

Mare Nostrum: Resistance from below forces Europe to save people

Seven theses on the current situation in the central Mediterranean

Some activists of Afrique-Europe-Interact have participated writhing these theses

With the following text we – activists from different networks involved in questions of flight and migration – want to bring up for discussion some reflections on the Italian naval operation “Mare Nostrum” and therefore on the current situation in the central Mediterranean. Because here in the past months, the combination of boat people who persistently risk the crossing and public criticism has forced the EU migration regime onto the defensive. The rescue of each and every person – and this thousands and thousands of times – is great news which moreover allows us a glimpse of the future: the end of the mass grave in the Mediterranean. Because we ought to call again and again to mind, that it is only since 1993 that due to political decisions all these deadly mechanisms of control- and exclusion have been established and that they could disappear overnight again. That this can only be forced through by resistance from below, is an central assumption of the following seven theses, the last of which therefore being a sketch of some of the goals of action for the upcoming months.

1. About the goals of militarisation...

By order of the Italian government, the Italian military started the operation “Mare Nostrum” at the end of October last year. In reaction to the “tragedy” of the 3rd of October 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa, the navy started a full-scale campaign to save or intercept boat people at an early stage at sea. An entire fleet, including reconnaissance from the air, was brought at the ready, up to near the Libyan coast, in order to guarantee a permanently sharp surveillance. This new step in the militarisation of the border regime was aiming at deterrence by way of forward displacement of presence and this not only to allow for the identification and arrest at sea of human traffickers. On board of the vessels refugees and migrants were registered, forced violently to give their fingerprints and “screened” as to their countries of origin, in order to prepare for the further procedure in Sicily: people from Eritrea, Somalia or Syria should from now on be admitted and accommodated in camps. In contrast people from Nigeria, Gambia and other countries ended up in the streets, some of them received request for leave. The situation of Tunisian and Egyptian migrants was even worse; they were confronted with exacerbated push-backs. The fact that at the start there were also Libyan officers on one of the vessels – officially “for observation” – indicates clearly that Mare Nostrum has had from the onset different goals.

2. ... on the realities of rescue

Things turned out differently. All “cooperation efforts” in Libya failed, because the power struggles made it impossible to find reliable partners. Meanwhile the whole country is considered to be a “failed state”. Leaving aside some exceptions, all the intercepted boat people had to be transported to Sicily. Even in the winter and spring months the crossings continued, as of March more and more boats were put to sea and statistically the running year is already a new record year at the end of July. At least until May 2014 and when considering the number of arrivals, there were never fewer deaths in the central Mediterranean as in the first five months of 2014. More precise: Mare Nostrum had to reduce the dying in order to prevent a downright legitimacy crisis of the migration regime. As a rescue-at-sea-program Mare Nostrum moreover became for a large number of refugees and migrants a halfway bridge to Europe. This very fact should be assessed and recognized – as unusual as this might seem – as the central and inestimably important ray of hope or achievement of the past months, by the way also with a view to the relatives, who are as well existentially affected.

3. The migration movement breaks up the militarised fortress

Despite all the deterrence by calculated left-to-die strategies, despite systematic human rights violations by refoulement: it is and was first and foremost the persistence of the social movement of migration which extorted this success from the inexorable EU border regime. And another merlon of the fortress is vehemently being ground. During the past months in particular groups of Syrian and Eritrean refugees collectively refused to give their fingerprints, because even before arriving in Italy they knew about the danger of being bound to Italy as the country of asylum application due to their fingerprints, as well as about the related impending homelessness and lack of perspectives.

Due to this units for counterinsurgency forced them to give their fingerprints, first in Lampedusa and later in Sicily. In this process dehydrated and devitalised refugees were repeatedly attacked, some with electric shocks, some with brute force (including bone fractures). The result of these conflicts was that in the meantime Italy has thousandfold abstained from biometric controls and therefore from the 'curse of the finger', that is Dublin III, – a statement which certainly should not hide the fact that the Italian government by doing so also tries to abdicate from its responsibility in the question of refugees and tries to put pressure on the rest of Europe.

4. After effects of the uprisings in North-Africa

With the revolt movements in 2011, first in Tunisia, then in Egypt and in Libya, three of the EU's so called watchdog regimes in North-Africa were broken up shortly after each other. At the most in Tunisia the Arab spring still makes itself felt today, but the military putsch in Egypt and the civil war in Libya reflect fatal domestic and geopolitical developments. In the existing order the EU has until now hardly succeeded in re-imbedding its goal of a forward displacement of migration control. Even though the refoulement of Tunisian and Egyptian Harragas ("border burners") when they manage to reach Italy by boat, has long since started functioning again. In addition refugees and migrants from subsaharian Africa are faced with massive deprivation of rights in Tunisia, including the cynical alternative between unlimited detention or 'voluntary' return. However, the integration into a comprehensive externalisation strategy, which in particular should stop the sub-Saharan migration, works less frictionless than anciently, especially in the extremely crisis-ridden Libya.

5. Resistance and critical public opinion in Europe

A third factor has decidedly gained in importance from the 3rd of October 2013: throughout Europe and particularly in Germany the media reports were more critical than ever before. Never in the past 20 years the EU migration policy was questioned to such an extent. At the sight of the coffins of children in Lampedusa, even the responsible politicians were shedding crocodile tears. But this turning point in public opinion and the media came in no way as a surprise, it rather reflects a protest and resistance movement against the lethal EU border regime, that has in many ways increased in the past years. Already in the years 2004 to 2006 thousands of migrants drowned in the Atlantic, without the public at large taking any notice of it. And also in recent years separate "boat tragedies", with even more victims than on the 3rd of October, occurred without a similar public outcry. Apparently the horrendous pictures from Lampedusa constituted the proverbial last drop that made the cup run over. Thousands of protests and commemorative events for the victims at the external borders, hundreds of actions against refoulement and not in the last place the increased self-organisation of refugees, all contributed to the fact that those responsible for the victims of the border regime came under massive pressure and that slogans such as "Refugees Welcome" and "no-one is illegal" are today supported at a new level.

6. Return to mass mortality?

While the international press regularly reports on the refugees who are saved by Mare Nostrum, a silence similar to censorship reigns concerning the increasing number of naval disasters

between Libya and Sicily in the last two months. Since May 2014 there are small reports about the Italian navy vessels withdrawing again and again from the sea off the Libyan coast, thus leaving increasingly large gaps, which cannot be closed any more by the Italian coast guard. Some naval disasters have occurred even though refugees had broadcasted a mayday call. More than 1.300 new victims of the border regime are the consequence of this partial withdrawal, while Italian public opinion is meanwhile complaining about the cost of the operation being too high and the EU – in the first place the German government – is strictly declining all demands for a Europe-wide participation. Considerations that Frontex ought to take over the salvation program seem utterly ridiculous: the EU border patrol agency does neither have the equipment and capacity, nor the interest. Frontex stands rather for fending off refugees and for migration control by all means.

7. Demands and perspectives

Rescue by all means, in the entire Mediterranean and off the Libyan coast, that is the strict requirement of the moment. For life in Libyan transit is becoming increasingly unbearable for refugees, considering the torture in the camps and the racism and the belligerent skirmishes in the streets. Even the UNHCR has completely withdrawn from Libya. Mayday calls of boat people ought to be reacted to at once everywhere, Mare Nostrum has shown that this is possible. Apart from that the first initiatives of self-organised alarm networks with distress signal telephones should be quickly further developed, in order to put immediate real-time pressure on those responsible when the salvation is not forthcoming or is being indefinitely postponed. Finally: Ferries for the distressed the Pope exhorted as influential voice, humanitarian corridors or legal entry opportunities demand diverse human rights organisations. Those would be advisable intermediary steps, when not combined with the establishment of a reformed border regime, but accompanied by a fundamental critique of the EU migration policy. The visa procedures and the complete set of instruments of exclusion must be abolished, in order to realise the universal right to protection and freedom of movement. “Freedom Not Frontex” remains the pointed right motto and the road to this freedom must be paved with the enhanced building of structures of self-organisation and support along the entire route.

4 August 2014: Activists from the initiatives and networks Research Association Flight and Migration, Afrique Europe Interact, Welcome to Europe and transact!