

Refugees Shouldn't Be Italy's Burden Alone

By BENJAMIN WARD

An Italian naval vessel made a grim discovery in the Mediterranean Sea last month. Alerted that a 20-meter fishing vessel was in distress, the crew located and began evacuating the 600 or so migrants on board. The Italian navy captain told the BBC that his crew had also found dead bodies packed in a hold on the ship. The total dead was later confirmed as 45. The rescue and discovery were part of the navy's ongoing Mare Nostrum, an effort to save the lives of thousands of refugees fleeing the Middle East and North Africa on ill-equipped, overcrowded vessels prone to sinking.

The Italian navy's determination to rescue these migrants is in contrast to the attitudes of many European Union leaders. An EU summit in late June failed to approve any new measures to help Italy as the migrant wave continues to intensify. An Italian news agency reported that draft language on help for Italy didn't make it into the final version of the summit communiqué.

Instead we got familiar rhetoric about tackling root causes, combating smuggling and preventing irregular migration to "help avoid the loss of lives of migrants undertaking hazardous journeys." While EU governments have a right to police their borders and ought to tackle root causes, these initiatives won't save lives today.

The Italian government estimates that up to 80% of those it rescues are refugees. Many are from Syria, a country that almost three million people have fled since a civil war broke out in 2011. Others come from countries with poor human-rights records like Eritrea and Somalia. How does the EU propose to address the conflicts and human-rights abuses that drive those people to flee?

True, some of those making the crossing are economic migrants in search of a better life. But those who advocate tackling root causes as a preventive measure should

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consider this: According to the World Bank, average gross national income per capita in the EU was \$33,906 in 2012, while in sub-Saharan Africa it was \$1,547. Tackling the economic drivers of migration won't bring results soon.

Ahead of the EU Summit, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi had said that if the EU's border agency, Frontex, didn't take over responsibility for Mare Nostrum, Italy might be forced to scale back or halt the operation. Now that Rome has assumed the rotating EU Council presidency, it can press the issue again, including at an ad hoc EU summit on July 16.

If other EU governments remain steadfast in their unwillingness to help share costs or take responsibility for some arrivals, the siren calls from Italian opposition parties to halt Mare Nostrum will grow louder. And Rome may look for solutions involving Libya, the main country of departure for the deathtrap boats. Mr. Renzi has already said that the U.N.'s refugee agency should consider opening camps in Libya.

Libya is currently not capable of humanely hosting or fairly processing asylum seekers and migrants. The country is undergoing a rocky transition with near-daily killings, armed clashes between rival militias and weak central-government control. New Human Rights Watch research has found that migrants and asylum seekers are being tortured with whips and electric shocks in Libyan detention, many after being intercepted or rescued in Libyan territorial waters by the coast guard. Libya isn't a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. As EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom pointed out in a recent interview, the idea of enhanced migration cooperation with Libya fails the test of practicality: "An agreement with whom?"

There is no doubt that Mare Nostrum is expensive, costing Italy an estimated €9 million a month. But those costs would be manageable if they were spread more

evenly across EU countries. The EU has a humanitarian aid budget of €1 billion annually, which amounts to about 1% of the EU's total budget. Considering that Mare Nostrum is directed to the ultimate humanitarian purpose—saving lives—the costs seem easier to justify.

The number of arrivals this summer is unusually large—more than 65,000 in Italy by sea so far this year, compared with 56,000 during all of 2011, the previous peak. It may be that the prospect of safe rescue by the Italian navy changes the equation for some contemplating the journey—or the smugglers who profit from it. The risk of state institutions collapsing in Libya, the increasing difficulty of entering the EU through Greece and Bulgaria and the growing crisis in Syria also play a part in the rising flows across the Mediterranean.

But even if Mare Nostrum is a pull factor, what is the alternative? Allowing people to drown to deter others? While the numbers are large, they aren't unmanageable with a properly coordinated EU response. There is no reason why those arriving in Italy by sea couldn't be dispersed across the EU, allowing any asylum and human-rights claims to be fairly processed without imposing an unfair burden on any one member state.

If EU leaders genuinely feel that the Common European Asylum System is unable to cope, the logical solution would be to invoke the temporary-protection directive—an EU mechanism designed to address a mass influx of displaced people—to allow emergency assistance and burden-sharing among member states.

The Italian navy captain interviewed by the BBC expressed his mission simply: "We are here to work day by day to save lives at sea." If the European Union can't understand that imperative, it has lost its way.

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Italian migrants aboard an Italian military ship.

