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The Mediterranean : NATO finally comes to the aid of shipwrecked migrants, but the European Union refuses to admit them

The signatory organizations named below demand that the European Union provide a unified response to the tragedy in the Mediterranean. We insist that migrants and refugees who risk their lives crossing the sea must be admitted onto European soil.

In response to the systematic failure of European ships to rescue shipwrecked migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, people across Europe and Africa cried out for justice. Finally, on July 11th a Spanish ship used by NATO forces, called the Almirante Juan de Borbón, came to the rescue of more than one hundred women, men, and children of sub-Saharan African origin [1], whose makeshift boat was sinking in international waters. These shipwrecked migrants had set out from Libyan ports [2], but they never made it to European soil. [3].

The prospect of criminal charges brought against NATO for its failure to rescue shipwrecked migrants has begun to bear fruit, but the European Union remains unmoved. In fact, the Italian and Maltese governments have refused entry to the European military ship carrying rescued migrants. Rome refused entry under the pretext of overcrowding on the Island of Lampedusa, while the Maltese government claimed that the shipwreck took place too far from its territory and was thus under NATO's responsibility [4].

The day of the rescue, three survivors who required immediate medical attention were transferred to a Tunisian military vessel and received treatment in a Tunisian hospital. Five others were evacuated by helicopter to La Valette (Malta). For six days the Almirante Juan de Borbón was forced to remain in international waters because not one state in the European Union or in the Atlantic Alliance would admit the refugees. Finally, on the morning of July 16th, a Tunisian military vessel brought the remaining survivors back to Tunisia, despite the fact that the Almirante Juan de Borbón never entered Tunisian waters.

This event highlights, yet again, the cowardice and inhumanity of the European Union's reaction to shipwrecks in the Strait of Sicily. Several further observations on this point are required :

- Even if NATO, in this precise case, complied with its legal obligation to rescue those shipwrecked in international waters, the present events are disincentive to assist migrants at sea since most European nations continue to systematically fail to comply with their own obligations in terms of search and rescue.
- Italy refused to accept about one hundred shipwreck survivors because it worried about overcrowding in the refugee camp on Lampedusa Island. As a result, these individuals were sent to Tunisia, where, since fighting broke out in Libya, it is estimated that over 650,000 refugees have entered the country. Tens of thousands of these refugees still survive in deplorably overcrowded camps ;
- All of the shipwreck survivors were sent to Tunisia despite the fact that some were Tunisian nationals who might have been asylum seekers. In that case, the principle of non-refoulement might not have been respected.

When they do not let boat people drown in the Mediterranean (according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2,000 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean between February and June 2011 alone), European nations nevertheless refuse all responsibility for the people they rescue. Countries with military ships in the Mediterranean wash their hands of all

responsibility for these migrants and refugees by sending them to Tunisia ; a country already on the verge of serious instability. Tunisia can do little to aid the thousands who flee violence in Libya, let alone accept all of the shipwreck survivors that NATO sends to its shores. European countries are particularly culpable when it comes to Tunisian asylum seekers whose rights are completely ignored during this process. As of yet, the European Union has provided no unified means to facilitate the rescue and legal admittance into Europe of shipwrecked migrants and refugees.

We cannot accept this state of affairs any longer. Once more, the participating organizations call for a unified European system for the admittance of migrants and refugees who risk their lives on the high seas. We call on the African and European public, especially those who find themselves at sea, to speak out against this slaughter in the Mediterranean.

Signatory organizations :

ABCDS Maroc (Association Beni Znassen Culture Développement Solidarité), ACORT (Assemblée Citoyenne des Originaires de Turquie), AEDH (Association Européenne des Droits de l'Homme), Afrique-Europe Interact (Mali – Germany), Les Alternatifs (France), Anafé (Association nationale d'assistance aux forntières pour les étrangers), Andalucía Acoge (Espagne), ARCI (Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana), APSR (association d'accueil aux médecins et personnels de santé réfugiés en France), ASGI (Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione), Attac, ATMF (Association des Travailleurs Maghrebins de France), AFVMC (Aide aux Familles et Victimes des Migrations Clandestines – Cameroun), Borderline Europe – Human Rights without Borders (Germany), CAAR (Comité d'aide aux réfugiés), CASP (Centre d'Action Sociale Protestant), CADTM (Comité pour l'Annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde), CCFD – Terre Solidaire (Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement), CCSM (Collectif des Communautés Subsahariennes au Maroc), CEDETIM (Centre d'Etudes et d'Initiatives de Solidarité Internationale), CFDA (Coordination Française pour le Droit d'Asile), La Charte Mondiale des Migrants, la Cimade, CIRE (Coordination et Initiatives pour Réfugiés et Étrangers – Belgique), CMSM (Conseil Migrants au Maroc), Collectif de soutien aux migrants tunisiens de Lampedusa (France), Comede (Comité médical pour les exilés – France), COVIAM (Comité de Vigilance des Alpes Maritimes), DOM'Asile, Emmaüs International, FASTI (Fédération des Associations de Solidarité avec les Travailleur-euse-s Immigré-e-s), FEP (Fédération d'Entraide Protestante), FIDH (Fédération Internationale des ligues des Droits de l'Homme), FTCT (Fédération des Tunisiens pour une Citoyenneté des deux Rives), GADEM (Groupe Antiraciste d'Accompagnement et de Défense des Étrangers et Migrants – Maroc), GAS (Groupe Accueil Solidarité), Gisti (Groupe d'Information et de Soutien des Immigrés), IPAM (Initiatives Pour un Autre Monde), LDH Belgique, LDH (France), Migreurop, Médecins du Monde, Movimento dei Senza Voce, Mouvement de la Paix, MRAP (Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l'Amitié entre les Peuples), Réseau Foi et Justice Afrique Europe, REMDH (Réseau Euroméditerranéen pour les Droits de l'Homme), REMI (Réseau Euroméditerranéen pour la protections des Mineurs Isolés), Secours Catholique – Réseau Mondial Caritas, Secrétariat International de la CNT (Confédération Nationale du Travail – France), Toits du Monde Orléans, SOS Racismo (Spain)