

OUT OF AFRICA

In the first four months of 2011, over 30,000 Tunisian refugees arrived on the island of Lampedusa, Italy's southernmost point. Lampedusa, with a population of 6000, is 70 miles from Tunisia and 127 miles from Sicily. Following the outbreak of the Libyan Civil War a few weeks later, thousands of Libyan refugees escaped to Italy. The number of refugees continued to swell as refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Eritrea joined other African refugees making their way to Italy. Under European Union law, the country where refugees first arrive is required to administer the asylum process. Italy, overwhelmed by the deluge of refugees and its own high unemployment rate, asked for help from the other 26 EU countries, particularly in resettling refugees who have family members in other EU countries. EU member states responded that Italy had the resources and the responsibility to deal with the crisis on its own.

In recent years, tensions over struggling economies, religious differences, and cultural assimilation have undermined European willingness to accept refugees. Many countries feared that giving shelter to refugees would only encourage illegal immigration, which in turn would take jobs away from citizens and stress existing social, medical, housing, and educational services. The 1997 Schengen Agreement guarantees free movement of people across European Union borders. Although 25 EU members have agreed to this guarantee, few have honored it, thus preventing immigration. The 2001 European Union Council Directive 2001/55/EC set standards for distributing the burdens and consequences of mass immigration among EU members. However, a majority of member states oppose the Directive and have prevented its activation.

On 5 April 2011 Italy issued six-month temporary residency papers and travel permits, granting 25,000 Tunisian refugees the right to travel to EU countries. In response, several countries asked the European Commission to denounce Italy's actions. Germany, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Austria, and other countries set up border checkpoints to curtail immigration. France reduced the number of residency slots granted to foreigners by 10%.

Many Tunisian refugees wanted to go to France, in particular. Tunisia was a French colony until 1956, and many refugees speak French. During the 1960's manufacturing boom, France encouraged migration of workers from Northern Africa, despite stricter laws restricting immigration by former African colonials. The 1976 Regroupement Familial policy allowed foreign workers' families to join them in France. Consequently, many refugees have relatives in France. France is also attractive to refugees, as French law confers citizenship on all children born in France. Access to education and health care is not denied to even those who are in France illegally.

On 17 April, French riot police turned back scores of Tunisian refugees at the French-Italian border, preventing 10 trains from crossing the border, and closing ancient footpaths between France and Italy. French officials insisted they were not trying to undermine the Schengen Agreement, but responding to threats to public order.

Romania offered to resettle 200 Tunisian immigrants from Italy, and Germany ultimately finally agreed to host 100. The combined total represents only about 1% of the 30,000 refugees that arrived in Italy by mid-April. By mid-May, nine other countries, including the United States, offered to accept an additional 600. France eventually relented and agreed to take in some refugees. It stipulated, however, that it would host only those with the resources to live in France without the need for employment or financial assistance, in effect ruling out accepting any of the refugees.