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The Floating Cemetery: Unwanted and Abandoned at Sea

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TORTURE

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THE LOST CAUSE

*Impunity of torture despite anti-torture legislation
In the Philippines*

The Floating Cemetery

UNWANTED AND ABANDONED AT SEA

The sea, full of mystery
And free souls, that out of
misery,
Abandoned and forsaken,
The road across the sea have
taken,
To find in exile the golden age,
And life's children to change,
But swept by the deadly waves,
Out from under,
As in a thunder,
Without any mercy,
Men, women, children,
Sank to the very bottom,
In salty water locked up
forever,
Not to see the sun light never;
Sea, the sea imprisoned them
forever!

~ by Shqipe Prenc

IN RECORD numbers, people are escaping regions plagued by warfare, instability, disasters, poverty, systemic persecution, violence and torture. The United Nations announced last year that forced displacement has topped 50 million globally and early tracking indicates that number may increase again this year. Multiple crises worldwide are driving the record migrations, which include Africans and Middle Easterners entering Europe, Rohingya Muslims fleeing Burma, civilians escaping violence in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Burundi, Somalia, Iraq, and more



— all undertaking risky journeys to find better lives.

We are witnessing the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War: over 50 million people are on the run from war, conflict, drought and famine. A humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. At the same time, we are witnessing a historic failure of epic proportions. A failure our children and grandchildren will look back on and be ashamed of. How Europe, the world's richest continent, left innocent people, young and old, women and men, to drown. Despite the fact that we had the resources to save them. This is a

direct result of failing governance accompanied by a monumental lack of compassion.

Cynicism and populism have prevailed. Politicians argue that it creates “positive incentives” if you save the boat migrants and refugees. But neither the rescue services nor the prospect of drowning decides whether these migrants cross the sea, for they are not driven by “positive incentives”, but of something far stronger — their instinct of survival.

Migrants from West Africa in overcrowded pickup trucks drive through dusty roads, one desert town after

the other. They set off from their hometowns on the edge of the harsh Sahara desert to cross the merciless Sahel on the uncertain journey towards Europe via Libya, where the collapse of the government has provided an open door for smugglers.

The people I have met in West Africa or in Libya did not want to flee, to leave their family and friends, their home and work. But they had no alternative. Torture, disappearances, assassinations and war was a part of their everyday life. Stories of abduction, torture, sexual violence and abuse from migrants and refugees in Libya are ubiquitous.

Migrants and refugees are often raped and tortured. Torture and other ill-treatment in immigration detention centres remains widespread. In many cases, migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea have been subjected to prolonged beatings in such facilities following their interception and arrest by the Libyan coastguard or militias acting on their own initiative in the absence of strong state institutions. Women held in these facilities, which lack female guards, are vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment.

The deep desperation when all hope is lost, where everything else is better than what has been, has been countered by constantly increasing border controls, criminalising entry and creating a breeding ground for human trafficking. Instead of blaming the smugglers, one should instead tackle the root causes of why so many people risk their lives to reach Europe.

One of the underlying reasons is Libya. The chaos-ridden country has developed into a transit and a smuggler paradise – and with six bordering countries, has destabilised an already fragile region with massive increase in smuggling networks. NATO and allies bombed Libya's infrastructure, without any intention of rebuilding it, nor any idea of what would replace it. What you now have is anarchy, lawlessness and a security vacuum controlled by militias, clan leaders and warlords. Libya has now become the epicentre for weapons, drugs and human trafficking across the Sahel to Europe.

Last time I was in Libya, I stood at Tripoli's harbour, overlooking the Mediterranean and the wild waves. People had already started pushing out the overloaded rubber boats and discarded fishing vessels and hundreds had already died – in what they called the "Blue Desert".

It is estimated that there are a half to one million people in Libya, waiting to cross the Mediterranean. Sadly, we are only witnessing the tip of the iceberg. A mass grave is shaping up in the Mediterranean.

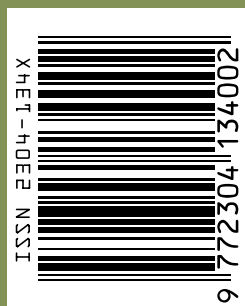
Even more depressing is that the Mediterranean is not the only floating cemetery. The first time I heard about the Rohingya was in a UNHCR High Level Meeting in Geneva, Switzerland in 2012, where I was representing the Danish UN Mission. A few European countries stressed the deteriorating situation in Burma, and the lack of protection for the Rohingya. Mainstream media had never covered the situation and only recently woke up to the devastating news about the Rohingya and other survivors of dangerous boat voyages from Burma and Bangladesh; describing horrific treatment by traffickers in Burma and abuse, neglect and ill-treatment aboard ships.

The poor treatment of the Rohingya has been accompanied by callous remarks by regional leaders. Burma's political leaders deny the existence of Rohingya, denouncing them as "illegal Bengalis." Burmese officials initially rejected that any of the people in the boats came from Burma. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh said the migrant workers from her country were "mentally sick" and vowed to punish anyone leaving the country illegally. Prime Minister Tony Abbot of Australia called the boat people "reckless" and when asked if Australia would consider resettling any Rohingya found to be refugees, replied, "Nope, nope, nope."

The international community must take a stand. Europe and Asia. Otherwise this sickening indifference is what eventually will kill humanity. Because the opposite of life is not death, it is indifference. ■

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