

Italy deserves EU's help on migrants

The plight of boat refugees from Africa cannot be ignored

Matteo Renzi, Italy's prime minister, has been quick to win a reputation for being a straight talker who does not mince words. As he tries to focus the attention of his EU partners on the thousands of migrants trying to reach Europe from north Africa, that characteristic has not deserted him. "A Europe that tells the Calabrian fisherman to use a specific technique to catch tuna, but then turns its back when there are dead bodies in the sea, cannot call itself civilised," he told the Italian parliament this week.

As Italy begins its six-month presidency of the EU, Mr Renzi is right to try to raise the issue of boat migrants up the bloc's agenda. Last year the risks facing those crossing the Mediterranean became all too apparent when 366 people drowned after their boat capsized one mile from the Italian island of Lampedusa. The tragedy facing these refugees, many fleeing civil war in Syria or forced military service in Eritrea, was lamented by Pope Francis who warned of "the globalisation of indifference".

The disaster led the Italian government to take a commendable stance. Until 2011 Italy had blocked immigrants at sea, returning many to Libya, their main point of departure. After Lampedusa, Italy began a search-and-rescue effort called *Mare Nostrum* – or "Our Sea" – which focuses on saving lives. So far this year the Italian navy has picked up more than 65,000 survivors, far higher than the previous peak in 2011 of 56,000.

What angers Mr Renzi and the Italians is that they feel they are acting alone in their effort to save lives. Italy pays €9m a month to fund the *Mare Nostrum* operation but receives little support from EU partners, even though many migrants enter Italy as a first step to reach other nations.

The Italians are also irritated that other EU governments are refusing to share the burden of relocating these people. True, Germany last year received 100,000 asylum seekers. But most EU states, fearful of increasing anti-immigrant sentiment, have offered

asylum to only a few hundred.

Italy's strategy over the refugees has been criticised by some politicians. They argue that *Mare Nostrum* encourages the refugee flow because migrants know they will be rescued. But while arrivals in Italy may have soared, migrants to Greece have also risen as the fighting in Syria intensifies.

Others argue that the EU should tackle the root causes of migration by giving economic assistance to north Africa. But such aid will not bring quick results. According to the World Bank, average per capita income in the EU was about \$34,000 in 2012, while in sub-Saharan Africa it was about \$1,550.

The EU therefore needs to place the boat migration issue near the top of its priorities – especially given the likelihood of continuing upheaval in the Middle East. The

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bloc puts a strong focus on boosting economic partnerships with eastern neighbours such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. While the challenge of building a partnership with Libya is difficult, the bloc should put a lot more energy into building relations with others in the region.

EU governments ought, too, to be far more willing to shelter migrants. The EU, as a whole, has been notably ungenerous towards the refugees from Syria. Of the 3m Syrians who have been displaced in the country's civil war, 1m have taken refuge in Turkey but only 100,000 have come to the EU. There is room to take more.

Given the toxic debate on immigration across the EU, governments will need courage to pursue this course. But the burden of taking refugees from north Africa cannot rest with Italy alone. At a time of deep scepticism about the future of the European project, it is refreshing to see Mr Renzi appeal to Europe's civilised values.

