

Last October has sadly recorded two<sup>1</sup> shipwrecks in the Sicilian Channel which claimed the lives of at least 373 migrants that were trying to reach the shores of the Italian tiny island of Lampedusa. The death toll is even destined to grow, since some 180 migrants are still lost at sea. Lampedusa is one of the gateways to Europe, together with Greece's eastern border as well as Spain's Melilla and Canary Islands. Places which became bitterly known due to perilous sea crossings, since as many as 19,300 people had never arrived alive to their oversea destination, the European Union. In the sole Sicilian channel, more than 7,000 migrants either died (1847) or are still registered as missing (5218) since 1994.

In the aftermath of the two latest harsh episodes of this chapter of human tragedy's book, which is yet also a chapter on human being's courageousness, dignity and hope, my article is meant to reflect on a number of facts, in order to argue that things are currently getting worse for migrants. Namely, there is a considerable increase of risks connected to the sea crossing in the Sicilian Channel.

Firstly, I looked at sea crossing statistics<sup>2</sup>. It is not pleasant at all to work on calculations about those who have endangered their lives trying to achieve better life conditions: escaping political regimes, civil wars, religious persecution, poverty in their original countries. Nevertheless, these figures may represent a valid step towards the demarcation of problems and the elaboration of viable solutions.

I accessed available data since 2002 on deaths reported in the Sicilian channel and I have subsequently divided them into three temporal groups, made up of four years each:

| Period     | Death/Missing |
|------------|---------------|
| 2002-2005  | <b>1292</b>   |
| 2006-2009  | <b>2557</b>   |
| 2010-2013* | <b>2436*</b>  |

*Tab.1 - 2002-2013 overview*

With reference to the side chart, it is important to note a number of things. Firstly, figures for 2013 only includes ascertained deaths, in a hopeful wait for more rescuing of alive migrants at sea. If we include into the count migrants who are still believed missing, at the beginning of December we would basically have the same amount of perished migrants as for the period 2006-2009.

Secondly, there is a marked disproportion between the overall period 2002-2013 and previous years. Although I have no detailed year-par-year data for 1994-2001, the total number of fatalities/missing migrants corresponding is reported to be 842. Therefore, the period between 2002-09 has seen a +457% fatalities increment in respect to the previous eight years. Obviously, these data do not make much sense if total migrant arrivals are not considered also. Let's analyse it within a more comprehensive chart<sup>3</sup>: 80586

| Year | Arrivals     | Fatalities | Year | Arrivals       | Fatalities | Year  | Arrivals           | Fatalities |
|------|--------------|------------|------|----------------|------------|-------|--------------------|------------|
| 2000 | <b>447</b>   | N.A.       | 2005 | <b>14855</b>   | 437        | 2010  | <b>459</b>         | 20         |
| 2001 | <b>923</b>   | 8          | 2006 | <b>18495</b>   | 302        | 2011  | <b>51753</b>       | 1822       |
| 2002 | <b>9669</b>  | 236        | 2007 | <b>(12000)</b> | 556        | 2012  | <b>(&gt; 5000)</b> | 171        |
| 2003 | <b>8819</b>  | 413        | 2008 | <b>31236</b>   | 1274       | 2013* | <b>14102</b>       | 423*       |
| 2004 | <b>10497</b> | 206        | 2009 | <b>N.A.</b>    | 425        |       |                    |            |
| Tot. | <b>30335</b> | 855        | Tot. | <b>76586</b>   | 2994       | Tot.  | <b>71314</b>       | 2436       |

Tab.2 - Lampedusa arrivals and fatalities in the Sicilian Channel (data within brackets are approximations; N.A. Indicates that reliable data could not be found)

In 2009-2010, we see in particular the effects of the *Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Co-operation* signed by Italy and Libya, which has meant a consistent drop in the arrivals.

The last set of data I would like to focus on is the ratio between arrivals and fatalities, in order to understand if the sea crossing to Lampedusa is getting more hazardous, that finding being one of the aims of this article. In order to keep my groups, I have excluded year 2001, for which I have clear figures: if I include 2001 ratio (115,3), the average for 2001-2005 would raise to 52,4.

| Year           | Ratio       | Year           | Ratio       | Year           | Ratio       |
|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| 2002           | 40,9        | 2006           | 61,2        | 2010           | 22,9        |
| 2003           | 21,3        | 2007           | 21,6        | 2011           | 28,4        |
| 2004           | 50,9        | 2008           | 24,5        | 2012           | (29,2)      |
| 2005           | 33,9        | 2009           | N.A.        | 2013           | 33,3        |
| <b>Average</b> | <b>36,7</b> | <b>Average</b> | <b>35,7</b> | <b>Average</b> | <b>28,4</b> |

Tab.3 – Survival ratio

As we observe in Tab.3, the Mediterranean migrant route to Lampedusa has actually become a more difficult endeavour to be accomplished, although in the whole period analysed in the table 96,5% of migrants has arrived safe. In last years, one every 28 migrants did not make it to reach Lampedusa alive. We shall thus focus on the reasons behind the incremented difficulties, having in mind that bad weather conditions or simply misfortune can't be accountable alone for this. One of the main causes is unavoidably rooted in the current tightening of the EU's migration-control policies; or, more precisely, in the effects that this tightening has entailed; Europe's most recent strategy to deal with migrant arrivals has been that of starting an externalisation of its borders, through three means: First, the transfer of migration management and asylum processing (hence, a transfer of duties and responsibilities) beyond the EU's borders, which is to say in North Africa<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, the financing of security instrument improvements, the establishment of detention centres within Northern Africa states<sup>5</sup> as well as the patrolling of their coasts from both international and domestic waters. Thirdly, the ratification of international agreements with specifically concerned countries (see the agreements signed by Italy-Libya, Italy-Tunisia and Spain-Morocco in particular).

In conclusion, the EU strategy is aiming at preventing further arrivals of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to the greatest degree possible, externalising controls to third countries like Libya<sup>6</sup>, despite substantial public evidence that even refugees and asylum-seekers are subjected to serious abuses over there. Through this process eventually the EU is also externalising human rights protection to countries with very poor records in this sense. In order to ensure the achievement of its goals, EU fines airlines which transport people without valid documents; increases visa restrictions; uses Frontex to implement joint patrol operations. These systems have worked very well for EU in 2010, since only 459 migrants arrived to Lampedusa, while asylum applications in Italy and Malta reduced by 94% and 53%, respectively, simply because the procedure was more difficult to be accessed. Over years, Frontex has protected 42,000 Km of sea borders, 9,000 land borders and 300 international airports at constantly increasing costs, as from Table 4.

|        |                   |                   |                    |                   |
|--------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Year   | 2005              | 2006              | 2007               | 2008              |
| Budget | <b>6,200,000</b>  | <b>19,200,000</b> | <b>35,000,000</b>  | <b>70,000,000</b> |
| Year   | 2009              | 2010              | 2011               | 2012              |
| Budget | <b>88,250,000</b> | <b>92,846,928</b> | <b>118,187,000</b> | <b>84,960,000</b> |

*Tab.4 - Frontex budget in €*

Since Frontex can make use of 21 air-planes, 27 helicopters and 116 boats, technical equipments, hearth beat detectors belonging to EU member states, these budget expenditure are motivated by the need of preventing migrants from touch the EU ground, I conclude. Notwithstanding the budgetary leap, controls were less efficacious in 2011 and onwards, in the wake of the Arab spring, despite of the EU has deployed Frontex off Tunisia and Libya to prevent populations from approaching its coasts<sup>7</sup>. Afterwards, the Egypt uprising, the Libyan and Syrian civil wars started to bring more and more people on Italian shores up to today.

What happens to migrants? They are caught among multiple boiling points: first, the original country they are fleeing, where they may be repatriated by the authorities at any time. Secondly, the European Union, which is instead trying to approach them directly in Africa, before they could jump on a departing vessel. Lastly, North African countries where the EU's security controls are implemented, such as Morocco, Algeria and Libya, which may develop in the future a tougher attitude on overstaying migrants (consider moreover the effects of the rumour of the alleged participation of black mercenaries in the Libyan civil war). Basically, migrants remain in a limbo where they are vulnerable to any sort of violence. If the sea crossing is the part of the journey we are most likely to witness with our eyes, many other atrocities like tortures, sexual harassments and humiliations occur distantly from spaces of public concern, ended up by being underestimated. We know these things happen though, through the accounts of survivors, the reports of international organisations and digital contents which appear on social network and media. For example, after the 3 October shipwreck, the Italian police have arrested a 24-year-old Somali man accused by other migrants of being one of the organisers of the people trafficking. He is also currently facing charges for tortures and sexual violence committed on several migrants in a detention camp in Libya, before boat's departure.

In fact, criminal organisations smuggling human beings have now become way more efficient in their ignominious activities: due to money collected over time and networking with other groups, they can now even keep migrants in detention camps, especially in war-torn countries like Libya. They are not allowed to embark until they pay some \$3,000 to traffickers, as many sources reported, on top of what they have already paid for the journey. Therefore, migrants are not a scarce resource

for criminal organisations, which can decide to hold them as prisoners, for years also, in the case of delayed payment of ransoms. In the trafficker's mind, a migrant may even die, since many more are coming every day. Within this context of overwhelming requests to cross the sea, on the one hand, and renewed EU's strategies, on the other, I argue that the security of migrants become much more vulnerable than ever before. Criminal organisations decide the proper time to organise the crossing, with no particular concerns over the weather or the success of the journey itself, since they have already pocketed the money they wanted from migrants. Smugglers overload available boats and then they force migrants to jump at sea, when dangers of being captured by patrol vessels arise. On the average level, a boat in 2008 carried 66 people, in 2011 the average went up to reach 114.

On the EU's side, we are not just talking about increased prevention and control measures. I have found this Red Cross report's quote quite telling<sup>8</sup>:

*“In March 2011, a boat carrying 72 people (Eritreans, Ethiopians, Ghanaians, Nigerians and Sudanese) drifted for more than two weeks between Libya, which they were fleeing, and Italy, which they sought to enter. Despite their distress and the large presence of NATO ships and helicopters in the area, no one came to help; 63 passengers died. An investigation led by the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly clearly points the finger at European states and their border-control measures to discourage fishermen and merchant ships from fulfilling their obligations of rescue at sea”*

It seems like there is a political will to enforce the de-responsibilisation as well as the de-territorialisation of EU borders by any means, including non-intervention. Once more, I stress that the increment of risks related to the sea crossing to Lampedusa is artificial and does not simply depend on misfortunes. The journey of migrants is hindered, irrespective of reasons which are leading them to leave their homelands. Often, these reasons are nothing else than human rights violation, the same rights encapsulated in the EU charter. As a confirmation of that, I looked into the asylum recognition rate granted in Italy<sup>9</sup> for nationals of three countries in the Horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, whose migrants compose a large share of the total arrivals (in the 3 October shipwreck many perished migrants were Eritreans, Somalis and Ghanaians). In years 2010-2012, the average recognition rate for worldwide asylum applicants in Italy was 77,3%. Ethiopians, Eritreans and Somalis were granted respectively an average rate of 81,7, 83,6 and 90,3: Italy's authorities thus recognised to an high extent the need to protect human rights of these specific nationalities, something that now the EU is trying to demand on other countries with low chances to realise this very fundamental humanitarian goal.

This research would largely benefit from data on the current number of African migrants in countries like Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria and Libya to assess the potential growth of their presence in these countries. In this way, the picture of the changing EU policies and the strengthening of criminal organisations smuggling human beings would be complete. However, these figures are really hard to be found out at the moment. Anyway, with data available at present days, which I have presented here, it seems fear to affirm that we are in front of a scenario of deteriorating security for migrants and short-sighted solutions to deal with humanitarian issues. Keeping current trends, things will only get worse (for migrants). If a softening of the EU policies seems not feasible, future cooperation efforts shall aim at least at guaranteeing people's safety in the externalised detention camp, where refugees shall also be able to access the asylum procedure with no further, artificial difficulties put in place to deter migrant arrivals in Europe.

Marco Zoppi  
WardheerNews contributor  
Email: [marcozoppi@hotmail.it](mailto:marcozoppi@hotmail.it)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The first shipwreck took place on 3 October. The boat caught fire and capsized close to the Sicilian island of Lampedusa. See BBC article for more details: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24436779>. The second one on 11 October. See here for more information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24499890>.
- 2 Most figures included in this article are taken from Fortress Europe, a blog which has been following migrant's routes in the Mediterranean Sea for more than a decade. See here: <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it/>
- 3 Data presented in Table three are taken from several sources, namely the above-mentioned Fortress Europe, the Italian Ministry of Interior and newspapers.
- 4 For example, see the Jesuit Refugee Service's note: <http://www.jrseurope.org/AdvocacyPages/Externalisation%20of%20Asylum/EXTERNALISATIONcampaign.htm> and the Red Cross' report "Shift Borders": [http://redcross.eu/en/upload/documents/pdf/2013/Migration/Shifting\\_Borders\\_Externalizing\\_migrant\\_vulnerabilities\\_rights\\_Red\\_Cross\\_EU\\_Office.pdf](http://redcross.eu/en/upload/documents/pdf/2013/Migration/Shifting_Borders_Externalizing_migrant_vulnerabilities_rights_Red_Cross_EU_Office.pdf)
- 5 For further information, consult Chris Stephen's article on the Guardian published on 13 October 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/13/libya-zoo-migrant-centre-eu-refugee>
- 6 In 2012, the European Court of Human Right condemned Italy for deporting migrants to Libya in 2009 without previously assessing the scope and provisions for international protection which these individuals could claim.
- 7 Red Cross report "*Shift Borders*", pag. 9
- 8 *Ivi*
- 9 Data from the Italian Ministry of Interior. Accessed here: [http://www.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/assets/files/27/2013\\_10\\_14\\_Quaderno\\_statistico\\_per\\_gli\\_anni\\_1990\\_-\\_2012.pdf](http://www.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/assets/files/27/2013_10_14_Quaderno_statistico_per_gli_anni_1990_-_2012.pdf)