How far will the EU go to seal its borders?

Caitlin L. Chandler
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In order to stem onward migration, the EU now pours billions of euros into the Horn of Africa and other regions, thereby blurring the lines between humanitarian aid and border control. Reporting from eastern Sudan, Caitlin L. Chandler describes the human cost of this policy, as previously permeable border zones become impassable or more dangerous.

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Khartoum used to be a city where you could disappear. Located on one of the key migration trails to Europe via the Horn of Africa, thousands of Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis would enter the sprawling city to hire smugglers to take them north into Libya and then Europe. African refugees and migrants used to be able to travel out from the country relatively easily. But Sudan is now home to one of the European Union’s aggressive attempts to contain Africans before they can make it off the continent and onto Italian shores.

A central pillar of the EU’s current migration policy is to pressure governments in Africa and the Middle East to stem onward migration in exchange for aid. With the continued electoral gains of far-right parties across Europe on anti-immigration platforms, these efforts are rapidly accelerating. Now as billions of euros flow from Europe into the Horn of Africa and other regions to stem migration and previously permeable border zones become impassable or more dangerous, the human cost plays out far from the remit of European citizens. How far is Europe willing to go to seal its borders?

The question can best be answered not from the EU’s headquarters in Brussels, but in countries like Sudan. In November 2017, I spent a month reporting in Khartoum and Kassala, a town in eastern Sudan near the Eritrean border.

Research indicates that people intent on migrating to Europe through Sudan have left for
a combination of reasons, including government persecution, longstanding conflicts, and grinding poverty. Many Eritreans, who comprised the majority of refugees I interviewed, flee lifelong military conscription, among other human rights abuses. They first stay in Khartoum for a few months or even years, making furniture, cleaning houses, selling tea, or taking up other black-market jobs to save up the thousands of dollars they need for the journey through Libya or to Egypt.

In Khartoum, Eritreans live in subdivided houses, where flimsy walls delineate smaller rental units. Each room is occupied by a family or group of people. Those with more money have small fans and mattresses, the barest of amenities. Those without resources sleep on the floor, cheeks pressed into the ground.

“I live here with my friends,” said Yonas, a twenty-one-year-old Eritrean with a soft voice and a baby face.* We sat on one of the metal beds in the room he shares with five others as we talked. The room was small and cramped, broken glass from a window lay scattered in one corner. Outside, several men dug earth to construct a latrine. “This is my life – I have nothing more. When I see the police, I run away every time.”

Yonas plans to head to Europe, as does Elsa, a twenty-six-year-old from Eritrea who has been in Sudan for a year. Elsa described her life to me matter-of-factly: her daily work as a maid, the need to change houses several times due to verbal and physical abuse, how she continues working out of sheer necessity. “At least in Europe we can get better education, better work,” she said. “My mom used to take care of me; what I dream about now is if I go to Europe, I can pay her back for what she did for me all her life.”

The EU, working with the Sudanese government, wants refugees and migrants to return to their “home” country or stay in a third country (how the EU refers to countries like Sudan). But it is getting more and more dangerous for young people like Elsa and Yonas here. Starting in 2016, the Sudanese government began arresting and deporting [1] Eritreans for “illegal entry” into Sudan, which human rights organizations have linked to the EU’s migration agenda. [2] Returning someone back to a country where they face severe harm – which in Eritrea includes imprisonment and torture – is a violation of the international norm known as non-refoulement. As a result, Elsa, Yonas, and almost all of the Eritreans I interviewed spend every spare moment devoted to one thing: planning how to get out.

The EU’s preoccupation with Sudan started in 2014, before what became known as the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 catapulted migration policy to the forefront of European politics. For a long time, thousands of Eritreans, Sudanese, and others transiting through the Horn arrived each year in Lampedusa or the main island of Sicily on what is known as the Central Mediterranean route. In 2013, 9,834 Eritreans arrived in Italy, but in 2014, the number had more than tripled to 34,329.

In late 2014, the EU, European countries, African states, and the African Union (AU) came together in Rome to launch the EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative – known as the Khartoum Process – to address the “challenges posed by the mixed migratory flows of irregular migrants, refugees and asylum seekers between countries of
origin, transit and destination between the Horn of Africa and Europe,” through “a spirit of partnership, shared responsibility and cooperation.” The 2014 Rome declaration outlined key activities, such as “improving national capacity building in the field of migration management in all its components.”

This new collaboration, which is not legally binding, surprisingly included the formerly shunned governments of Sudan and Eritrea. Sudan’s president Omar al-Bashir has been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur, for which he has yet to be arrested or stand trial. Eritrea’s Isaias Afwerki is a military dictator, ruling so brutally for twenty-six years that 12 percent of the population has fled the country. But the EU, in a marked change from previous years, now involved representatives from these repressive governments to meet its end goal: stopping Africans from entering Europe.

View of Khartoum from the river Nile (Photo by John Power)

The Khartoum Process has become a lynchpin in the EU’s broader migration strategy, whereby the EU funds other countries to close their borders. In November 2015, the Valletta Summit on Migration [3] explicitly built on the Khartoum Process; European governments asked their African counterparts for their cooperation on migration in exchange for aid – €1.8 billion via a newly created EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (also launched in Valletta). A little over a year after the Khartoum negotiations, the EU cut a deal with Turkey, [4] forking over billions in exchange for Turkey policing its shores to prevent predominantly Syrian (as well as Iraqi and Afghan) refugees from entering Greece, and confining those who did to squalid camps. Then, in 2016, the EU began funding and training the Libyan coast guard to intercept boats trying to cross the Mediterranean. The Libyan coast guard returns these refugees and migrants to detention centers in Libya, where they risk starvation, torture, and rape. (The Libyan ministry that runs the detention centers also receives technical support and assistance from the EU.)

Individual European nations have developed their own bilateral agreements with countries along key migratory routes – for example, Italy’s government is also directly training and funding the Libyan coast guard, in parallel to the EU’s efforts. Some of these agreements build on a longer history of Europe turning to Libya to police its waters – such as one signed in 2008 [5] between Italy’s then prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and Libya’s former leader, Muammar al-Qaddafi, which included $500 million worth of electronic monitoring devices on the Libyan coastline.

The EU’s border-control efforts have tightened the noose across the Horn of Africa, making dangerous journeys even more perilous. The Khartoum Process was initially described as an effort to protect refugees and migrants – some of whom experience extreme violence on the route to Europe, including kidnapping, torture, and rape – by tackling smuggling and trafficking. The conflation was problematic from the beginning; although smuggling can lead to trafficking, this is not always the case, and refugees often see smugglers as their only means to get to their destinations.

The Khartoum Process also seemingly ignored the fact that smuggling and trafficking in the Horn flourishes with the support of government officials, police, and border guards.
This collusion is well documented – for example, the U.S. government’s office [6] to monitor and combat trafficking notes that Sudan does not meet minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. A team of Sudanese investigative journalists working in Kassala found “early warning” systems [7] between Sudanese police and traffickers to help the latter avoid arrest, while another investigation [8] by Refugees Deeply documented the involvement of high-level government officials.

A recent report [9] from the International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI), the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), and the Centre for Human Rights Law at SOAS, University of London found that the Khartoum Process’s focus on criminality rather than political context had made the journeys of refugees and migrants more, not less, dangerous: “states in the HoA and in Europe have created, sustained and contributed to the very conditions that their current initiatives are meant to tackle.”

This was confirmed by several sources on the ground in Khartoum and Kassala. “Migration is becoming more difficult because the security services and the government are blocking the traditional routes – this doesn’t mean it stops – it just means they’re moving to more dangerous routes. Now there are even more army and security officials who are part of the process,” said Fatima, a Sudanese journalist who has been covering migration for several years.

The Khartoum Process sent a clear signal to the Sudanese government that controlling migration was the EU’s top priority – and that it was ready to pay for it. The EU does not fund the government of Sudan directly because of human rights concerns, but over €100 million is streaming into Sudan to a variety of international organizations. On the ground, it is impossible to trace where all of the funds end up.

Soon after the Khartoum Process began, the Sudanese government deployed a paramilitary group [10] – the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which includes former members of the Janjaweed, a militia implicated in war crimes during the Darfur conflict – along its vast border with Libya to prevent people from crossing. It is impossible to patrol the entire border, but the Sudanese media regularly reports that there are armed confrontations there between the RSF and “traffickers”; the RSF has refused to say how many refugees and migrants are killed in these clashes. The RSF regularly reports arresting hundreds of people [11] trying to cross the border, sending them first to detention in the town of Dongola and then back to Khartoum, where they face deportation.

The 1951 UN Refugee Convention, [12] the international standard for refugee protection, states that refugees should not be penalized for entering a country illegally, recognizing that seeking asylum often requires circumventing immigration rules. Of the Eritreans who do make it to Europe, 90 percent receive some form of asylum.

But tightening borders across the Horn has increasingly criminalized everyone on the move. Lucy Hovil, a researcher at the International Refugee Rights Rights Initiative, lamented: “Refugee protection has never been more in need of protection.”
Across Africa, the EU Trust Fund is up and running, allocating €2.5 billion since its inception in 2015 to a myriad of hastily designed programs to curtail migration. As a result, the lines between humanitarian aid and border control are becoming dangerously blurred.

The Trust Fund is financed by Official Development Assistance (ODA), with over €2.9 billion coming from the European Development Fund – meaning that money previously available for things like healthcare and education is now partially diverted to border control instead. An Oxfam analysis [13] found that, of the €400 million allocated to migration management, “most projects are designed to restrict and discourage irregular migration through migration containment and control.”

An initial inquiry by CONCORD, [14] a European network of aid NGOs, of Trust Fund projects in three countries – Ethiopia, Libya, and Niger – found that “projects could be disconnected from needs in partner countries and lack a holistic view. Local actors are barely consulted and only once decisions have been taken."

Private security companies benefit majorly from the Trust Fund – to date, Civipol, a French company created to service the French Ministry of the Interior (France’s equivalent of the Department of Homeland Security), has been allocated over €44 million. [15] Civipol, which is also active across the Sahel in France’s former colonies, owns large shares in homeland security and arms-trade fairs. [16]

The EU couches its Trust Fund programming in human rights language and is careful to portray the issues it attempts to address as complex. “The real question is: do you offer hope to these people or not?” Jean-Michel Dumond, the EU’s Ambassador to Sudan, told me on a warm Friday in his office in November 2017. “If they have no hope they will move. You have to offer hope and that can only be relatively long term … there are no quick-fix solutions.”

It is not clear that the programs financed by the Trust Fund in Sudan offer the long-term solutions the over twenty-five refugees and migrants I interviewed say they want: well-paid work, access to higher education, legal migration pathways, the ability to live legally outside of refugee camps, and to have their rights protected. The projects highlighted on the Trust Fund’s website [17] range from small-scale livelihood trainings, food assistance, and primary school education to unspecified trainings for border guards, police, and the judiciary, and border equipment. (This is despite the fact that the Sudanese government already spends an estimated 70 percent of its budget on security and the military, at the expense of health, education, and nutrition in a country wracked by food insecurity and prolonged displacement stemming from conflict.)

And as the EU increasingly prioritizes border control over aid and development, some international organizations have continued to accept the funds, despite the fact that it means they are now bound to use them to carry out the EU’s political agenda.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is one of the UN agencies that has majorly benefited from Europe’s new focus. In Africa, the IOM has been allocated well over €134 million from the EU Trust Fund so far, with millions more planned. Some of these projects involve IOM cooperation with police, security, and governments in
countries where these same entities have a long history of human rights abuses, such as in Sudan.

“Of course we’re partnering with the government of Sudan – one of the key functions we do is support institutional strengthening for dealing with migration. We’re not here to combat migration, we’re here to manage migration,” said Andrew Gray, head of the IOM’s migration unit in Khartoum.

In addition, the IOM is the EU’s primary grantee in Libya, where it works in some of the detention centers, including training guards and refurbishing detention facilities. The IOM’s role across the Horn has rapidly grown after CNN aired a report in mid-November 2017 showing African men being sold in Libya.

“Big strong boys for farm work,” says the muffled voice in the video clip. “You are watching an auction of human beings,” cuts in CNN correspondent Nima El-bagir. There had previously been extensive documentation of the horrific conditions in Libya, but the CNN piece sparked protests in Bamako, Conakry, and Paris, among other cities, calling for international action, and trended on social media for days. Refugees and migrants have reported that they are sold within Libya’s network of detention centers.

Although EU leaders were previously aware of these conditions, in light of the public outcry they were swift to recast their image as saviors. Macron announced the launch of “concrete military and policing action” from the EU and AU in late November. In reality, the EU’s primary response has been to provide €100 million to the IOM to send people back to their home countries. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has also received funds for the evacuation of a small number of people to Niger for asylum screening and resettlement. In March, EU Vice-President Federica Mogherini told the European Parliament that, “In the first two months of this year, January and February, we managed to rescue and free more than 16,000 people from the camps in Libya.”

Removing people from the horrific detention centers is a humanitarian imperative, but it does not address the underlying issue – that the EU’s continued support for the Libyan coast guard has forced vulnerable people directly back into these same detention centers where they are bought and sold. “The suffering of migrants detained in Libya is an outrage to the conscience of humanity,” said Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, the outgoing UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in a statement last November. “The European Union’s policy of assisting the Libyan coast guard to intercept and return migrants in the Mediterranean [is] inhuman.” It is not often that such a high-level UN official condemns EU policy.

Operations to empty the detention centers have been fraught. Thousands of people (no one has a definite estimate) are being held in unofficial prisons that international organizations cannot access. Libya’s U.N.- and EU-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) also runs detention centers; the IOM announced in March that it has sent home some 10,171 people from these centers, with an estimated 4,000–5,000 refugees and migrants still trapped inside. A statement issued in May 2018 by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said 800 people, including children, are being held in a center in the port city of Zuwara, where for over five months they have lacked adequate
food and water. As of May, there were over 52,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers in the country, [25] with many more uncounted, and an estimated 700,000 to 1 million migrants.

Only a tiny fraction of refugees in Libya who are in the detention centers have access to possible resettlement. As of May, UNHCR had flown 1,152 of the most vulnerable refugees to Niger, 312 to Italy, and ten to Romania. [26] Of those evacuated to Niger, 108 of them have been resettled in France, Sweden, and Switzerland. Niger suspended receiving evacuees for two months from March to May in protest against the slow pace of resettlement.

Some Africans in Libya – including over 5,000 Somalis – have refused to leave Libya, saying they would rather die than go home.

Inside Europe, the IOM is the primary agency working with governments to conduct “voluntary returns” – offering people transport and up to €500 in cash to return to their country of origin. [27] While such programs are supposed to be optional, the reality is that people often opt in because they cannot be legally reunited with their families or have no other choices. “The broader story about return and reintegration that we know from previous studies, is that most often there are no long-term solutions in place when people are sent back,” Sine Plambech, a migration scholar based in Denmark who has conducted extensive research into the return of Nigerian women from Europe and elsewhere, tells me over Skype. “So what is framed as ‘rescue’ is actually just someone being sent back to what they left behind.”

European leaders continue to place the blame elsewhere. “It’s not the French who are the traffickers, it’s the Africans,” said French president Emmanuel Macron during a visit to the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso last November. “Show me a French, Belgian, German person, who carried out trafficking between Nigeria and Libya. This person doesn’t exist.”

As the EU denies the direct consequences of its policies, it has fallen to humanitarian and human rights organizations and activists to oppose them. MSF wrote an open letter to the EU in September 2017 – prior to the CNN report – based on months of working in Libya’s detention centers. “What migrants and refugees are living through in Libya should shock the collective conscience of Europe’s citizens and elected leaders. Blinded by the single-minded goal of keeping people outside of Europe, European funding is helping to stop the boats from departing Libyan waters, but this policy is also feeding a criminal system of abuse ... it must be named for what it is: a thriving enterprise of kidnapping, torture and extortion.” [28] Amnesty International issued a report in December 2017 documenting the human rights abuses people stranded in Libya were experiencing. “European governments have not just been fully aware of these abuses; by actively supporting the Libyan authorities in stopping sea crossings and containing people in Libya, they are complicit in these abuses,” it said.

But their criticism has fallen on deaf ears. Increasingly, they are taking to the courts as a last resort [29]: a pending lawsuit [30] in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) alleges that Italy’s deal with the Libyan government has led to human rights violations, including torture and slavery.
Meanwhile, aid organizations working to save lives on the Mediterranean have increasingly come under attack, both from the Libyan coast guard, the EU, and Italy. On March 15, 2018, a rescue ship run by Proactiva Open Arms, a Spanish nongovernmental organization, received a distress call at sea that two boats were sinking. As it pulled dozens of people out of the water, including children, the Libyan coast guard approached, demanding Proactiva abandon its operations and hand over the migrants and asylum-seekers. Despite the ship sailing in international waters, Italy’s maritime rescue center also instructed Proactiva to follow the orders of the Libyan coast guard. The organization refused, and the Libyans threatened to open fire, reportedly saying they would kill the crew. After a heated standoff, the coast guard backed down, and the ship sailed onward to Sicily.

But there, Italian authorities refused to let them dock, saying Proactiva had violated EU law by not handing the asylum-seekers over to the Libyans. A diplomatic crisis ensued; after forty-eight hours stranded in European waters with 218 traumatized people on board – two of whom had to be evacuated to Malta for emergency medical treatment – Proactiva disembarked in the Sicilian town of Pozzallo, where police seized the ship and announced a criminal investigation into three of the organization’s staff for “encouraging illegal immigration.” Italian courts have since ordered the ship’s release.

“Buenos días,” tweeted Oscar Camps, the head of Proactiva shortly after being served with investigation papers. “If we had returned them to hell, we would have never forgiven ourselves.”

Meanwhile, as the EU wages an indefinite war to close migration trails from Sudan and elsewhere, those who have actually been trafficked find themselves without options.

One night in Khartoum I met Helen, a fifteen-year-old girl from southwestern Eritrea. Helen has clear skin and pale brown eyes; she wore an Adidas T-shirt under a striped cardigan and a glittery gold scarf. She has four brothers and three sisters; the elder sister lives in Khartoum, where she works cleaning houses. In Eritrea, Helen was content attending school, spending time with her siblings, and exploring her small town, which she described as beautiful.

But one night a few months ago, Helen was walking home alone at night from her local market when a car with several men pulled up beside her. The men got out and brutally assaulted her. Then they shoved her inside the car.

Helen blacked out. When she woke up, she heard Arabic, a sign she was likely now in Sudan. “I suddenly became conscious, and what I saw was that all my clothes were full of blood.” Helen said. “I started to cry.”

Helen was somewhere in the countryside, with a small group of other Eritreans under a cluster of trees. When she awoke, the others asked her how she had come there. Helen tried to explain, but nothing made sense and her head rang. She looked around, trying to assess her new surroundings. There were no houses or other buildings. The other women shared clothes with Helen, replacing her bloody ones.
Thousands of Eritreans flee their country each month and cross into Sudan, either on their own or with the aid of smugglers. Helen’s case is more unusual because she was abducted, but it shows how easily traffickers can operate, with impunity from law enforcement on either side of the border.

Helen described how each day, every Eritrean was pulled outside the group; the captors would force them to dial their families, then place the phone next to their faces to transmit the sound of their screams as they were beaten. Each night, one woman was pulled away from the group and raped multiple times, usually by several different men. “Sometimes they came to me every night,” said Helen. “They would change from me to the other girls.”

Helen was held for two months until her family in Eritrea was able to raise approximately $500 ransom. Then she was transferred to another site, where she waited for two days for a truck to take her to Khartoum. There, she found her sister. But she did not tell her sister what had happened during the two months she was imprisoned.

Helen and many others who have been trafficked and made it to Khartoum live in secret, unaware of how to access medical, legal, or other help. If they manage to receive any assistance, it’s usually through personal donations from other Eritreans. Similarly, Ethiopians who end up in Khartoum can also access a safe house run by the Ethiopian community on a shoestring budget. When I visited the safe house, a young man had just arrived after having been trafficked from Ethiopia; the safe-house manager found him a floor to sleep on.

Helen told us that she wanted to see a doctor, so after we met, the female translator I was working with called around for a referral. She was told the best place was the IOM’s Migrant Resource and Response Centre (MRRC).

One afternoon, my translator and I picked Helen up in a taxi and accompanied her to the IOM center. When we got there, the brand-new center was empty, except for staff members and an external consultant. The center’s manager ushered us into a room; one of the first questions he asked was to see Helen’s identification. Many people who have been trafficked or smuggled no longer have IDs. We mentioned this, and then asked for a translator or social worker, so that Helen could be included in the intake process. The manager became irate. “Do you want to tell me how to do my job?” he said. “We can’t help everybody.” Finally, he arranged for a Tigrinya-speaking counselor to speak to Helen privately. Afterward, they said they would refer her to a doctor from the Eritrean community – there was no medical professional on site. They did not offer to pay for her transport home or to the appointment.

In the weeks after we visited the IOM center, at least two other Eritrean women we referred for medical services reported to us that they were turned away for not having identification. The very services in Khartoum that are supposed to help people on the move apparently do not serve those without papers.

The EU has some of the strongest human rights conventions and institutions in the world,
despite its member countries’ histories of war, violence, and colonization. If the EU wanted to take a rights-based approach to migration, it could work with member countries to create more legal channels through work and education visas. European countries could also increase the number of refugees it takes in for resettlement – in 2017, it accepted only 38,881 people through UNHCR’s program. Such options would provide alternatives to undertaking deadly journeys. In countries like Sudan, the EU could focus on meaningful reforms, such as lobbying the Sudanese government to allow refugees to live legally outside of camps and enabling access to education and work opportunities.

Instead, the EU has failed to respond humanely, or even coherently, to the arrival of refugees and migrants, despite the fact that much of Europe’s wealth today stems from decades of colonial rule, participation in the slave trade, and continued resource extraction abroad. Countries in the Middle East and Africa continue to host the majority of the world’s displaced populations. Italy and Greece have borne the brunt of the EU’s frontline response given their geography. Other EU countries, with the exception of Germany, have responded by closing their borders.

An Eritrean refugee in Khartoum (Photo by John Power)

As of May 2018, countries including Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the United Kingdom have transferred exactly zero refugees [32] from Italy under the EU’s emergency relocation scheme. It was Italy’s center-left Democratic Party (PD) that signed an agreement with Sudan in 2016 to accelerate deportations of asylum seekers and in 2017 began supporting the Libyan coast guard to try to prevent new arrivals; in March, national elections resulted in wins for two populist parties, one of which, the League, campaigned on a virulently anti-immigration platform with the slogan “Italians first.” In June, the new interior minister Matteo Salvini said he intended to create new detention centers and accelerate deportations of migrants, and is considering efforts to prevent humanitarian organizations from rescuing refugees and migrants as they cross the Mediterranean. “Enough of Sicily being the refugee camp of Europe.” Salvini said on June 3. “I will not stand by and do nothing while there are landings after landings.” In June, Italy blocked two rescue ships run by humanitarian organizations from docking, forcing one to Spain and the other to Malta after the ships were stranded for several days at sea with hundreds of people onboard.

Support for far-right parties in Europe is climbing – one analysis across twenty-two European countries found that it’s higher than at any other time over the past thirty years. Eastern European countries like Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have virulently anti-immigration and anti-refugee governments; while countries from Norway to Switzerland have tried to tighten asylum guidelines to offer protection to fewer people as a way of placating public anti-immigrant sentiment. Italy, Belgium, and France have recently allowed the Sudanese secret police to screen asylum applications in Brussels and Paris, resulting in the deportation of refugees back to Khartoum, where some reported they were tortured. In Germany, Angela Merkel’s government has been on the verge of collapse over her refusal to close the German border to asylum-seekers.

“The danger with the EU’s current approach is that we lose sight of the structural issues
and long-term migration governance solutions. We also lose sight of what’s happening in the everyday life of those people who are sent back, who are now unemployed or back in conflict zones. What happens to them? If things have not changed, if there are no sustainable plans, they will migrate again,“ said researcher Sine Plambech.

Meanwhile, the outsourcing of migration control continues; Italy and the EU have committed €285 million to the Libyan coast guard until 2023. [33] The border security business is booming: according to a recent report by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, the social-democratic German think tank, between 2003 and 2013 the EU and the European Space Agency spent €225 million on border-control projects. Some of these funds go to developing new forms of surveillance technology – like mechanical sniffer dogs. At an EU summit in Brussels on June 29 on migration, leaders agreed to explore creating processing centers in European states and in North Africa. No country has agreed to host any of these centers. Prior to the Summit, UNHCR and IOM sent a letter to the EU proposing that they run “reception centers” for those attempting to cross the Mediterranean; part of their proposal includes swift deportation of anyone who does not qualify for asylum or another form of protection.

From 1 January–8 April 2018, 16,089 refugees and migrants [34] still arrived in Europe from North Africa and Turkey, with 6,894 crossing from Libya to Italy. [35] The central Mediterranean route is now considered the deadliest migration trail in the world – 359 people died during this same period. During the previous two years, over 7,400 people died. [36] These numbers are repeated in newspapers often; but make no difference as a deterrent to migration or in framing Europe’s response.

“I don’t want to stay here, and I don’t want to go back to Eritrea,” Helen told me in November. “I’m thinking about how to leave Sudan.”

Earlier this year, my translator in Sudan tried repeatedly to contact Helen, but her phone was switched off. She could be in Khartoum or already in Libya.

The EU fails to publicly acknowledge the truth behind Helen’s story, though one suspects, deep down, its politicians know it. The decision to migrate originates from the human will to survive, a resolve that defies the world’s most powerful nations, however they may try to break it.

* When only a first name is used, indicates name was changed to protect identity due to potential repercussions in Sudan and/or Eritrea.

Footnotes


7. https://mg.co.za/article/2018-01-12-00-sudans-state-supported-smugglers


22. https://twitter.com/eu_e eas/status/973649838444351489