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Switzerland helps to return migrants to Libya

The Swiss Confederation has allocated a million Swiss francs to the Libyan coastguard. This policy has helped to curb crossings but various NGOs have denounced it as being tantamount to supporting migrant trafficking.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

A million Swiss francs for the Libyan coastguard – that is the amount which Switzerland committed in 2017 as part of a European programme run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). “Three training schemes have been provided for the authorities responsible for sea rescue and migration,” states Emmanuelle Jaquet von Sury, a spokesperson for the Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP). “Particular emphasis has been placed on registering migrants after rescue operations at sea

to ensure their cases are followed up, including in the detention facilities.”

The coastguard have received 2,500 items of rescue equipment, including life jackets, first aid kits and blankets, according to the FDJP. Switzerland is not there on the ground to monitor the implementation of this programme, “but the presence of representatives of the IOM and the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in most ports to the west of Tripoli ensures assistance and a certain degree of protection is provided during disembarkation and, in particular, the

registration and detection of particularly vulnerable cases”, says the spokesperson. However she adds, “the conflict situation in Libya sometimes reduces the mobility of IOM personnel and complicates the implementation of the project.”

Accusations of racketeering and murderous interventions at sea

Various NGOs have accused the Libyan coastguard of involvement in migrant trafficking. They claim the crews of the Libyan Coast Guards (LCG) have

Libyan refugees aboard a boat are rescued on the open sea. Photo: Keystone



even caused people to drown. This is revealed in a report published at the end of 2017 by Amnesty International, which refers to an incident that occurred on 6 November, during which the manoeuvres of a coastguard frigate played a part in the drowning of around 50 people.

The FDJP said that it did not have any official information to confirm the incident. "However, the alarming number of ships that have sunk in the Mediterranean Sea – with 2,832 deaths in 2017 – obliges us to help ensure better protection for migrants. The IOM project for sea rescue was set up to pursue this humanitarian objective," says Emmanuelle Jaquet von Sury. Amnesty points to double standards. "The European states, which are well aware of the serious violations suffered by refugees and migrants in Libya, have chosen to control migration by supporting the Libyan authorities. By stopping the crossings, they are keeping thousands of people in a country where they are systematically subjected to abuse and where they have little or no chance of finding protection," it states.

"The people saved at sea tell us that they would prefer to die than return to detention centres in Libya," says Caroline Abu Sa'Da, director of SOS Méditerranée Suisse, an association involved in the rescue operations carried out by the vessel Aquarius. She believes it is impossible to trust the LCG. "Who are these coastguards actually? They are just militia carrying out interception operations and taking migrants back to detention facilities where the conditions are atrocious, sometimes preventing aid from NGOs reaching them. Switzerland cannot turn a blind eye by simply being satisfied that these units are taking people out of the water."

As the organiser of the third meeting of the Central Mediterranean Contact Group in November 2017 in Berne,

"Switzerland is aligning itself with a repressive European policy which aims to prevent access for migrants to Europe," comments Vincent Chetail, Director of the Global Migration Centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. The European Union (EU) provided 46 million euros in 2017 to strengthen the intervention capacities of the Libyan authorities. It highlights the fact that this policy led to a significant reduction in the number of crossings last year. The FDJP indicates that this strategy has enabled the rescue of 14,000 people at sea. "Libya, which has not ratified the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, is not a country of asylum. It is not safe nor does it offer protection. There is no system in place and the funds allocated will be misused," counters the professor of international law, who believes that "Europe is making itself complicit to abuse."

Forced to undertake even more hazardous crossings

The expert condemns an ineffective policy that increases the dangers. "The crossings from Libya or Tunisia are the easiest routes. If they are blocked off, the flow of migrants will shift elsewhere, increasing the risk of crossings that endanger human life." The founder of the Global Migration Centre believes the overall perception of migration is distorted. "In 2015, the number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe stood at 1.2 million, which is 0.2 % of the EU population, and that was a statistical peak. It cannot therefore be called a mass influx. The real challenges are helping the reconstruction of Libya and reviewing migration policy, in particular by opening up legal access routes to Europe," says Chetail. According to Amnesty International, almost half a million people set sail

between 2015 and 2017, resulting in 10,000 deaths. The number of exiles in Libya exceeds 400,000 people according to the IOM, and an estimated 20,000 migrants are being held in detention centres.

In addition to the UNHCR and the IOM, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which visits detention facilities in Libya, also attended the third contact group meeting in Berne in November 2017 and pointed out that "a migration policy must also aim to reduce the use of detention centres as a means of managing migration, as well as reduce the abuse of migrants." The organisation recommended "improving the management of human remains and data about deceased persons to facilitate the provision of information about their death and where it occurred for the families of the deceased", according to spokesperson Thomas Glass.

In the Mediterranean, winter has not stopped the crossings. On Tuesday 16 January, the crew of the Aquarius carried out five consecutive rescue operations, saving 505 lives. On the same day, the Italian coastguard, which has coordinated a total of 11 rescue operations – by NGOs and merchant vessels – estimated that 1,400 people had been saved off the coast of Libya. "It's impossible to cover the entire rescue zone with three NGO boats which are permanently stationed there," SOS Méditerranée said, calling upon European states to commit to establishing a European rescue fleet to prevent thousands of deaths.