

Presentation Text

For a GMPA-Organized “Briefing on *Migration and Racial Discrimination*

UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination– CERD

Geneva, 14 August, 2015

WHEN SOLIDARITY FAILS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE RELOCATION CRISIS

LIZ FEKETE, Director of the Institute of Race Relations, London

1. Introduction: I want to talk about the immediate institutional crisis in the EU, as hostility grows towards a modest plan by the European Commission to relocate a little over 32,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy. The failure of the member states to rise to the humanitarian challenge posed by the boat people arriving via the Mediterranean Sea, the mean-spirited and positively hostile response of some governments, both national and regional, and the breakdown of solidarity between the receiving countries and their richer neighbours, has had consequences.

2. Background: I would like to talk about the consequences, in terms of cause and effect - also in a way that illustrates the intersection between the breakdown of a humanitarian approach to asylum and the growth of racism. But I would first like to frame my points by making two short observations. First, failures in the institutional response should not blind us to the absolute heroism of ordinary people and over-stretched civil society actors such as Refugee Welcome (Germany), Caritas (Austria) and Migszol (Hungary) who are feeding, clothing and welcoming the new arrivals.¹ Second, we must recognise that the current lack of political leadership, and the failure to find adequate and secure accommodation, is not something new. What I will describe serves merely as the top layer to an existing situation. Europe has fallen far short of providing a safe haven for displaced people, and deaths of migrants do not just occur at Europe's militarised borders. The facts that deaths inside accommodation or removal centres, or as the result of enforced destitution, are met with official indifference suggests a continuation with the moral inertia behind border deaths². The Institute of Race Relations recently published an audit of 160 asylum and immigration-related deaths within EU States, 46 per cent of which were by suicide, as desperation reaches epidemic proportions.³

3. Media Scaremongering: The roots of the current spate of attacks on migrant accommodation centres starts with a scaremongering media discourse and equally irresponsible words of some politicians. Migrants are represented in the media as toxic waste, a dangerous mob, human flotsam, an 'unstoppable flood' and a terrorist threat. In the UK, they have been compared with insects, through the use of inflammatory terms such as 'swarms of people' (British prime minister David Cameron)⁴ and 'like cockroaches' (Sun tabloid journalist, Katie Hopkins).⁵ The British foreign secretary, Philip Hammond

singled out African 'economic migrants' at Calais, describing them as 'marauding migrants' 'threatening our standard of living' and opining that 'Europe can't protect itself, preserve its standard of living and social infrastructure if it has to absorb millions of migrants from Africa.'⁶ (It's also worth noting here that, in relation to Calais, there has been barely a flicker of concern about the fact that at least thirteen migrants, including two teenagers have died attempting to reach the UK since June.)⁷

4. Politicians acting in short-term self interest are not curbing hostility, but spreading

it: The consequences of this scaremongering - the way the migrants are treated as a security threat - have made it more difficult for electorates to understand why migrants take such a perilous journey, particularly if they hail from African countries, the problems of which are barely covered in the European press. In this climate, too many politicians are pandering to prejudice, acting for short-term self-interest, whipping up distrust, spreading hostility, not curbing it. Unless politicians at a national, local and regional level are encouraged to act responsibly, xenophobia will continue to be manipulated into something even more sinister, and potentially deadly. France has sealed its Italian border at Ventimiglia, Hungary is constructing a wall at the border with Serbia (reportedly with the use of prison labour). The Czech interior ministry demands cultural compatibility of those re-located,⁸ and the governor of Lombardy threatens to financially penalise northern Italian prefects who go along with the national relocation plan.⁹ Luigi Ammatuna, the mayor of the Sicilian port town of Pozzallo, in the Ragusa region, summed up the Italian North-South divide well when he said that the North's anti-immigration stance was 'spreading bad feeling' about migrants across the entire country, adding that they are 'heartless' and 'selfish' for not working with the government to solve the crisis.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the leader of the powerful Northern League, has declared that the 'League is prepared to occupy every hotel, hostel, school or barracks intended for the alleged refugees'.¹¹

5. Extreme-Right politicians interject an anti-black racism into a debate that attacks the multicultural society:

The first step is to end rhetoric which in some countries has now gone beyond anti-immigration into a wider anti-multiculturalism, as well as a discourse with heavy overtones of anti-black racism. Here we can specifically identify the interventions of electoral extreme and far Right politicians, the likes of The Finns and the People's Party Our Slovakia. The Finns Party - the second largest party in the Finnish parliaments - has leaders such as Olli Immonen MP who wrote on social media that he was 'dreaming of a strong, brave nation that will defeat this nightmare called multiculturalism'.¹² And Marian Kotleba, the state governor of the Banská Bystrica Region, told a rally of 8,000 people in Bratislava protesting against relocation of refugees, 'I wish you a nice, white day... we are here to save Slovakia'.¹³

6. Demonstrations and vigilante-style attacks: Such rhetoric encourages hostility at a local level, where examples abound of migrants seeking safety being greeted by hate-filled mobs. In Prague, anti-immigration demonstrators waved gallows and nooses, calling for the death of 'traitors', i.e., all those who support migrants.¹⁴ In Treviso, Italy, 100 migrants had to be evacuated from one town after two days of protests spearheaded by fascists from Casa Pound¹⁵ - and after the Northern League mayor for the Veneto region

had called for the refugees to be cleared out of accommodation near tourist resorts, warning that the region was in danger of 'Africanisation'¹⁶. And in Germany, where attacks on refugee accommodation centres for 2015 - specifically arson - now exceed that of the whole of 2014 (in turn, attacks in 2014 were up threefold from 2013),¹⁷ journalists and local politicians are now facing death threats and the car of one east German politician was blown up.¹⁸

7. When politicians lead the way: While Germany has PEGIDA, hostile responses in countries like Hungary has been led by the Prime Minister,¹⁹ and in others, such as Austria, where the Social Democrats in Burgenland have formed a coalition government with the extreme-Right Freedom Party, by state governors and local mayors from both centre Left and centre Right.²⁰ This is also an issue in Bavaria, where the state premier Horst Seehofer has been accused by the Central Council of Jews of provoking hostility towards asylum seekers,²¹ as well as across the North of Italy, where hostility has been fuelled by senior politicians in Liguria, Lombardy and Veneto. Other countries like the UK and Denmark have already started to cut welfare payments to migrants, in a further lurch towards the nativist agenda of the anti-migration movements. The UK government, for example, has slashed asylum support payments and withdraw automatic support for families whose claims are refused but who for legitimate reasons cannot return home – amounting to enforced destitution. Both Italy and the UK are attempting to drive those without papers out of private housing, outsourcing immigration controls to landlords.

8. Conclusion: The danger is that xenophobia from below will combine with the structural neglect of the rights of migrants from above. This will result in a further deterioration of conditions (overcrowding, lack of health care) in reception and detention centres. 'Fast-track procedures' to speed up asylum claims will not only lead to grave injustices but more forced deportations, which also claim lives, as we saw most recently in March 2015 in Sweden when an Iraqi asylum seeker suffocated during a deportation attempt: the seventeenth such deportation death in Europe since 1991.²²

One truth is that there has been a huge drive by ordinary European citizens, who are taking a stand for human dignity, to welcome refugees. Sadly, another truth is undermining this. The truth is that we face the possibility of a perfect storm unless those in power take cognizance of their positive duty to combat racism, rather than fuel it.

Endnotes:

· See 'Give me your tired, your poor... the Europeans embracing migrants', *Guardian*, 3 August 2015.<<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/03/europeans-who-welcome-migrants>>

· For a full list of deaths at the border, see 'The fatal consequences of Fortress Europe' <<http://www.unitedagainstracism.org/campaigns/refugee-campaign/fortress-europe/>>. For more discussion of border deaths internationally see the website of the Border Crossing Observatory at Monash University, Australia. <<http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/thebordercrossingobservatory/>>

· See Reem Abu-Hayyeh and Frances Webber, 'Unwanted, Unnoticed: An audit of 160 asylum and immigration-related deaths' Institute of Race Relations European Research Programme Briefing No. 10, March 2015. <<http://www.irr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ERP-Briefing-Paper-No-10.pdf>>

· See 'Calais crisis: Cameron condemned for "dehumanising" description of migrants', *Guardian*, 30 July 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/30/david-cameron-migrant-swarm-language-condemned>>

- See 'The UN's statement on Katie Hopkins "cockroaches" column about immigrations - full text', *Independent* 24 April 2015. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/the-uns-statement-on-katie-hopkins-cockroaches-column-about-immigrations--full-text-10202351.html>>
- "'Marauding" migrants threaten standard of living', says foreign secretary'. *Guardian* 10 August 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/aug/09/african-migrants-threaten-eu-standard-living-philip-hammond>>
- See Harmit Athwal, 'Asylum seeker death toll rising', IRR News Service Online, 30 July 2015. <<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/asylum-seeker-death-toll-rising/>>
- A spokesperson for the Czech interior ministry said that the government will oppose the reallocation of migrants within the EU unless it can have a say in selecting those refugees 'from countries in which we will be able to send our own people', *Prague Daily Monitor*, 15 July 2015. <<https://www.google.co.uk/#q=Czechs+want+to+supervise+choice+of+refugees>>
- As cited in, 'Italy's North rebels as migrants arrival tops 50k', *The Local (Italy)*, 2 June 2015, <<http://www.thelocal.it/20150607/italian-backlash-as-migrant-arrivals-climb>>
- 'Turning away migrants "heartless"', *The Local* 9 June 2015, <<http://www.thelocal.it/20150609/sicilian-mayor-slams-heartless-anti-migrant-north>>
- 'Italians revolt against migrant "invasion"', *Telegraph* 17 August 2015. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11542063/Italians-revolt-against-migrant-invasion.html>>
- In response, 15,000 people demonstrated their opposition in Helsinki, certainly the largest anti-racist mobilisation in recent times. See 'Thousands rally in Finland against lawmaker's anti-immigration remark', *Reuters* 28 July 2015. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/28/us-finland-immigration-idUSKCN0Q22JJ20150728>>
- 'Arrests in Slovakia after anti-immigration rally', *RTE News* 21 June 2015. <<http://www.rte.ie/news/2015/0621/709530-slovakia-rally/>>
- 'Far-right reaches for new extremes in the Czech Republic', *The Conversation*, 15 July 2015. <<https://theconversation.com/far-right-reaches-for-new-extremes-in-the-czech-republic-44496>>
- Gianluca Mezzofiore, 'Mediterranean migrant crisis: Neo-fascist Casa Pound militants and angry locals start violent protest', *International Business Times* 17 July 2015. <<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/mediterranean-migrant-crisis-neo-fascist-casapound-militants-angry-locals-start-violent-protest-1511364>>
- Ibid.
- See 'Arson attack on hostel for asylum seekers shocks Germany', *FT.com*, 12 April 2015. <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3885d104-df97-11e4-a6c4-00144feab7de.html#axzz3j4oRaHx9>>
- 'Politicians car blown up in far-right heartland', *The Local* 17 July 2015. <<http://www.thelocal.de/20150727/attacks-on-refugees-continue-over-weekend>>
- In early June, prime minister Viktor Orban told the daily newspaper *Napi Gazdasag* that he wanted to protect the Hungarian people from 'dying out'. He said he opposed a multicultural society brought about by immigration and that 'We will do everything to save Hungary from that fate.' As cited in 'EU reports finds rampant racism, xenophobia in Hungary', *Deutsche Welle* 9 June 2015 <http://www.dw.com/en/eu-report-finds-rampant-racism-xenophobia-in-hungary/a-18505689?maca=en-RSS_en_ifw-4072-xml-mrss>. The Hungarian government has also been criticised for its National Consultation on Immigration and for a series of advertising posters with slogans such as 'If you come to Hungary, you can't take jobs from the Hungarians!'/ 'If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture!'/ 'If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our laws!'. See Annabel Tremlett and Vera Messing, 'Hungary's future: anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism and anti-Roma?', *Open Democracy*, 4 August 2015. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/annabel-tremlett/hungary-s-future-antiimmigration-antimulticulturalism-and-antiro>>
- See Liz Fekete, 'Burgenland's "Red-Blue" coalition of sham', IRR News Service Online, 29 July 2015. <<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/burgenlands-red-blue-coalition-of-shame/>>
- 'Jewish group slams right-wing asylum plan', *The Local*, 24 July 2015. <<http://www.thelocal.de/20150724/jewish-group-slams-right-wing-refugee-plan>>
- See Liz Fekete, 'Another deportation death in Europe', IRR News Online, 9 April 2015. <<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/another-deportation-death-in-europe/>>