

Face It: There Is No Quick Fix In This Migrant Crisis

Standing on deck seeing children, women and men up to their waist in seawater because their boat is slowly deflating, world politics suddenly seem very far away. We are the only ones here, in international waters. No other vessels around for miles, and about 140 people on the verge of dying. The roaring engines of our RHIBS carry the sound of survival for the people in the sinking boat.

If an hour earlier the Italian coast guard hadn't directed us to this location, these people would have died. Pushed out from Libyan shores hours before without an NGO vessel - or any other vessel - close by. Pushed out to sea by smugglers, but also by violence, detention, persecution, corruption or the simple fact that they saw no future in the place where they were.

When we dock in Catania a few days later, British journalist Katie Hopkins and members of the anti-immigrant movement Defend Europe are there, saying that we did the wrong thing. We shrug, restock, get our engine fixed and set out again.

A week later, I see what could have happened if we wouldn't have been on time. The NGO ProActiva Open Arms have rescued more than 160 people from a deflating rubber boat, but during an earlier panic on the dinghy at least 13 people died, drowned, trampled on, suffocated, burned by the chemical mix of seawater and fuel.

We board Open Arms' vessel to collect the bodies, as we have a morgue on board and they don't. Never have I witnessed such a horrific scene. We put the bodies in new body bags and photograph them - the photos will be used by the Italian police in case of a criminal investigation into the causes of death.

We're in the heart of the migration and refugee crisis, the big story of our era. Worldwide, more than 65million people have fled their homes. Most of them find refuge in their own countries or region, some try and make it to Europe through the dangerous crossing to Italy, a route on which this year roughly one in 43 people dies. And Italy has been bearing that brunt on its own for years.

Europe's answer however is quite simple: let's keep the migrants out. But surely,

Europe can do better than that?

Let's acknowledge the fact that the rescue vessels on the Mediterranean are not the solution for this crisis - although they are a life-or-death solution for the people on the flimsy boats.

But let's also acknowledge the fact that people always will find ways to flee, as they have been doing for centuries. NGOs are in the eye of a political storm right now, as they are considered a pull-factor by some. Yet far more important for people to leave their homes are the push factors mentioned above; conflict, persecution, corruption, abuse, the lack of a future.

The truth is, there is no quick fix for this issue. Ban the export of rubber boats to Libya? Sure. A Code of Conduct? We're always willing to constructively search for solutions as long as they don't go against human rights and our humanitarian mandate.

But they are not solutions for the people in the heart of this crisis, to those who aim to cross and who will keep on finding ways to get to a place where they hope to build a future for their children and families.

In the short term, Europe must install safe and legal routes for people to come to Europe. Among the 577 people we recently brought to Italy were 66 Syrians; families with young children. Many of them fled war in their country years ago and were now fleeing the violence in Libya. It's almost certain they'll get their asylum status, so why are we forcing them, families with children, to get on a flimsy boat? The same goes for Eritreans, of whom we brought more than 250 to safety last week; they'll get their status, so why can't they come to Europe legally?

The long term solution lies in tackling the root causes of mass migration. People flee violence, torture, slavery, poverty, the lack of opportunities. If we can take those causes away, people would no longer have a reason to leave their homes.

That, however, would take a different way of political thinking. It's about time the EU looked at those alternatives, instead of choosing borders over people. If it doesn't, people will keep looking for dangerous ways to come to Europe. And that will mean more lives being lost.

Source: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/rik-goverde/migrant-crisis_b_17699576.html

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