

Europe's Response to Migrant Tragedy in the Mediterranean

Written by Phil Cole

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PHIL COLE, APR 27 2015

In her column in the Sun newspaper on April 17th Katie Hopkins described migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean as cockroaches and suggested using gunboats to tow the boats back and burning them (presumably once the migrants had disembarked), and indeed, in an interview on LBC the next day she suggested burning all the boats in North Africa.

She has been subjected to much ridicule for these comments, but, apart from the comparison with cockroaches, it is hard to see much of a gap between her hate-filled views and the response of the European Union with its ten-point plan to tackle the crisis that is unfolding.

That plan includes a "systematic effort to capture and destroy vessels used by the smugglers." The statement refers to the success of the EU's Atalanta Operation, which "should inspire us to similar operations against smugglers in the Mediterranean."

The Atalanta Operation was aimed to counter piracy off the coast of Somalia, and included arrests of pirates and destruction of boats. The 'Migrants at Sea' blog points out, however, that operations against piracy have a clear foundation in international law, but similar operations against people smuggling have no such foundation and so may not get the UN mandate they would require

Other proposed measures include expanding the area of Frontex's Triton operation, presumably so boats will be intercepted closer to the African coast rather than in European waters, and to work with countries around Libya, including deploying immigration liaison officers. The effort seems to be to strengthen the 'border' between Europe and North Africa and prevent migrants from taking to the sea at all, or if they do, intercepting them as soon as possible and towing them back.

There is the offer of 5,000 resettlement places for migrants who qualify for protection, but that is alongside proposals to fingerprint all migrants and for Frontex to establish a rapid return programme for those deemed to be 'illegal'.

The 5,000 figure has to be set against the call from the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Francois Crepeau, for the wealthy world to agree to take one million refugees from Syria over the next five years. Rather than make it harder for desperate people to escape appalling conditions in North Africa and the Middle East, especially Syria, Europe should make it easier and establish and support safe routes. That way "you reduce the number of deaths, you reduce the smuggling business model, and you reduce the cost of asylum."

This alternative model, however, is unlikely to play to the ears of European governments, especially in the United Kingdom during a general election, where the Katie Hopkins view is not obviously unpopular with the general population. It has been pointed out that comparing the people attempting to reach Europe to cockroaches is reminiscent of Nazi Germany's characterization of Jewish people and others deemed 'undesirable' as vermin. Zoe Williams in the Guardian says Hopkins' column "recalls the darkest events in history", and she reminds us of the genocide in Rwanda where the Tutsis were similarly described as cockroaches.

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But whatever we think of Katie Hopkins and the Sun newspaper that published her 'thoughts', the fact that the European Union's response is almost identical to her policy proposals should make us wonder whether the political atmosphere around migration and refugees in Europe as a whole means that the continent has in fact journeyed to the heart of darkness.

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