

Hiding the Refugee Problem Offshore

The New York Times

October 20, 2004 Wednesday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company

Section: Section A; Column 1; Editorial Desk; Pg. 26

Length: 460 words

Body

The harrowing scenes we've seen recently of desperate African families adrift on rusting boats in the Mediterranean point to the urgent need for Europe to settle on a common policy for handling the asylum seekers, refugees and illegal immigrants who risk everything to escape their wretched homelands. This global problem requires more than the old answer of shoving the ones who make it past the borders into a shadowy existence, and warehousing the rest.

Germany and Italy have called for setting up processing centers in North African countries like Libya, Tunisia and Morocco to screen prospective refugees from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. This troubling proposal is driven in part by a rising populist backlash against asylum seekers in these two countries. Without any clear understanding on how these camps would function -- especially in countries not known for their protection of human rights, and in the absence of a common European policy on refugees -- this is a bad idea. This week, it encountered firm resistance from France and Spain, whose new center-left government has been far more welcoming toward all forms of immigration than its conservative predecessor. A similar suggestion recently came from the interior ministers from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria and Slovakia. They expressed concern about Chechen and other refugees and proposed setting up transit camps in Ukraine. Understandably, the Ukrainian government bridled at the suggestion, not least because nobody sought its opinion.

It's obvious that those who enter Europe illegally pose a serious problem, as they do in the United States. Many of them live outside the legal and social framework of the country they're in. But this problem can't be solved by outsourcing it.

Refugees who end up in foreign transit camps are likely to face long stretches of what is effectively detention, quite possibly in nasty conditions. Libya, in particular, has an appalling record of forcibly sending asylum seekers back to countries like Eritrea and Sudan, where they face certain persecution.

It's possible that properly designed, managed and monitored transit centers could be part of an eventual solution. But the more urgent task is for Europe to agree on a common asylum policy, which should recognize that asylum seekers have the right to full protection until their cases have been heard.

The European Union should also streamline legal immigration procedures. That could help offset the looming labor shortages and pension crises that are otherwise likely to result from the sharp fall in birthrates in several of Europe's largest economies. Until these policies are in place, transit camps are just a place to hide the problem.

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Hiding the Refugee Problem Offshore

Document-Type: Editorial

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: REFUGEES (91%); IMMIGRATION (90%); MIGRATION ISSUES (89%); REFUGEE & RELIEF CAMPS (89%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (77%); EUROPEAN UNION (77%); HUMAN RIGHTS (77%); OUTSOURCING (76%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (67%); LABOR SHORTAGES (50%)

Geographic: EUROPE (94%); LIBYA (92%); AFRICA (92%); ERITREA (79%); ESTONIA (79%); FRANCE (79%); SPAIN (79%); MOROCCO (79%); AUSTRIA (79%); SUDAN (79%); GERMANY (79%); LITHUANIA (79%); TUNISIA (79%); SLOVAKIA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%); EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES (79%); NORTHERN AFRICA (79%); BALTIC STATES (79%); ASIA (79%); MIDDLE EAST (79%); LATVIA (78%); UKRAINE (70%); Libya; Italy; Germany; Europe; Africa

Load-Date: October 20, 2004

End of Document