

Deaths in the Mediterranean are not inevitable! Solidarity: the last shield against the EU's deadly policies

After several days of uncertainty and confusion, the outcome at the beginning of April in the Central Mediterranean,¹ although still provisional, is particularly disastrous: hundreds of migrants exhausted after being abandoned at sea for several days without any help, 12 people dead from dehydration or drowning² and several hundred sent back to the Libyan hell they were trying to flee at all costs. But while Europe pretends that this tragedy is one of the inevitable "collateral damages" of the COVID-19 health crisis, it is worth retracing the genesis of the "let-them-die" policies that the EU has been developing in the Mediterranean for several years.

European coastguards refusing to respond to distress calls or ignoring them,³ sabotaging migrants' boats to prevent them from reaching European shores,⁴ failing to coordinate rescue operations even though the boats are located in the search and rescue (SAR) zones for which they are responsible, leaving hundreds of people slowly dying at sea for several days and facing waves several metres high, or the coastguards secretly organizing, with the help of merchant or fishing vessels, privatized push-back operations to Libya in violation of the principle of non-refoulement⁵... this is the appalling outcome of the events of the second week of April, during which more than a thousand migrants tried to escape the Libyan chaos⁶ and the war raging there.

"Europe is facing a health crisis" has been the justification invoked for all these actions with deadly consequences. Exceptional circumstances, exceptional responses: on 7 April, following its refusal to allow the arrival of the boat belonging to the NGO Sea Eye, which was seeking a safe port in which to disembark the 150 survivors on board, Italy announced that it was obliged to close its ports. Referring to the epidemic severely affecting its territory, Italy stated that the country was no longer able to guarantee the safety of the people who would be disembarked there.⁷ Two days later, Malta adopted similar measures, adding that its coastguard would no longer be able to assist migrants in distress at sea.⁸ Libya also declared its ports unsafe⁹ - something that the associations have been saying for years ... Thus, no state in the Central Mediterranean is accepting its responsibility to rescue migrants at sea.

While European states hide behind the health emergency to justify these policies of non-assistance, the rhetoric of "crisis" has become the norm in the Mediterranean context. These latest events are just another step in the strategy deployed for years to prevent all arrivals on EU territory. Accused by Frontex Agency and European member states of being a "pull factor", the Italian *Mare Nostrum* rescue operation had ceased at the end of 2014, leaving a deadly vacuum behind it.¹⁰ Rescue NGOs that have been trying to fill this gap since 2015 have in turn been criminalized and their activities hampered. In order to avoid the disembarkation of people potentially rescued during EU surveillance

¹ Mediterranean Saving humans, [The Easter of shame – A recap by Mediterraneana](#), April 17, 2020.

² Times of Malta, [Five migrants found dead in boat stranded in Maltese waters](#), April 15, 2020.

³ Alarm Phone, [14 April 2020 Tweet](#).

⁴ The New York Times, [Malta Accused of Sabotaging Migrants Boat](#), April 9, 2020.

⁵ Alarm Phone, [Douze décès et un refoulement secret vers la Libye](#), press release, April 16, 2020.

⁶ Alarm Phone, [The Covid-19 Excuse: Non-Assistance in the Central Mediterranean becomes the Norm](#), press release, April 11, 2020.

⁷ Ouest France, [Coronavirus. L'Italie ferme ses ports aux migrants](#), April 8, 2020.

⁸ Info Migrants, [Coronavirus : à son tour, Malte annonce la fermeture de ses ports aux migrants](#), April 10, 2020.

⁹ The Guardian, [Libya says migrants stopped at sea will not be let back in](#), April 10, 2020.

¹⁰ See [Death by Rescue](#).

missions (Frontex and EUNAVFOR MED),¹¹ the deployment of ships was gradually replaced by air surveillance. This tactical change has enabled European states to detect vessels departing from Libya earlier, so that they can be intercepted by the so-called "Libyan coast guards". The new Operation Irini, which replaced EUNAVFOR MED on 1 April 2020, follows the same logic of avoidance by deploying its vessels further east off the Libyan coast, where it is less likely to encounter migrant vessels,¹² all the while continuing to outsource controls.

Between 2017 and 2018, more than 91 million euros from the EU's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa were used to train these supposed Libyan 'coast guards' and strengthen their interception capacities¹³. This close cooperation between the EU, Italy and Libya has resulted in an explosion in the number of migrants being returned to Libya, despite the well-known hell that this country is for them, between large-scale arbitrary detention in extreme conditions, ill-treatment, torture, ransom demands, endemic rape, forced labour, human trafficking, war, racism... systematic violence that pushes thousands of migrants to attempt the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean.

The fact that people continue to die at sea for lack of rescue, in prisons or under bombs¹⁴ after being sent back to Libya, is not a matter of fate but is the result of policies of externalisation and border closure. Carried out with a clear conscience by European leaders, in disregard of the fundamental rights of migrants, these policies have made the Central Mediterranean the most dangerous migratory route in the world: more than 19,000 deaths have been counted there since 2014, 1,260 in 2019 alone.¹⁵ These people have been sacrificed on the altar of European migration policies. To present them today as the collateral victims of a health crisis is utterly hypocritical.

While policies aimed at containing the spread of the virus are justified, they do not make acceptable the policies of non-assistance at sea that the EU has been pursuing for years, even temporarily and supposedly on an 'exceptional' basis. Under no circumstances can the COVID-19 pandemic justify the suspension of States' obligations in terms of rescue at sea and the solidarity that should exist between them to organize collectively the reception of these people in need of protection. Nor can it justify the suppression of the fundamental rights of migrants, in particular the "right to escape"¹⁶ of those who seek at all costs to escape the Libyan chaos. It can never be tolerated that lives are sorted, prioritized and despised.

Against these policies of closure, externalisation and abandonment which have turned the Mediterranean into a mass grave, and which have been exacerbated in recent weeks, thousands of people have expressed their solidarity. The Alarm Phone team has worked tirelessly to provide remote support to people in distress at sea, denouncing the various violations to which they have been subjected and putting pressure on the authorities responsible for their rescue. One of the boats in distress was rescued by a European NGO. Actions and petitions demanding immediate rescue and the opening of European ports have multiplied.¹⁷ Everywhere, civil society is mobilizing to save lives, to fight against the European Union's murderous policies and to organize cross-border solidarity.

As long as lives continue to be sacrificed in the Mediterranean and as long as freedom of movement for all is not achieved, this solidarity will continue to be expressed and voices will continue to be raised for justice to be done!

22 April 2020

¹¹ Boats4People, [Méditerranée : les naufrages meurtriers de migrants ne sont pas une fatalité !](#), April 16, 2015.

¹² Jeune Afrique, [Libye : l'opération Irini est conçue pour ne pas sauver de vies](#), April 3, 2020.

¹³ Info Migrants, [L'accord « choquant » entre l'Italie et les garde-côtes libyens renouvelé pour trois ans](#), February 3, 2020.

¹⁴ Migreurop, [Death at sea or under the bombs : is there no other alternative for the thousands of migrants trapped in the hell of Libya ?](#), July 5, 2019.

¹⁵ [More data on OIM website.](#)

¹⁶ Migreurop, [De « la guerre contre le virus » à la guerre aux exilé-e-s : les réponses sécuritaires au Covid-19 exacerbent les violences aux frontières](#), April 2, 2020.

¹⁷ To name just two of the many initiatives, see the #dontletthemdrown campaign launched on social networks by 37 NGOs to protest against Malta's decision to close its ports and the actions carried out by the NGO Mediterranean Saving humans.