

Refugees Lies, smokescreens and big business

Alva White

Alva White spent summer 2016 on the MV Aquarius, a humanitarian search and rescue ship patrolling the central area of the Mediterranean Sea, operated by SOS MEDITERRANEE and Médecins sans Frontières.

The more talk about ‘refugee crisis’ (since arriving home in the UK after six months aboard an NGO search and rescue boat patrolling 300+ miles of Mediterranean Sea between Libya and Sicily) the more I see a massive wall of lies and smokescreens projected by the powers that be – governments, European Union, and official bodies monitoring the situation such as Frontex.

The list of deceptions is long and depressing. The motivation for perpetuating an inaccurate picture is multi-layered and, I would argue, grounded in the fact that big money is being made out of this trade in human life. The central Mediterranean route for illegal migration to Europe is currently the busiest and the most deadly, accounting for the vast majority of the 1,364 people who the UN estimates have drowned in the Med so far this year. We will never know the true cost in lives, the numbers of people, including children, who died attempting to make it to a rescue boat, or aboard the boats that sunk unseen.

In February 2017 at an informal meeting in Malta, EU leaders decided that the best way to try to tackle the thousands of migrants, refugees (or, as I prefer to call them, people) leaving the shores of Libya was to pay to train and equip the Libyan coastguard to stop people smugglers while increasing the number of search and rescue operations. Mr Tusk’s remarks were posted on the European Council’s website:

‘We will deliver economic assistance to local communities in Libya to improve their situation, and help them shelter stranded migrants. And we will work with the International Organisation for Migration to step up voluntary returns from Libya to countries of origin.’

I hope someone pointed out that Libya is currently a lawless state. It will take more than some cash, new speedboats and training to keep this terrible inconvenience from Europe's door. If I had a chat with the brainbox who came up with this idea, I would mention that the 'migrants' I met were starved, beaten, raped, tortured and entrapped into forced labour while in Libya – the very place to which the EU seems intent to send them back.

So how is that going? During a rescue in the Mediterranean on 23 May 2017, the Libyan coastguard approached boats in distress who were being rescued, intimidated the passengers and then fired gunshots into the air, threatening people's lives and creating mayhem, according to aid organisations Médecins Sans Frontières and SOS Méditerranée, whose teams witnessed the violent incident.

'Two Libyan coastguards, wearing uniforms and armed, stepped on to one of the rubber boats. They took phones, money and other belongings from the passengers,' says Annemarie Loof of MSF. 'People became panicked and felt threatened. The passengers were terrified by the aggressive conduct of the Libyan coastguards.' This behaviour caused mass panic to break out and ended with more than 60 people in the sea. 'Our teams pulled 67 people out of the water as gunshots were fired in the air. It's a miracle that no one drowned or was injured,' she said.

Sadly, during the same period, at least 34 migrants, some of them young children, were reported to have drowned after falling into the sea off the Libyan coast, according to Italy's coastguard. The overcrowded boat was reported to be carrying about 500 people when it listed suddenly, plunging about 200 of them into the water, a spokesman said. This triggered a frantic search for survivors.

Reinforcement of the Libyan coastguard is due to come into full effect in June 2017. Potentially, fewer people will attempt the crossing. Less people aboard dangerous boats adrift in the Mediterranean Sea is, of course, a good thing. But how will they be treated in Libya?

To put these events in perspective, consider this astonishing fact from Reece Jones' excellent book *Violent Borders – Refugees and the Right to Move* (Verso, £16.99).

'Globally, more than half the deaths at borders in the past decade occurred at the edge of the EU, making it by far the most dangerous border crossing in the world.' (p.16)

As Jones outlines in his Introduction,

'this book disputes the idea that borders are a natural part of the human world and that migration is driven primarily by traffickers and smugglers. Instead, the

existence of the border itself produces the violence that surrounds it ... the hardening of the border through new security practices is the source of the violence, not a response to it.' (p.5)

Which indicates that the EU's grand plan to throw money, resources and equipment at the Libyan coastguard will result in more violence; it may already have done so, by replacing one life threatening danger with another. Do such deterrence tactics leave less of a stain on Europe's shores? Out of sight, out of mind?

What about another favourite smokescreen obscuring why people risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea: the claim that they are 'economic migrants'? All those strong, fit males risking their lives at sea in the hope of a 'better life'. It is claimed that they are not legitimate refugees or asylum seekers. The young lads I met – 10, 11, 12 years old — were they economic migrants?

During 2015, Eritreans formed the largest national group crossing the Central Mediterranean to Europe. In 2016, they were the second largest group, after Nigerians. This is remarkable given that the total population of Eritrea is just five-and-a-half million. In 2016, a UK court ruled that sending back to Eritrea people who'd evaded national service would put them at risk of serious harm. Ninety per cent of Eritreans who manage to reach Europe are granted asylum. Yet they have to risk their life in the Med even to seek asylum in the first place.

And what now? Does the EU intend that Libya will send these young men back to Eritrea, when they are intercepted by the newly trained Libyan coastguard? As Reece Jones points out,

'Another large group of migrants come from Eritrea, where a 2015 UN investigation accused the government of President Isaias Afweki of crimes against humanity, including torture, extrajudicial killings, forced labour, and sexual violence.' (p.20)

Is there a pattern emerging here?

Trade in migrant life is booming business. People we rescued while I was at sea told us how those who keep them captive would physically abuse them, torture them, beat them whilst family members were on the phone, to extort more money. People of different nationalities paid different amounts for a place on the boats we rescued – Somalis and Eritreans were generally charged more (anything upwards of \$1000 per person) because they often had family in Europe who might financially support their journey. Other nationalities such as Nigerians or those from Mali or Cameroon had a lower price tag (anywhere upwards of \$500 each) or paid in labour for their place

in the boat – for example, on construction sites or in brothels.

Others told us how they had paid money to one smuggler who had them in his possession, only to be sold to someone else who they then had to pay all over again. One young lad mentioned that he had to direct his family to a bank account in Dubai to transfer the money. Others told of a money transfer service called *Hawala*. Several people I spoke with indicated that those at the top of the trafficking and smuggling networks were officials and military figures and their minions ran the operations. I have no proof of these allegations, but that is what they said.

Who is collecting all this money and what's the hold-up in tracking where the money goes and stopping it? Another carefully constructed smokescreen is to present the Mediterranean refugee situation as totally unmanageable and out of control, almost inviting the international community to throw up its hands and say 'what can we do about it?' 'We're doing our best.'

Loretta Napoleoni is a journalist and author of *Merchants of Men – How Kidnapping, Ransom and Trafficking Funds Terrorism and Isis* (Atlantic Books, 2016, £17.99). Napoleoni makes a compelling case for the transition of Somali pirates to human traffickers. She argues that the trafficking of migrants turned out to be easier business than piracy; no need for investors, something from which even the lower ranking pirate could profit, requiring far smaller overheads and simpler than kidnapping a ship and crew. This is a much more viable business model.

'As hijacking armed ships and kidnapping crews became increasingly difficult, trafficking migrants grew from a side business into Somali pirates' main activity ... Trafficking continues with impunity and remains less risky than piracy for Somali criminals, as no major international initiative, similar to those to prevent pirates from hijacking commercial ships, has been put on place to save the victims of trafficking.'

Napoleoni goes on,

'As *Daily Telegraph* correspondent Colin Freeman, who was himself kidnapped in Somalia, put it, in contrast to its robust anti-piracy operation named Atlanta, the European Union is relatively indifferent to pirates when they wear the trafficker's hat. "Given that the same gangs are often controlling both trades, you might have expected people trafficking to be just as high priority for the foreign navy patrols as piracy," said Freeman.' (p.86)

If international intervention could stop piracy – then surely it could also stop trafficking of people or trace the chain of command, the money flow, and the source of this booming business?

One last smokescreen hiding the most basic observation about this mess

of a crisis is removal of any discussion or consideration of free movement, of safe passage for people who need to get away from somewhere, someone or something. It seems unfathomable to suggest that another human being, like those we meet in the Mediterranean at the hands of smugglers, might be offered an alternative, safe, legal route out of their situation. The rhetoric, the fear, and the transmission of misinformation have almost eradicated such a notion. As Reece Jones points out:

‘The International Organization for Migration suggests “the relatively low number of migrant deaths before 1990 may be related to the fact that it used to be much easier to reach Europe by regular means, even in the absence of official government authorization to immigrate”.’ (p.26)

Reece Jones, *Violent Borders – Refugees and the Right to Move*, Verso, 2016, hardback ISBN 9781784784713, £16.99

Loretta Napoleoni, *Merchants of Men: How kidnapping, ransom and trafficking funds terrorism and ISIS*, Atlantic Books, 2016, hardback ISBN 9781782399919, £17.99

