN Refugee Convention passed in 1951 guaranteed refugees not only the right to seek protection from war, discrimination and persecution in another country, but to be provided with access to jobs, education and social services.

The EU has committed to accept a mere 72,000 refugees, under conditions where close to 3 million Syrians alone are stranded in Turkey, and up to half of Syria’s population are either internally displaced or have fled to other countries. This is a return to the policies of the 1930s when the so-called democratic countries of Europe and North America accepted a token number of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

Greek Interior Minister Panagiotis Kouroumbilis directly compared the Idomeni camp on the Macedonian border with a Nazi concentration camp. “This is a modern Dachau, the result of the logic of closed borders,” said the member of the Syriza-led government in Athens, which has deployed troops to detain refugees and is acting as Europe’s gatekeeper.

Significantly, the final agreement contained the provision that when the number of 72,000 refugees is reached, the “one in, one out” mechanism will be suspended and no more refugees will be admitted to the EU from Turkey.

In 2008, when the global financial system stood on the verge of collapse, no expense was spared to bail out the banks and investors whose actions brought the world economy to the brink of collapse. But when it comes to providing for the basic necessities of life for millions of desperate refugees, no resources are forthcoming.

The catastrophic conditions that have created the mass of refugees now blocked at Europe’s borders are themselves the product of the actions of the imperialist powers. The NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, the invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, the war of aggression against Iraq in 2003, the NATO-led air war to topple the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, and the ongoing regime change operation to overthrow the Assad regime in Damascus—to mention only the most prominent examples—have resulted in the destruction of entire societies. Hundreds of thousands have been killed and millions have been forced to flee their homes.

The reliance on Turkey to block these refugees from reaching Europe will mean that they will be returned to the war zones they have sought so desperately to flee. Ankara is in the midst of a conflict with Kurdish separatists in the southeast of the country, where the Turkish army has launched a series of military operations resulting in hundreds of casualties. The Islamist government has also stepped up repression of journalists and the media, suppressing the *Zaman* newspaper, a publication critical of the government.

Notwithstanding the public pose of unanimity, the agreement on deterring the millions fleeing war cannot disguise the fact that deep differences remain within the EU itself. The closure of borders to keep out refugees, seen most recently with the decision by Austria and its Balkan neighbours to unilaterally impose border controls, threatened to tear the EU apart.

The deal was a “great success” for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, according to *Die Welt*. Merkel explicitly praised the deal because it embodied her demand for a “European solution” to the crisis. This call has nothing to do with any desire to assist refugees but is bound up with the interests of German big business to prevent the collapse of freedom of movement within the Schengen zone, from which it has been the main beneficiary over the past two decades.

For its part, France is less supportive of the concessions made to Turkey. French President Francois Hollande emphasised on Friday that Ankara would have to fulfill all 72 requirements before the removal of visa restrictions for Turkish citizens to travel within the EU would be implemented, according to Reuters.

Within the European working class, there is deep opposition to the sealing off of the EU's borders and the patrolling of the surrounding waters by NATO warships. Significantly, in spite of the incessant right-wing propaganda by the media and established political parties, German daily *Die Welt* reported the results of a poll Friday that showed 51 percent of respondents in favour of opening the border at Idomeni.

There is no reflection in the political establishment of the widespread sympathy among working people for the refugees, however. The so-called "left" is fully on board with the anti-refugee policy. In Germany, the Left Party is backing Merkel's policy, embodied in the deal with Turkey. In Greece, the Syriza government of Alexis Tsipras has joined hands with Davutoglu in upholding Fortress Europe.