Beyond the Mediterranean

Migration und migrantische Selbstsorganisierung in Mali

By Stephan Dünnwald

Through numerous negotiations with the southern Mediterranean littoral states, Europe has succeeded in pushing the front line of its defense against refugees and migrants beyond the high seas, right into the interior of the African Maghreb states. In exchange for easier access to European visas for their own citizens, and increased development aid, the Maghreb states soon agreed to refuse Sub-Saharan migrants entry into and transit through their territory – even though in some cases these prohibitions lack any legal basis.

In Libya and Mauritania especially, a great many detention camps have been set up, in which migrants are held until they can be deported to the Southern border. Every day and every week transports of detained migrants arrive in these camps, especially the ones in Mali. The migrants, caught in the cities or on the routes North, are loaded onto trucks and dumped in a no man's land, without water, without food, and often without necessary medical care.

The “migrant problem”

Since the summer of 2005, when large groups of migrants from Sub-Saharan countries tried to assault the border fences around the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, both politicians and the general public in the West have begun to perceive a problem: that of migration from Africa to Europe.

The following year, in 2006, migration routes shifted, to the Canary Islands, as well as via Libya to Malta and the South Italian island of Lampedusa. The chances to get to Europe this way, although, have decreased dramatically since then.

The boats, overloaded with migrants, are sent back directly to the African mainland. The European border protection agency Frontex and national border police and military units cooperate closely in this endeavor. Migrants who do manage to land on the coasts of Europe are usually caught and sent back to their countries of origin or transit within weeks.

Every two weeks a delegation from Mali travels to Spain to identify Malian citizens detained there so as to facilitate their deportation. Europe goes to great lengths to stop African migrants and refugees from achieving their goals. It is tacitly accepted that in defending Europe's borders, both the administrations of EU member states and those of Maghreb countries disregard human rights.

What's presented as “the migration problem” here, a problem supposedly impossible to solve at a national level, reveals itself to be a grandiose exaggeration. In 2006, Spanish appeals for European solidarity in matters of immigration control were rudely rejected by the then German minister of the interior Wolfgang Schäuble, who stated that a country like Spain should be easily able to deal with an influx of 60000 new immigrants. Indeed, he probably remembered all too well the early nineties, when he himself (then also minister of the interior) managed to hype the refugee statistics of the day up into a national crisis that could only be solved by changing the fundamental right to asylum enshrined in the German Fundamental Law.

In fact, immigration to Spain from Sub-Saharan Africa is significantly lower than immigration from Morocco, from Latin American countries, or that of European pensioners. Immigration from

Africa is felt to be especially problematic, a fantasy nourished perhaps by nightmare images of a mass immigration.

Le bon droit et la bonne justice égale pour tous et partout

“Good law and good justice, equal for all, everywhere” is the slogan of the AME (Association Malienne des Expulsés), the “association of deportees from Mali”. The organization was founded in 1996, when deported members of the French Sans Papiers movement and deportees from Angola and other African states met in Bamako, the Malian capital. They were so many, recounts Ousmane Diarra, founder and president of the AME, that in the end they decided to organize. For a long time, the association lived in the shadows, chronically under financed and restricted in its capabilities. This only changed after 2006, when, after the deportations from Ceuta and Melilla, African and European human rights and refugee rights organizations came together at the World Social Forum in Bamako. The local work of the organizations started to have global resonance, transnational networks were created; at the same time, trainings and some modest financial aid made the work of local association much more efficient.

A network of organizations, some of them self-help groups of deportees like the AME, some human rights groups focused on supporting migrants, has formed in Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Morocco, and is becoming denser. Activists from Africa have become regular guests at conferences and actions of European human rights groups. Multilingualism became a hallmark and prerequisite of meetings in Madrid, Rabat, Frankfurt or Paris.

The AME succeeded in expanding their capacities to support refugees step by step. First a refugee reception area was set up at Bamako-Senou airport, which started by only doing counseling, then moved on to giving support in other ways as well. This became a lot easier when an old Mercedes could be acquired, so that deported refugees could be brought to Bamako, to stay with family, or to the AME office, where a room with some mattresses serves as provisional housing.

The AME concentrates on deportations from France. Air France and Aigle Azur deport persons from France several times a week. Charter deportations, especially from Spain or Lybia, with often a hundred or more people arriving at the same time, overtax the AME's capacities. Other deportation flights, rarer, for example with Royal Air Maroc, arrive very early in the morning. In these cases the AME is not present at the airport, but is informed by the airport police about the arrival of deportees. These migrants are also picked up at the airport and provided with accomodation, if necessary.

Besides being present at Bamako airport, the AME staffs two outposts at the borders with Mauritania and with Algeria. Algeria has been deporting Sub-Saharan migrants to the Malian border for a long time. Crowded onto trucks, in groups of eighty to a hundred, migrants are brought to Tinzaouten, in the desert. From the no man's land of the border area, they have to somehow find their way to the Malian city of Kidal. There the AME provides them with food, first aid and provisional housing, and if necessary also with the means to travel on to Bamako. In early 2009 the AME established an outpost in Nioro, at the border with Mauritania. In Mauritania, transit migrants are detained in the camps of Noadhibou and Nouakchott, then deported to the Malian border. Here as well the AME provides provisional accomodation and support as well as transport to Bamako.

But practical support is just part of the AME's activities. The AME sees itself primarily as a human rights group with political aims. Its practical activity includes the intake of deportees,

counseling on legal and social issues, and, if necessary, medical aid. Its political activity consists of pointing out, both to the Malian authorities and European governments, the human rights consequences of their anti-migration policies. Together with human rights organizations in neighboring countries and in Europe, the AME documents human rights violations and publicizes them, on the radio in Bamako, in reports at conferences and demonstrations in Mali, France or Germany.

Close encounters with Europe in Bamako

Europeans seem to care very little about what actually happens to those migrants who have been refused entry and deported. Stopping migration is quite evidently the priority of French and Spanish diplomatic activities in Mali. France makes use of its good connections and its status as the former colonial power – although this role is increasingly being contested. An indication of the change in relations between Mali and France is the continuing refusal of Mali to sign a readmission agreement. Many Malians, and especially those in France, resent the harshness with which la grande nation pushes through deportations. For there are of course deportations, even without a readmission agreement. In many cases, the Malian embassy recognizes arrested migrants without residence status as Malian citizens; but the French authorities would like this procedure to be much expanded. In exchange, France is offering more development aid and also – some, slightly – easier access to visas.

The CIGEM, the Center for Information on and Management of Migration, is an instrument of French influence in Mali. It is officially a European project, financed by the EU development fund. But there were some frictions in the initial phase of the project, with the result that the staff is now exclusively French. The center's mission includes: collecting information on migration; counseling would-be migrants and suggesting alternatives to leaving the country; supporting deportees; and, probably its major and most difficult task, preparing the Malian authorities to take on all these responsibilities themselves. Until now the Malian administration pays no attention to people who want to leave the country, nor to those who (are forced to) return. While the Malian government tries to curry favor with expatriate Malians, because they bring money into the country and constitute an important electorate, it does absolutely nothing for deportees.

The Spanish diplomatic mission in Mali is a recent development. In reaction to increasing immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa, Spain has opened a number of embassies in West Africa over the last few years, in a bid to influence migration. Spain is financing operations and equipment of the Malian border agency, for example. They also help the Malian Red Cross take care of deportees at the border crossings. The Spanish authorities are very discreet concerning these activities. There is no information about any of them forthcoming from the embassy, and the official line is that Spain is simply assisting the Malian government in protecting its interests.

Europe's defensive operations against unwanted migrants crossed the borders of the transit states a long time ago, and are now being carried out in the countries of origin. In the transit countries, the strategy of the European and other states has been quite successful. Whether they will succeed in curbing interest in migrating in the countries of origin, or in offering people there alternatives to migration, remains to be seen. There is as yet no sign of it. Granted, there are beginnings, for example some information campaigns on the dangers of irregular migration, or measures to support migrants who have returned “voluntarily”. But the success of these campaigns is highly debatable.

Poverty and emigration

It is in fact the lack of alternatives that continues to drive young men to migrate. There are

hardly any jobs in the country, and a regular wage is often not enough to support a family. In many regions of Mali the situation is made even worse by increasing drought, which leads to soil exhaustion and thus to decreasing, and less and less dependable, harvests.

Here we see the gradual and indirect effects of climate change, driving the population first to the cities, then out of the country. The Malian government and international development agencies are trying to counteract these tendencies with irrigation projects, but their success, especially in the North of the country, is very limited. So more and more young people drift into the cities, especially to Bamako, survive doing odd jobs while dreaming about making money somewhere, to contribute to the upkeep of their families. It is poverty and the lack of prospects that motivate young people to leave their country. To really change this situation, great efforts would have to be made to improve agriculture, to promote the processing and marketing of local products. Instead, the high subsidization of US American and European cotton makes cotton growing in Mali unprofitable and the opening of Malian markets, enforced by the World Bank, exposes producers and the population as a whole to the violent oscillations of food prices on the world market, especially concerning rice, a staple food. Mismanagement and the corruption of state agencies also contribute to economic stagnation. Many have given up the hope that things might ever improve in their own country.

Europe's proclamations of wanting to improve the desolate situation of many Sub-Saharan African states lose all credibility, if, simultaneously, Europe does everything it can to block migration routes and deport unwanted immigrants.

Bamako – a reservoir of failed migrants

The activities of the EU, Spain and France in Mali against irregular migration are not providing alternatives to emigration. Migration, usually of a duration of a few years, is a tradition in Mali; in many parts of the country it is part of becoming an adult. Young men prove to themselves, and to their families, that they can stand on their own two feet and contribute to the family income. If they do not succeed in this endeavor, they are often so ashamed of their failure that they do not dare return home. They stay in Bamako, live with friends, or tell their family that they are back in the country only temporarily. Their fear of coming back empty-handed is not unreasonable. As often as not it is the family that wants nothing more to do with the unsuccessful migrant. Deportees are often given to understand that there is no place for them at home, some are treated so badly that they have to leave, again. Deportees are often in a situation that could be likened to social death. Cut off from their family, they have lost the most important social relation. Many can't cope with the emotional stresses of deportation and rejection by their community. They break down and escape into the dream of another migration, this time a successful one – even though they do not have the means they would need for such a project. There are deportees in Bamako who have been living there for years, driven on only by the dream of making it after all, of getting to Europe once again, in the end.

Circular Senselessness

Among the political absurdities of European migration control, the concept of circular migration is one of the most remarkable pieces of nonsense. Migration in Mali has traditionally been mostly circular. It is true that sometimes migrants stay at their destinations, bring their family and settle down, but the majority of migrants see migration as a means of proving themselves in the eyes of their family, and their goal is to return home after a successful migration. The blockage of this migration means that irregular migrants are more at risk, because the are constantly under threat of deportation, and that they do not return, because, under the circumstances, they need much longer to accumulate the necessary capital for a return. So

what are we to make of the fact that the European Commission, as well as many member states, supposedly favor the concept of circular migration, while in practice they do their best to prevent it? The background of this charade is the model of regular migration, as espoused by Europe. Irregular migration was tolerable only as long as European labor markets depended on cheap labor from Sub-Saharan Africa.
Economic crises, faltering economic expansion and increasing global competition on all markets have led to a decreased demand for migrant labor. In the political sphere, the tendency is now to champion “selective” or “controlled” migration (“migration choisie”), meaning that only people who are considered useful to the host country have a chance of getting in. To establish the norm of regular migration, irregular migration must be actively demonized. The distinction between regular/irregular migration is quite pointless in Africa. Migration is an everyday phenomenon, there is freedom of movement among the West African ECOWAS states, passports and borders are of little consequence. It is the European offensive against irregular migration that is making nationality and border controls important again – it is Europe that pays for the re equipment of border stations and for biometric data collection, and tries to present irregular migration as necessarily connected with human trafficking. Hardly a conference now goes by without a representative of the EU or the IOM (International Organization for Migration) pillorying irregular migration, thus turning a heretofore irrelevant distinction into a conceptual cornerstone of policy. Only: Europe is not keeping its part of the bargain. In reality, Europe is not facilitating regular migration. Lots of empty promises, and only a very few visas and work permits have been forthcoming from the embassies of Spain and France in Bamako.

Reintegration – a task for the future

It is not suprising, under the circumstances, that there are more and more initiatives that are working for a new beginning for returned migrants within the country. Many self-help organizations of deportees have come into being over the last few years. Only a few of these try to support migrants who have just returned, like the AME. The primary aim of most of these networks is to aid their members, to collect funds to help people reintegrate and get out of the desolate situation they find themselves in after their return. In this way the failure of migration, it is hoped, may be transformed into a success, after all. The CIGEM has realized the potential of these numerous groups (over 100), has initiated the founding of an umbrella organization and distributed monies for the support of new arrivals. Some representatives of self-help groups have furthermore been elevated to the rank of counselors of the CIGEM. Among the many organizations that exist, the AME was the only one able to decline the offer of financial support by CIGEM. Support from human rights organizations from Europe gives the AME a certain degree of independence, so that they are gradually becoming an opposite pole to European state interests in Mali. With some other actors and groups in Bamako, the AME is working on building up its own network, independent of the CIGEM. In terms of practical activity, as well, the AME is by far the strongest organization. The intake and accompaniment of deportees is efficient, in addition, the AME has embarked upon a cooperation with Doctors of the World in recent months, in a project on the psychosocial support of deportees. It is financed by the European Union and the development program of the United Nations. But the AME is also aware of its own deficits. While the intake and initial support of deportees is now well-organized, no group in Mali is really able to help returnees with reintegration. Only those returnees who manage to reestablish themselves economically in their home country, have a chance of being accepted again by their families. But there is not enough money, and there is a lack of good ideas for projects that might enable returnees to set up their own business, or get them into steady employment. The AME wants to start a few trials now, using very modest means, to gather some experience in this domain. But in the end, as they very well know, they won't get beyond the stage of having a few pilot projects. But if a project is successful, and is maybe even emulated by others, that would already be progress. Only then would the AME really have

something to offer to the failed migrants.