EUROPE

Rescue-Ship Fracas Revives Europe's Migrant Debate

Interior Minister Matteo Salvini vows to expel Carola Rackete for bringing rescued migrants into Italy

Carola Rackete, the captain of the migrant-rescue ship Sea-Watch 3, disembarking from an Italian police boat on Monday in Porto Empedocle, Italy. **PHOTO:** GUGLIELMO MANGIAPANE/REUTERS

By Eric Sylvers

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A pitched battle of wills between Italy's leading nativist politician and the German captain of a migrant-rescue ship has divided European Union governments and highlighted the unresolved problem of Mediterranean migration.

Carola Rackete, the 31-year-old skipper of the rescue ship Sea-Watch 3, defied authorities and forced her way into an Italian port over the weekend in a vessel carrying 40 African migrants rescued near the Libyan coast about two weeks ago. Italian authorities arrested her Saturday and put her under house arrest.

An Italian judge Tuesday threw out one allegation made against Ms. Rackete and said she could go free, though she still faces possible charges for facilitating illegal immigration. The migrants on board are being dispatched to other EU countries.

Italy's anti-immigration Interior Minister Matteo Salvini has vowed to throw Ms. Rackete out of the country on his ministry's authority. Mr. Salvini is also engaged in a war of words with Germany and France over the incident, exacerbating tensions over immigration between the European Union's centrist and antiestablishment political camps.

Mr. Salvini, a 46-year-old whose surging popularity in Italy has made him the standard-bearer of Europe's far-right, has periodically burnished his anti-immigration credentials by refusing permission for ships that have rescued migrants at sea to dock at Italian ports. Ms. Rackete's ship, owned by the German nongovernmental organization Sea-Watch, is only the latest to run afoul of Mr. Salvini's policy.

Some of the migrants who were on board the Sea-Watch rescue ship disembark at the port of Lampedusa, Italy, on June 29.
PHOTO: ELIO DESIDERIO/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

He has accused NGOs of effectively being the partners of criminal smuggling gangs that charge people thousands of euros to be ferried from North Africa to Europe, often in barely seaworthy boats. Ms. Rackete has become a symbol for critics who say anti-immigration politicians such as Mr. Salvini are turning their backs on desperate people fleeing warzones and poverty.

The number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Italy has dropped dramatically in the past two years, partly as a result of Mr. Salvini's tactics aimed at deterring rescue ships, but also because of earlier Italian and EU policies aimed at blocking migrants' land routes to the coast of North Africa.

About 2,700 migrants arrived in Italy by sea in the first half of this year, compared with almost 17,000 in the same period in 2018, according to Italy's interior ministry. While Mr. Salvini has singled out NGO-run rescue ships for docking bans, Italian navy or police ships have on occasion brought migrants they rescued at sea to Italy.

Some migrants continue to make it from Libya to Italy without needing rescue. During the standoff between Italian authorities and the Sea-Watch 3, almost 400 other migrants landed on Italy's shores. Libya's coast guard, supported with EU funds and boats, has been intercepting migrants and taking them back to shore. In response, some migrants are leaving for Italy from Tunisia or from Turkey, using sailboats, according to aid groups.

Italy's crackdown on NGO ships has made the Mediterranean crossing more deadly. The overall number of deaths has fallen as the numbers of those risking the trip has dropped. But the percentage who drown has been on the rise. In the first five months of this year, one in 15 migrants who set off on the Libya-Italy route died, compared with one in 35 in 2018, according to the International Organization for Migration.

The Sea-Watch 3, under Ms. Rackete's command, defied Italy's orders not to enter its territorial waters and docked at Lampedusa on Saturday. While attempting a docking maneuver, the ship brushed a smaller Italian police boat, further enraging Mr. Salvini, who called Ms. Rackete "the German criminal" and her forced entry "an act of war" that endangered the lives of Italian police officers.

On Tuesday, the judge dismissed the potential charge of endangering the lives of the policemen on the boat. The captain apologized for coming into contact with the police boat, but says she had no choice but to bring the migrants ashore because she feared some might attempt suicide out of desperation.

During the standoff at sea last week, the NGO Sea-Watch appealed to the European Court of Human Rights to order Italy to let the ship dock. The court rejected the request, saying instead that Italy should provide assistance to the people on the ship.

Senior officials in Germany and France have hit back at Italy's handling of the incident. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier defended Ms. Rackete on Sunday, saying: "Who saves human lives cannot be a criminal."

Mr. Salvini said he would take no lessons from other EU countries. "We ask the German president to worry about what happens in Germany, and if possible to invite his citizens to avoid breaking Italian laws," Mr. Salvini wrote on Twitter Sunday. Later, he tweeted: "Since the French are so generous (at least with their words) with migrants, we'll send future boats to Marseilles."

Italians, Mr. Salvini said, are "tired of being treated as a dumping ground for all of Europe."

Italy has pressed other EU countries to share the burden of asylum seekers who land on its shores. The governments of Germany, France, Finland, Portugal and Luxembourg agreed to take the migrants who were aboard Sea-Watch 3.

In January, Mr. Salvini refused to allow the same Sea-Watch ship to dock in Italy. The vessel eventually arrived in Malta, where rescued migrants disembarked after 18 days at sea. They were mostly sent to other European countries.

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