

Migration and a New Destination for Africa Migrants: Lampedusa Island

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Abstract:

Recently, increasing number of African migrants have lost their lives during their treacherous journey en route to Lampedusa, Italy, a tiny island in the Mediterranean Sea. This tiny, picturesque speck in the Mediterranean Sea has become the frontline of the growing humanitarian crisis in Europe (USA Today, 2015). Reportedly, more than 2500 people, who were travelling to Lampedusa from Libyan waters, have died so far. For International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of migrants dying in Mediterranean Sea crossing could hit 30.000 this year (BBC News, 2015). This essay examines the unfolding immigration crisis from North Africa to Lampedusa Island, the underlying dynamics affecting incoming immigrant population, and its impact on Europe.

Key words: Lampedusa Island, migration, African migrants, immigration crisis, humanity.

Introduction

Throughout the history, humanity has had to migrate for various reasons such as natural, economic and social enforcements. Drought and famine can be counted as natural; new-better life and escape from poverty as economic; war and

terror as social enforcements. As a social fact, immigration has diverse causes and results on both immigrants and the place where they migrated. This population mobility deserves sociologically great interest in terms of assimilation, multiculturalism and globalism.

Şahin (2001) defines immigration as an individual or mass mobility for economic, social or political reasons. Öngör (1980) interprets immigration as a temporary or permanent settlement for the purpose of working, hope for finding better conditions for living. For Akkayan (1979), immigration is a geographical movement of an individual who wishes to live his whole or part of life in another place. In this context, immigration can be classified into two: volunteer or compulsory movement (Klemencic, 2007: 27).

History testified several mass migration movements. The first known mass migration movement is Huns and then Germanic tribes, which coincides with the period of 400-800 AD, called "Migration Period" (Hines, 1999: 93). The social impacts of this migration are collapse of Roman Empires, the end of First Age, start of Middle Age (also known as Dark Age), rapid expansion of Christianity. Another mass migration, a compulsory one, took place following the period of "Great Geographic Discoveries" (Klemencic, 2007: 34). Millions of people from Europe, Africa and other parts of the world migrated to New World¹. Beginning from 16th century, European people settled in America for economic purposes, whereas more than 15 million people from Africa continent were forced to migrate America as slaves (Bayraktar, 2013: 112). It was a turning point in African people's destiny, which would have everlasting effect.

In modern times, the Second World War displaced millions of people from their homelands (Giddens, 2010: 522). Europe

¹ New World: The term was first coined by Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci. The Americas were also referred to as the "fourth part of the world" (Davidson, 1997: 417).

started to receive immigrants in order to satisfy its workforce needs and recover from remnants of two world wars. Until 1970s, Germany received immigrants from Greece, Spain and Turkey. Based on economic concerns, such immigration may be considered as volunteer migration. Compulsory immigration has political and religious reasons; and natural reasons such as war, flood, fire, and earthquake. People migrate or are forced to migrate another country without their will. Arab Spring² in 2011 is specific example for forced migration. Thousands of people from Libya and neighbouring countries in North Africa try to make it through.

As stated above, there are two kinds of immigration, volunteer and compulsory. In this study, it is attempted to portray the face of Italy in terms of immigration in historical context; to focus on recent disaster took place within the shores of Lampedusa Island; lastly to suggest the third type of immigration, which is *restricted volunteer immigration*.

Italy, Emigration Country to Immigration Country

Portraying immigration history of Italy will help us to understand the recent immigrant crisis took place in Lampedusa. Once an emigrant country, Italy has become an immigrant-receiving country for the last several decades. Italy has geopolitical importance in the region. Situated in the middle of Mediterranean and serving as an intersection between North Africa, Balkans and European continent, Italy has always been a border region both geographically and symbolically. Being one of the top emigrant countries, Italy lost its around 24 million people, who were seeking better live conditions between 1860s and 1960s. In recent years, Italy transitioned to one of the popular target countries rapidly.

² Arab Spring was a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests (both non-violent and violent), riots, and civil wars in the Arab world that began on 18 December 2010 in Tunisia with the Tunisian Revolution, and spread throughout the countries of the Arab League and its surroundings.

The Italy of emigrants, the Italy of underdeveloped, the Italy with a fragile social structure despite its economic success, the Italy of millions of individual sufferings seems now to belong only to the past, dissolving finally in the established national well-being [...]. Italy can raise its head: Italians are no longer a poor and wretched people, forced by circumstances to make their way outside the county's borders, often stigmatized and treated badly in receiving countries (Allievi, 2010:147).

As Allievi states, Italy had experienced huge waves of migration and transformed its emigration face to immigration through economic and political flow up. Major economical and industrial development slowed down the waves of migration to other countries. In addition, Giocca (2004) states that over the course of the twentieth century Italy transformed from a country of origin to a destination and transit country and in 1973 immigration surpassed emigration.

However, Italy's economical and social development would be shadowed by restrictive policies regarding flow of migration across central and northern Europe. Such policies resulted in direction of the flow towards Southern Europe. Until the end of 1960s, Italy became country of destination for the immigrants. Before, Italy was a transition country. Restrictive policies forced immigrants to stay in Italy, which means a transition from 'temporary flow of migration to permanent flow of migration'. In 2008, the rate of regular immigrants living in Italy is 6,7%, which is more than EU average (6%) and places Italy in third place after Spain (11,3%) and Germany (8,8%). In terms of irregular migration, over one hundred thousand migrants are seized by Italian Police every year. In 2008, it is estimated that 650.000 immigrants without documents were living in Italy. Researchers argue that 13% of irregular immigrants enter country from Southern Italy shores (Lampedusa) through secret ways. 50% of the detained irregular immigrants are repatriated.

In addition to restrictive policies at the turn of the century, the recent tragedy in Lampedusa did lead to call for EU lawmakers to review their migration policies (Krever, 2013). It is reported that European Union plans a system in which drones and satellites are to track refugees at sea (Mayr & Popp, 2013). However, Schlamp (2013:1) argues that this does not offer ways to save people like those killed on the way to Lampedusa this year. European Union's attitude towards these people is not about saving but detecting and pushing them back; the discourse is mainly 'burden' and 'death' (Khreptan-Hörhager, 2015:93). PM of Italy, Mr. Renzi goes on to criticize EU's approach to this issue that "it's unthinkable that in the face of such a tragedy, there isn't the feeling of solidarity which Europe has shown in their instances. Trafficking was a plague in our continent – the slavery of the 21st century" (BBC). In addition, Maltese PM, Joseph Muscat told that "what is happening now is of epic proportions. If Europe, if the global community continues to turn a blind eye... we will all be judged in the same way that history has judged Europe when it turned a blind eye to the genocide of this century and last century" (BBC). In her recent interview with Brigitte, a popular magazine in Germany (Jeska 2013), the current mayoress of Lampedusa, Guisi Nicolini, defined this phenomenon as a "European globalized indifference". Nicolini accused Europe of making Lampedusa into "the junkyard for the shatters of Western Christian mentality". She goes on to say that "Europe has forgotten that civilization is based on community and humanity". Nicolini criticized EU's immigration policies, and reminded that every human being should have the right to be protected. European Union's attitude towards this humanitarian crisis may well be defined in the words of Jacques Derrida. In his essay on strategic border of European Union and its nature, Derrida (2001:13) states that:

At the time when we claim to be lifting internal borders, we proceed to bolt the external borders of the European Union tightly. Asylum-seekers knock successively on each of the doors

of the European Union and end up being repelled to each one of them.

In 2001, Derrida pointed to such kind of issues happened in Lampedusa in terms of humanistic perspective, which should be discussed in a new study on European Union's humanistic approach to people seeking asylum.

The Tiny Island of Lampedusa and New “American Dream³”

The year 2015 witnesses several tragic losses of African migrants, who lost their lives during their dangerous journey to Lampedusa Island. According to figures of the International Organization for Migration⁴ (IOM), more than 1.700 people have died up to end of April 2015. And more than 800 migrants are feared drowned during their travel in the south of Lampedusa Island. What is more, IOM argues the number of migrants could reach 30000 according to recent rates. Federico Soda, IOM's Italy director, said that the Italian maritime forces doing “incredible work” trying to rescue as many people as possible, but that the rising number of deaths was “unacceptable” (BBC News). This disaster unsurprisingly recalled previous incident of October 2013, which saw almost 600 lives lost. Following the Lampedusa disaster, the Italian government implemented a system for patrolling in the Mediterranean Sea by operating “Operation Mare Nostrum” and humanitarian operation in order to rescue migrants, arrest the traffickers of immigrants (EURASIA).

³ In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" regardless of social class or circumstances of birth (Adams, 1931)

⁴ International Organisation for Migration: Established in 1951, IOM is the leading inter-governmental organization in the field of migration and works closely with governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental partners. For more information: www.iom.int

An all-out action is needed to solve the growing humanitarian crisis. EU should act with its member countries especially for the countries which have sea borders with Africa. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres (UNHCR, 2015), states that there is need for a comprehensive European approach to address the root causes that drive so many people to this tragic end. He strikingly warns that Italy should not be left alone in tackling with migrant issues. He hopes that the EU assumes a decisive role to prevent future tragedies. Thousands of African people search for safety in Europe. The continent is a “safe haven” for them. They risk their lives in order to live in peace and wealth. A migrant, Mohamed Abdallah from Darfur, strikingly portrays the psychology of thousands of migrants to the Guardian (2015): “There is a war in my country, there is no security, no equality, no freedom, but if I stay here, it’s just like my country (implying his country, Libya), I need to go to Europe”. Abdallah gives out clues for humanitarian institutions.

The immigration movement starts from North and sub-Saharan Africa for several reasons. For Collucello & Massey (2007:78), predominant source of their motives are “economic betterment and escape from persecution, discrimination and political instability”. Death numbers in recent tragedies draw attention to migration routes. Reportedly more than 35.000 asylum seekers and migrants arrive in Southern Italy by boat through Central Mediterranean. In 2014, 2447 people died en route to Italy. In 2015, only in five months, 1710 people are reported dead, 800 of whom died only in a single day, on 19th April, 2015.

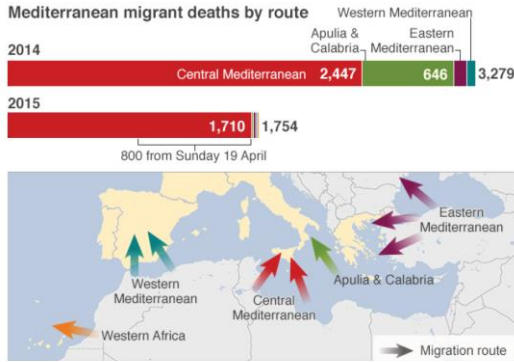


Figure 1. Deadliest routes in the Mediterranean

As can be seen in the figure, Central Mediterranean is the deadliest route for migration. UNHCR announced that 219.000 people crossed the Mediterranean in 2014, and 3500 lives were lost. In five-months-time in 2015, nearly 1600 migrants have died. In addition, when compared to other migrations all over the world, IOM reported that the large number of migrant deaths has taken place in the Mediterranean.

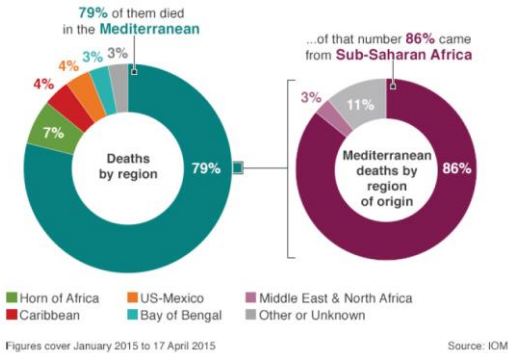


Figure 2. Rate of worldwide migration in terms of regions

The figures shown above indicate that 79% of deaths have taken place in the Mediterranean. Of the migrants who died in the Mediterranean, 86% of them started their journey in the sub-Saharan Africa. However, the route from Central Mediterranean to Lampedusa is by far the deadliest.

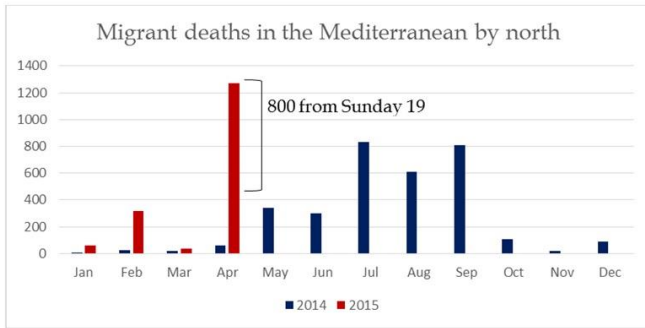


Figure 3. Migrant deaths in the Mediterranean by North

The figure of IOM shows the tragic face of migration from Northern Africa, Libya to Europe. This striking figure really calls for a humanitarian crisis across Europe. The most recent tragedy in Lampedusa triggered debates over asylum and immigration policy in Europe again (Mayr and Popp, 2013). In April 2015, in a single month, more than 1.200 migrants died during going after their “American Dream”. IOM goes on to state that 8 out of every 10 deaths have taken place there this year. The IOM also reports that 912 out of 954 of this year’s deaths have been on routes towards Italy, as of 17 April. The IOM estimates that 21.191 migrants have reached the Italian coasts alive during the same period.

Assessment and Conclusion

The agitation between European Union and Italian Government shall not stop migrant traffickers to organize another trip. Guardian reported that one smuggler organizes 20 trips a week according to seasons. European institutions such as Save the Children⁵, UNHCR, Mare Nostrum⁶ and IOM share responsibility and play vital role in securitization of illegal

⁵ Save the Children is one of the primary aid agencies working with migrants arriving in Italy.

⁶ It is a military and humanitarian operation in order to rescue migrants, arrest the traffickers of immigrants.

immigration coming from Southern Italy. However, EU institutions should bear more responsibility with other member states. Lampedusa is an Italian island but also constitutes the border of European Union. Italian government and EU institutions should work hand in hand to establish a mutual and humanistic discourse.

This article gives account of the African people within the borderline of life and death. Lampedusa is an interesting case to be studied in every relevant aspect, such as multiculturalism, globalism and humanism. It is important to “put humanity before politics” (The Guardian). EU should look into this very situation but not ignore thousands of people die in EU shores.

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