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Europe must reaffirm its commitment to the rights of refugees and migrants

150 bodies were found in the sea off the Tunisian Kerkennah islands only a few weeks ago. These bodies were of people who fled the violent conflict in Libya to seek safety in Europe. Their death added to the toll of refugees and migrants that have died trying to reach Europe from North Africa estimated at more than 1,800 so far this year.

This is not a new problem; desperate refugees and migrants have undertaken the same perilous journey for years and thousands have died.

But while Egypt and Tunisia, in the midst of their own political upheaval, quietly admitted hundreds of thousands of refugees from Libya, EU Member States failed to take credible measures to help prevent the deaths at sea of people fleeing that country.

They should have increased air surveillance and rescue at sea operations to enhance their capacity to go to the rescue of vessels at risk. They even had the resources of NATO and FRONTEX (the EU border security agency) at their disposal to do this. Likewise, they could have resettled vulnerable refugees from Tunisia and Egypt. Instead, EU governments focused on what was happening at home and went into panic mode about those who had survived the crossing of the Mediterranean and managed to reach Europe.

The past decade has seen a gradual erosion in the protection of the rights of refugees and migrants in Europe. Post 9/11 security policies were used as a blunt instrument to push aside human rights concerns and sensible immigration policies for the sake of responding to populist fear mongering. Backlashes against refugees and migrants became a regular tool for some politicians and sections of the media, blaming them for rises in crime, health scares and economic woes.

The Europe that once played an essential role in protecting refugees, the continent whose World War II refugee crisis gave rise to the international refugee protection regime, is now eroding refugee protection.

Refugees are forced to leave their homes to escape persecution and conflict and risk their lives to find freedom and safety. Migrants do not seek to come to Europe out of greed; they leave behind poverty and economic desperation and seek a better living for themselves and their families. Portraying refugees and migrants as undeserving, greedy or criminal is not only disingenuous, it fuels hatred and violence. Surely their desires for freedom, safety and a better future are ones everyone can relate to, rather than demonise?

Driven primarily by political and economic interests, the EU has over the years paid lip service to the human rights of refugees and migrants. In the meantime, it supported and funded abusive migration control policies in countries like Libya where refugees and migrants were detained for years in inhumane conditions, often subjected to torture and where refugees were put at real risk of persecution by returning them to their countries of origin.

As recently as October 2010, the European Commission signed a "cooperation agenda" with Libya over the "management of migration flows" and "border control" paying them 50 million

Euros until 2013 for this service. Fast forward several months and European governments are expressing outrage at widespread human rights violations and attacks against civilians committed by the Libyan regime in the current conflict. While they rightly do so, this exposes the hypocrisy that lies at the heart of the EU's asylum and migration policies: pretence to promote the rights of refugees and migrants while effectively condoning abusive practices, to prevent them from reaching Europe.

The failure to take effective action to aid boats in distress in the Mediterranean is evidence of EU Members States' willingness to prioritise their own political interests above the rights of people fleeing North Africa.

In response to the increasing deaths at sea and the failure of European governments to help stem these tragic accidents, Thomas Hammarberg, the Commissioner for Human Rights for the Council of Europe said that "when preventing migrants from coming has become more important than saving lives, something has gone dramatically wrong".

Indeed something has gone very wrong. By failing to reach out and help those who are fleeing the desperate situation in North Africa, European governments are rolling back decades of human rights gains, slowly but surely eating away at the idea that everyone's rights are equal.

The EU and its Member States have a responsibility to protect the rights of refugees and migrants and to come to their rescue when their lives are at risk. People across North Africa and the Middle East have shown the courage to stand up for themselves - often at great personal risk. Europe must honour their bravery by the small act of living up to the ideal of human rights protection for all.

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