

Abandoned in the desert: The EU's murderous anti-migrant and refugee policy

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People fleeing war, violence and poverty, and hoping for a better future and a life of human dignity in Europe, are being abandoned in the desert with the knowledge and funding of the European Union (EU), and their deaths are being condoned at the least. These so-called “desert dumps” are not isolated cases. Rather, they are the result of a deliberate EU policy aimed at creating a deterrent effect against unwanted migrants.

This is shown by research conducted by the investigative network Lighthouse Reporters in conjunction with international media outlets, including *Bayrischer Rundfunk*, *Der Spiegel*, the *Washington Post* and others. Over the course of a year, the journalists analysed hundreds of mobile phone videos of migrants and confidential documents. They researched the stories of over 50 migrants and recorded first-hand accounts of how people were abducted and dumped in the desert by security forces in Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania.

The story of Francois from Cameroon, who was stopped by the Tunisian National Guard as he attempted to flee to Europe in September 2023 while crossing the Mediterranean, is illustrative. Francois, his wife, his six-year-old stepson and the other refugees from the boat were captured, driven into the desert to the Algerian border in their wet clothes, abandoned there without drinking water and left to their fate.

“There is Algeria, go towards the light,” said the Tunisian security forces. “If we see you here, we’ll shoot you.” This was followed by a nine-day trek through the desert by the group of 30 refugees, which Francois was able to document with photos, videos and GPS data. The group also included two pregnant women. They survived by chance and with a lot of luck, as they found streams of water. The harrowing images can be seen in a short report by *Bayrischer*

Rundfunk, among others, and the *Washington Post* also used the case as a hook for its report on the EU's deadly deterrence policy on the African continent.

This practice of abandoning migrants in the desert and condoning their deaths had been reported and sharply criticised by the United Nations in the summer of 2023. A video broadcast on ZDF in early August 2023 shows the same treatment of refugees by Tunisian authorities. Tunisian Interior Minister Kamel Fekih spoke of individual cases and denied that it was a “collective practice.”

This has been completely refuted by the research that has now been published. Pushbacks and desert dumps are regular means of the EU's deterrence policy towards refugees and migrants, which are systematically used by the EU's North African partner regimes.

In July 2023, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Tunis together with far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and the then Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte to conclude an agreement with the authoritarian Tunisian President Kais Saied. The EU promised Tunisia financial aid totalling €105 million in return for “effective border management” and the “development of a system to identify and return irregular migrants” from Tunisia to their countries of origin.

Like Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania are also partner countries of the EU in the deterrence and containment of immigration from sub-Saharan Africa. Morocco and Tunisia are already considered “safe third countries” by some EU countries and are also being discussed as countries in which extraterritorial asylum procedures could be carried out. This means that asylum seekers from Europe would be transferred to these countries so that their asylum procedure could

take place there—and they could remain there even if the decision was positive. The UK’s agreement with Rwanda, which is already in force and allows all asylum seekers from the UK to be deported to the West African country, is often cited as a model.

In February 2024, von der Leyen travelled to Mauritania with Spain’s Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and negotiated the country’s contribution to migration control. During the negotiations, Mauritania received financial commitments from the EU totalling around half a billion euros. In January 2024, German Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser announced closer cooperation with Morocco on migration.

As part of their research into human rights violations, in Morocco and Mauritania, journalists had filmed refugees being forced onto buses and lorries and abducted over hundreds of kilometres. The migrants were abandoned on the border with Mali, among other places, where terrorist forces pose a particular threat to people’s lives. The Spanish authorities were apparently given lists of names of those who were left behind in the border area with Mali. The videos show vehicles in use that were made available to the partners in the Maghreb states by the EU.

Von der Leyen did not comment on the results of the investigation. An EU spokeswoman explained that all partners were expected to respect human rights and human dignity. These are hollow phrases that also accompany every agreement with the North African regimes.

The latest revelations confirm prior reports of abuse and clearly show that the security forces in the North African countries that are partners of the EU in “migration control” are systematically committing serious human rights violations against refugees. These are not only tacitly condoned and accepted by Brussels but are the direct result of EU migration policy in the Mediterranean region.

This inhumane practice of pushbacks by sea and land, and the intentional death by abandonment in the desert, is what the EU expects from the authoritarian regimes of its partner countries in the Maghreb. They are doing the dirty work of the EU, which itself is taking increasingly aggressive action against refugees and migrants. When EU representatives, such as Green Member of the European Parliament Erik Marquardt, now shed a few crocodile tears and call for a “human

rights-orientated asylum policy,” this is the height of hypocrisy.

In fact, migration policy shows the true face of an EU in which human life has no value. This cruel policy and attitude towards refugees, just like the pro-war policy, is supported by all the establishment parties, which openly adopt the programme of the extreme right, especially on the refugee issue.

In its appeal for the European elections, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) writes:

Fortress Europe, which is being expanded further and further with walls, barbed wire fences and inhumane detention centres at the external borders, is bringing death to thousands of refugees. It is a deliberate policy of murder to deter refugees fleeing war, destruction and misery. At the same time, politicians and the media are trying to make refugees and migrants the scapegoat for the deep social crisis.

The defence of democratic rights and the fight for equal rights for migrants and refugees therefore requires the independent mobilisation of the working class and a struggle against the rotten capitalist system and for a socialist perspective.



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