

Examining Immigration Policy

Europe proposes a unified approach to dealing with an influx of refugees

By *per Concordiam* Staff
Photos by Getty Images

The postcard-worthy waters off the Italian island of Lampedusa serve as the paradoxical backdrop to the challenges of illegal immigration. The tiny island represents hope for many fleeing war-torn regions but has most recently symbolized tragedy. Nearly 400 migrants died there in October 2013 when their boats capsized off the coast.



Immigrants are detained at a temporary shelter in Lampedusa, Italy, in October 2013 following the deaths of nearly 400 African migrants who drowned trying to reach the island.

The catastrophe has forced the European Union to review immigration policies that have struggled to balance the needs of national security with the promise of peaceful migration. As European Commission President José Manuel Barroso said in pledging \$30 million in aid to Italy: “The problem of one of our countries, Italy, must be perceived as a problem for all of us.”

At least 25,000 would-be migrants have perished in the Mediterranean Sea in the past two decades, according to the International Organization for Migration. Braving the perils of the Mediterranean is viewed by many as the only option to escape turmoil in their homelands. Because Lampedusa is closer to Africa than Europe — just 113 kilometers from the Tunisian coast — it has proven to be a popular route for Africans.

The number of asylum seekers arriving in Italy increased 70 percent between 2012 and 2013, from 4,500 to 7,800 refugees, according to United Nations data. Political strife and uncertainty in North Africa and Syria, as well as the effectiveness of the 12.5-kilometer barbed-wire border fence between Greece and Turkey, contributed to the spike. Greek border guards and officers from the EU border monitoring agency Frontex concur that the fence has reduced crossings by 95 percent, Agence France-Presse reported. But those destined for Europe find alternate routes. The breakdown of order in Libya and the civil war in Syria has displaced about 2 million people, many seeking refuge in Italy.

EU REGULATIONS

The application process can be lengthy and cumbersome. Immigrants to the EU must apply for asylum in the entry country and remain there until the application is reviewed. This process, adopted in 2003 as the Dublin Regulation, aims to prevent applicants from submitting asylum applications in multiple member states. Some argue, however, that this places too heavy a burden on border states and violates EU principles of free movement.

EU countries with long coastlines such as Italy, Malta, Greece and Spain absorb the

brunt of the migration, and its sheer volume exceeds national resources. The countries complain that they’re left financially drained, and immigrants are forced to live in substandard housing for want of alternatives. Those four countries have lobbied other EU members to share the burden of this migration. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports that reception centers in places such as Lampedusa are overcrowded. UNHCR senior protection associate Maurizio Molina told the *Guardian* that Lampedusa is in “critical condition” and urged other regions to share the burden.

The EU’s lack of a coordinated response has forced Italy to deploy Navy vessels, helicopters and unmanned drones to ensure immigrants survive Mediterranean waters. Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta said patrols have saved hundreds of lives. Similarly, Malta is planning to send ships to the Libyan coast to prevent migrants from leaving. Letta suggests Italy will push to overhaul EU migration policies when the country holds the rotating EU presidency in 2014.

After long months of waiting in Lampedusa, some migrants grow desperate to start a new life. They find illicit ways to reach other EU countries. “These persons [refugees and asylum seekers] are often forced to rely on the service of smugglers, exposing them to harassment and exploitation, beatings, the risk of trafficking, or even death,” UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres said in an *International Business Times* article.



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Illegal Migration Numbers

19,140

people have died trying to reach Europe in the last 25 years.

2,352 in 2011 alone.

About half of the 30,100 irregular migrants that reached Italy by sea between January 2013 and October 2013 were from Syria and Eritrea.

The EU, as a whole, received **272,208** asylum claims in 2012.

ITALY REVIEWED **27,000**

ASYLUM CLAIMS IN 2012;

24%

WERE GRANTED INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION.

Since 2003, **6,707** people have **DIED** off the coast of Sicily.

Sources: UNHCR, Frontex, Fortress Europe.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24407808>



African migrants try to cross the Mediterranean Sea in an overloaded boat.

MAKING THE MEDITERRANEAN SAFER

The EU has introduced technology known as the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR). Planned since 2008, the system seeks to secure EU external borders and standardize and streamline communications among border guards. Illegal migration involves about 50 different EU offices, and EUROSUR will help link these agencies with joint surveillance that will cost about 340 million euros during the next decade, the Deutsche Welle reports.

EUROSUR shifts the security focus from patrol boats to satellites and drones, providing better and broader coverage in all types of weather. Even though the system was not created to aid boats in distress at sea, but to interdict drug smugglers and other criminals, EUROSUR should ease the plight of migrants. "I think it's self-evident that if information comes into this system, that people are in distress," those people will be helped, Marcus Ferber of the European Parliament told the Deutsche Welle.

Nevertheless, some question the legalities of Frontex's involvement. Joanna Parkin, migrant specialist for European policy studies in Brussels, wonders how it would work without giving Frontex direct operational powers, which some countries have resisted. She inquires "whether Frontex should have this kind of enhanced role given the ongoing questions about whether Frontex can be held responsible for failures to protect migrants on the Mediterranean Sea or whether it can ensure that potential refugees are given proper protection when they reach Europe," *The New York Times* reported Parkin saying at an October 2013 news conference.

ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

The key to stopping immigration from Libya is resolving security problems at the source, said Dr. Christopher Chivvis, senior political scientist with the U.S. think-tank Rand. Two years after Moammar Gadhafi's regime was overthrown by NATO coalition forces, rival militias continue to battle for power in Libya. The security situation worsened to the point that Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan was kidnapped. "The EU can provide technical assistance, facilitate a national reconciliation process on the model of Northern Ireland" and supply police training and judicial assistance, Chivvis told the London-based newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat*.



IMMIGRANTS HELPING EUROPE

Immigrants need not be viewed as a burden. By most accounts, as the average family size diminishes in Europe, the continent's workforce will begin to shrivel. Germany has more than 16,000 job openings for civil engineers. Meanwhile, Sina Alinia, a civil engineer and Iranian immigrant, sits in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt awaiting word regarding his asylum application, *Der Spiegel* noted in a story on immigration policy. He has been waiting 2 1/2 years to appeal an initial denial of his asylum request. If Europe embraced would-be workers such as Alinia, the story suggested, it would alleviate EU workplace shortages.

At an EU summit in October 2013, immigration was at the top of the agenda. The European Council agreed to step up border security through Frontex in the Mediterranean and Southeastern Europe and moved swiftly to implement EUROSUR. The council has scheduled a thorough review of long-range EU immigration policy in June 2014.

News that the EU's top leaders were wrestling with the continent's border problems cheered residents of Lampedusa previously concerned about what they viewed as official inaction. As Lampedusa resident Ajad Miccoli told the *Guardian*: "Now, we hope, the politicians might finally be listening." □

Banners reading "stop the crime of illegal immigration" and "366 is not a number but human victims" are displayed at a commemoration ceremony in October 2013 for immigrants who drowned trying to reach Lampedusa, Italy.