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Preserving Borders vs. Preserving People: Death Toll Rises as Refugees Head to Europe Seeking Safety

The European Union has called for emergency talks to address the rapidly growing number of people fleeing to Europe to escape violence and unrest in Syria, Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, sub-Saharan Africa and other regions. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, approximately 2,500 people are believed to have died or gone missing trying to reach Europe so far this year. On Sunday, 37 people died when a boat capsized off the Libyan coast. This came just days after another boat capsized off the Libyan coast killing more than 200 people. Meanwhile, investigators in Hungary and Austrian authorities are continuing to probe the deaths of 71 people who were found abandoned last week inside a truck on the main highway between Budapest and Vienna. We speak to Joel Millman of the International Organization for Migration in Geneva; Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch; and Dr. Chiara Montaldo of Doctors Without Borders in the Sicilian town of Pozzallo in Italy. She has been providing medical and psychological care to people rescued from boats in the Mediterranean.

Transcript

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AMY GOODMAN: The European Union has called for emergency talks to address the rapidly growing number of people fleeing to Europe to escape violence and unrest in Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, sub-Saharan Africa and other regions. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, approximately 2,500 people are believed to have died or gone missing trying to reach Europe so far this year. On Sunday, 37 people died when a boat capsized off the Libyan coast. This came just days after another boat capsized off the Libyan coast killing more than 200 people. Meanwhile, investigators in Hungary and Austrian authorities are continuing to probe the deaths of 71 people who were found abandoned last week inside a truck on the main highway between Budapest and Vienna. On Friday, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called on governments to take action on the migrant crisis in Europe.

SECRETARY-GENERAL BAN KI-MOON: I am horrified and heartbroken as refugees and migrants are losing their lives in the Mediterranean, Europe and beyond. We have seen countless tragedies, most recently the grim discovery of more than 70 people who suffocated inside a truck in Austria. So many people have also drowned in the Mediterranean and also the Andaman Seas. We must understand why people are risking their lives: They are fleeing war, political instability and insecurity to seek a better future.

AMY GOODMAN: Hungary has responded to the situation by building a 109-mile-long razor-wire fence on its southern border. Meanwhile, *The Washington Post* reports scenes of blatant racial profiling at Budapest's main train station. Authorities allowed white and lighter-skinned people to pass through, but stopped and demanded papers from virtually all darker-skinned people. On Saturday alone, Hungary detained 3,000 people. Over the weekend, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius accused Hungary of adopting a, quote, "scandalous"

policy toward refugees. He made the remarks during an interview.

FOREIGN MINISTER LAURENT FABIUS: [translated] With regard to all those people who are politically chased out of their country and who are in war-torn countries, we have to be able to welcome them. It's called the plea for asylum, and every country has to respond to that—France, Germany, others. But when I see certain European countries that do not accept these groups, I find that scandalous.

REPORTER: [translated] Which countries are you speaking about?

FOREIGN MINISTER LAURENT FABIUS: [translated] Particularly countries that are situated in Eastern Europe.

REPORTER: [translated] Hungary, for example, what do you think of what's going on there?

FOREIGN MINISTER LAURENT FABIUS: [translated] They are extremely harsh. Hungary is part of Europe, which has values. We do not respect those values by putting up fences.

AMY GOODMAN: To talk more about the crisis, we're joined by Joel Millman in Geneva, spokesman for the International Organization for Migration there. And here in New York, Ken Roth is with us, executive director of Human Rights Watch.

We welcome you both to *Democracy Now!* We also hope to go to the coast of Sicily, where migrants are pouring in to the coastal towns. But we're going to start right now in Geneva. Joel Millman, talk about the extent of the crisis. I think it's one that people in the United States are not very well aware of.

JOEL MILLMAN: Well, we're up 322,000 seaborne crossings into Europe, principally from Turkey into Greece and from Libya into Italy. This is, with four months to go in this year, 2015, we're already ahead of where we were last year at the end of August—I'm sorry, where we were for the whole, at 219,000. So we're 100,000 above that and with another third of the year to go.

These are people that are fleeing principally a handful of countries. Syria is number one, Eritrea, Somalia; now Afghanistan has become very prominent, as well—all people that generally, from those places, would merit consideration for asylum and resettlement. So, the tragedy is that people that would be treated as refugees by Europe under almost any circumstance are risking their lives for the opportunity to petition for something that most countries in the world think they already deserve.

AMY GOODMAN: Talk about the—what is fueling this mass migration, from Africa, from the Middle East, from around all of the surrounding countries around Europe.

JOEL MILLMAN: Well, we can't be naïve. I mean, what's fueling it is the conflict and the stress that's happening in a few societies. However, it's the lawlessness of places like Syria and Libya right now that deny Europe and the rest of the world any kind of government partner that they can access to try to control or manage this migration flow. We understand that there

are demographic imperatives involved, that Europe has a falling birth rate. There's a huge demand for cheap labor, skilled and unskilled, and there's a huge dearth of jobs in the countries where these individuals are coming from. But the fact is, this is not a new condition. This has gone on for decades and had been managed. They've been managed with governments that aren't altogether savory to us, like Gaddafi's government in Libya. However, in the absence of real authority, criminal gangs have stepped up and opportunistically decided to start trafficking in migrants. Quite a number of these cases are people that may not have intended to go to Europe at all in the first place and have been kidnapped and coerced and stuffed onto boats. So we've seen that to a great degree, particularly in Tripoli and the western part of Libya. But, obviously, it's the inability of any government to control this effectively that's created the opportunity for lots of criminal gangs. And they're moving—while the profits are high, they're moving as many people as they can.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you explain what the Schengen Agreement is?

JOEL MILLMAN: Well, it's an agreement that is among European countries, not solely those of the European Union, to be able to transit freely throughout the continent. It's to facilitate tourism and trade, and it's worked quite well for many decades, principally because, you know, Europeans are very affluent, and they follow rules very well, and, until recently, there wasn't quite a lot of people coming sort of irregularly—is the term we like to use—from outside Europe. Unfortunately, this is not a system built to make for orderly—you know, orderly transit through Europe when people that aren't there with documents or aren't there with valid visas start coming in these numbers. And the numbers are huge, as we discussed.

AMY GOODMAN: Thousands of migrants have sought shelter in a makeshift shantytown in the coastal town of Calais. This is an Afghan refugee named Wahib describing his experience there on the eve of a visit from European officials and French ministers.

WAHIB: Nobody is, like, treating us like as a human being here, you know? Everybody and police are—if you go, like, to city, some police see us, "Hey," go, "jungle, jungle." Like, we are human beings, so—they call us "jungle." You can see that, you know? So, it's like very embarrassing for me recently. I cannot say about other people, but for me it's like very embarrassing. It's just because that our country is not, like, good. It's—we cannot stay there. There's a war.

AMY GOODMAN: Joel Millman, if you could respond to what this migrant is saying? Joel Millman, speaking to us by video stream from Geneva, spokesperson for the International Organization for Migration.

JOEL MILLMAN: Well, it's tragic, obviously. The individual that was just interviewed, I mean, he's an English speaker. It's not perfect English, but obviously he's educated. Obviously, he's made it all the way from Afghanistan to Calais. These are people that show tremendous resolve. Sometimes they have resources, and often they have great education. They're able—they would be able to thrive, integrate well in any society, particularly in Europe or North America. And yet, you know, regulations and rules against transit are keeping them in countries where their lives are often at risk. And we don't—we are no longer seeing these people as members of our society and welcome; we're seeing them as threats, especially if they come from Muslim countries. And it's true. I mean, they're reduced to living in squalor, which we think is beneath the dignity of any human being, much less a migrant.

AMY GOODMAN: What are you calling on the European Union to do right now, Joel Millman?

JOEL MILLMAN: Well, mostly to be flexible. I mean, we don't lobby particularly; we're not an advocacy group. And we don't think it's proper to single Europe out, as many have, as not doing its share. I mean, Europe has taken on a tremendous burden and have done so even though it's a system that's shared by 28 countries in the EU, and then, of course, all the other countries not in the EU. They're trying to find a way to turn what had been a uniform policy into something more flexible, and I think they've made pretty good strides. I mean, Germany last week talked about shelving the Dublin rule, which insists that an asylum seeker only accept asylum from the first country he arrives in, which clearly isn't working. I mean, hundreds of thousands have crossed into Italy in the last two years, and very few of them stay there. They all want to go to northern Europe or Germany or U.K. So, this is the kind of flexibility that we'd like to see more of.

Obviously, we want more resettlement, more resettlement quotas. We want people in Europe to understand that it's not a zero-sum game between letting them drown, on one hand, or giving them asylum and access to every benefit in the society, on the other. There are many, many solutions in between. I mean, there's temporary protected status. There's humanitarian resettlement. There's all kinds of things that governments have done for decades that only require a little bit of clear thinking and a political will. You know, here at IOM, we often reflect that it was four years ago this summer that the world was faced with the so-called boat people crisis in Southeast Asia. And the speed and the diligence with which countries as far afield as Canada and the U.S., France, Australia, Thailand and others all pitched in and found solutions for millions of people over a very short period of time and resettled them so successfully is something to be inspired by. And, you know, you often feel like, "What's happened with the world? They used to have solutions for these kind of crises, and now they seem to only have excuses for why they can't act." We know we can do better. We know that we will, with time.

AMY GOODMAN: Joel Millman, I want to thank you for being with us, spokesperson for the International Organization for Migration, speaking to us by video stream from Geneva, Switzerland. When we come back, we're going to go to the front line to a coastal town in Sicily, where migrants are pouring in, overwhelming the communities, communities without solutions. We'll also be joined by the head of Human Rights Watch here in New York, Kenneth Roth. This is *Democracy Now!* We'll be back in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: You've been listening to the Migrant Choir. This is a collaborative public choral piece that was staged at the Venice Biennale in mid-August this year as part of the Creative Time Summit. Migrants gathered from around the world. They came to Venice, and they sang in front of three countries that have turned immigrants away, in front of Italy, in front of the British Pavilion, as well as in front of the French Pavilion. The Migrant Choir is a project of [Public Studio](#) (Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky) with [Adrian Blackwell](#) and [Cittadini del Mondo](#). The video was shot by Stefania Andreotti.

This is
Democracy Now!
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The War and Peace Report

. I'm Amy Goodman, as we continue to look at this massive global crisis.

The Mediterranean Sea has become one of the world's deadliest borders, as more than 340,000 people displaced by war and violence have attempted to reach Europe this year. We go now to the coast of Sicily to Dr. Chiara Montaldo, a coordinator with Doctors Without Borders in Pozzallo, Sicily, Italy, providing medical and psychological care to migrants and refugees rescued from boats in the Mediterranean. She recently wrote a [piece](#) for *The Guardian* called "We see more and more unaccompanied children on migrant boats."

Welcome to *Democracy Now!*, Dr. Montaldo. Describe what is happening in just your town alone, in Pozzallo, where you're working.

DR. CHIARA MONTALDO: Yes, good afternoon. What is happening here, we are receiving migrants since almost two years now. And honestly, the condition of the people we receive are worse and worse, not so much for the traveling in the sea, but really for the condition in Libya, in all the migration way before to come here. And the main point where they are now victim of violence is for sure Libya, where all the people that we talk with, they really tell us that now is really the hell. This is the word that they often use to describe Libya, is the "hell." There is no security. Many people have been really tortured or have been beaten. They come with the wounds and burns. Many women, but also many men, are raped. So, now what we see, unfortunately, are the consequences of the worsening of the situation in Libya. This is clear.

AMY GOODMAN: You retweeted someone writing, "We are alive only because we are not dead."

DR. CHIARA MONTALDO: Yes.

AMY GOODMAN: Dr. Montaldo, explain.

DR. CHIARA MONTALDO: Yeah, most of the people that we are receiving now are really escaping from death. So, why they risk their life in the sea? They know very well now that the sea is like Russian roulette. So, they can die, they know, because now there are more and more shipwreck and tragedies in the sea. But still they keep coming. Why? Because their condition in their own countries are worsening. First of all, Syria, of course, but not only Syria—Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria. So, all these people are really escaping from a situation where the risk of life is really high, higher than the trip in the sea. So that's why they keep coming. Not only this, because actually we receive people from many different nationalities, but many of them, they were already living in Libya. And now, as I told you, the situation is always worse and worse, so all these people, really, most of them, they come because they don't have choice, and especially because they don't have other alternatives to this trip in the sea. So, unfortunately, some of them, they could afford to buy a ticket, if they could, but there is no possibility, because there are no legal way in this moment allowing them to reach safely Europe or any way a safe place.

AMY GOODMAN: The piece, Dr. Montaldo, that you wrote in *The Guardian*, you write of the chemical burns on the people, especially who were in the hold of the boats. And you write about how the lighter-skinned immigrants will be above, and the darker-skinned immigrants, for example, from Africa, are below, where they're more likely to get burned, because the immigrants fear that if darker-skinned people are seen, they're more likely to be turned away.

DR. CHIARA MONTALDO: Yeah, yeah, the chemical burn are symptoms that we see quite often, in some type of landing. It means whenever the boat has some problem of fuel leaking. So sometimes the fuel come out, and because they are sit all in the boat, especially in the lower part of the body, the legs, they have these really burn, like a fire burn, but they are caused by the fuel. And sometimes they are really severe. Sometimes we need to admit them. Sometimes we can treat them at the first reception center.

And it is true that, unfortunately, even in the boat, there is a kind of hierarchy. All of them, unfortunately, are desperate, but there is a kind of a different kind of despair, because, unfortunately, even in the boat, there is a first and second class, if we can say like that. And so, the last of the chain, often they have the worst places, the places more dangerous. And we see more and more people who died because they are in the—they stay in the lower part of the boat, which is normally the more—the most dangerous, because they cannot breathe sometimes. The fuel is there, and the gas of the boat—they are there. So, for example, two days ago, one of our team received people survived from this tragedy. Fifty people died because they were in the lower part of the boat. And they were probably without oxygen, and they died. Unfortunately, in these kind of tragedies, the people in the boat, maybe like yesterday, 400 people in the boat, they fight for life. This is normal. This situation put them in a situation where even in between them sometimes there are tension, and everybody try to save their own life.

AMY GOODMAN: What is your message for Europeans who say, "We have too many problems of our own. We have to send these people back," Dr. Montaldo?

DR. CHIARA MONTALDO: Honestly, I think that in front of what we are facing now—people dying, people without alternative—I think that this discussion to send them back, to block our borders are really—for me, they are—we should not discuss about this. We should discuss how to help people who is trying now to save their life. How can we still be here asking ourself should we block them or should not? How can we still be here to think how to protect ourself? I think that all our discussion are to protect ourself. But for me and for my organization, the priority is not protect ourself, is not protect our borders, but to help people who are dying. And they will continue to die if we don't do anything. And our fences, our barriers and our border are the cause of many of these deaths.

AMY GOODMAN: The issue of what people should be called, aside, of course, from simply "human beings" and "people"—"migrants," "refugees"—what do they prefer? And do you think they should be granted political asylum?

DR. CHIARA MONTALDO: So, what I think and what we think is that we prefer to call always the people "people," "human being," because for us what is important is to provide the care of the people in need, whoever they are, if they are refugees, if they are—whoever they are. So, we always prefer to call people "people," "human beings." Then, of course, there are differences, because some of them, they escape from the war; some of them, they escape from extreme poverty; some of them, they are victim of trafficking. So, there are many, many different people and many different reason for which people are escaping now. But, for us, this doesn't matter. These, for us, are human beings in need, in extreme need, human beings escaping from death, very often, or, anyway, from very dangerous situation. So, yes, we always prefer to call them "human being."

AMY GOODMAN: We are also joined by Kenneth Roth here in New York, executive director of Human Rights Watch. You have put out numerous reports on the situation of people who are migrating as a result of conflict, persecution, hunger, all the different reasons they do. What do you think has to happen now, Ken?

KENNETH ROTH: Well, Amy, let me first put this in perspective, because, you know, we're talking about a crisis. And yes, 310,000, 320,000 people are a lot of people. But Europe's population as a whole is about 500 million. So what we're talking about, the number of people who have come this year is less than 0.1 percent of Europe's population. Now, compare that to the United States, where undocumented people in this country are about 11 million. That's about 3.5 percent of the U.S. population. So, in other words, the U.S. population has completely integrated massive more people, a much larger percentage than Europe is facing. Indeed, the U.S. has built an economy around these people, so that it would be difficult to send them back. We're having a debate now about a path to citizenship, but realistically, these people are here to stay, and the U.S. has just incorporated them.

So, this is not really a crisis. I mean, Europe is perfectly able to manage integrating 0.1 percent of its population. The problem is, it doesn't want to—at least some people don't want to. We've seen real leadership. You saw the French foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, saying—very powerfully speaking for the need to welcome these people. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, has also been very outspoken in this regard. So, we are seeing some leadership in Europe, but the right wing, in particular, is demagoguing this issue and is creating real problems, which are not real problems, they're political problems.

AMY GOODMAN: So what exactly should the European Union do right now?

KENNETH ROTH: Well, it's important to recognize that a very substantial percentage of these people are refugees. That is to say, they're fleeing conflict and persecution. Yes, there are some economic migrants among them, but most at least have a right not to be sent back to persecution. And once they land on European soil, they actually have a right to have their asylum claim adjudicated, and if indeed they are found to be refugees, as most of them will be, they're entitled to stay.

So what Europe needs to do is to stop treating the Mediterranean or the often-dangerous land crossing, stop treating sort of drowning and death, as a way of preserving its borders. It needs to find safe and legal routes for these people who really do need to flee, a way for them to get to Europe without risking their lives. And, you know, we've seen modest steps in that direction. If you look at sort of the way Europe has responded to the Mediterranean Sea crossing, when the Italians were in charge, they had something called Mare Nostrum, which very much focused on protecting people. The European Union then took over about a year ago with Operation Triton and put a priority on preserving Europe's borders over protecting people—until this last spring, when a thousand people died in the course of one week, and then it changed. But I'm not sure if it's changed enough, because even just this weekend we've seen a number of drownings off the Libyan coast. Europe should be patrolling much more aggressively near the Mediterranean coast to try to rescue people as quickly as possible, so they're not continuing to use drowning as a way of preserving Europe's borders.

AMY GOODMAN: So what does the United States have to do with it? I mean, you have these massive conflicts that have roiled the globe. Do we have a responsibility here?

KENNETH ROTH: Well, yes. If you look at why people are fleeing—let’s take the Syrians, who are the largest percentage. In an ordinary war, you can get some degree of protection by moving away from the front lines. But in Syria, Assad is dropping barrel bombs in the middle of civilian neighborhoods that happen to be controlled by the opposition. There is no safe place to move in Syria if you’re in opposition-held territory, which is why we have 4 million refugees from Syria today. So one very important thing to do is to go to the root causes of this, to try to put real pressure on Assad to stop barrel-bombing civilians, and to take comparable steps in the other major refugee-producing countries, like Somalia, Eritrea and Afghanistan. You know, let’s not forget why we have this crisis. It’s not that everybody woke up this morning and thought it would be nice to move to Europe. These people are being forced out because of severe conflict and persecution.

AMY GOODMAN: And do you see connections between what we’re seeing in the United States—I mean, you have the Republican rhetoric; you have Donald Trump saying build a wall, Mexicans are rapists, all 11 million undocumented people should be deported; you have Chris Christie saying they should be treated like FedEx packages and tracked. What are the connections you see between what’s happening in the United States and what’s happening in Europe?

KENNETH ROTH: Well, there are commonalities between the right wing in both Europe and the United States. And what this is really about is some sense that the migrants are somehow destroying American culture or European culture, that these societies cannot incorporate the changes that would result from welcoming in, you know, hundreds of thousands or, in some cases in the U.S., millions of people. Now, the United States, in fact, is just fine. In fact, it’s been greatly enriched by the immigration. And it’s not as if American culture is radically different today from what it was, you know, two or three decades ago. It’s not as if American democracy is in jeopardy. But this is nonetheless an argument that the right wing likes to put forward, that the American way of life is in jeopardy. And you see very similar arguments in Europe, aggravated by the fact that so many of these asylum seekers and migrants are Muslims. And there’s this terrifying fear in Europe that, you know, largely Christian Europe is somehow going to be changed for the worse because a handful of Muslims are going to come in. And so there is this unfortunate right-wing, racist commonality.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to thank you, Ken Roth, for being with us. I hope you’ll stay, because we’re going to be talking about Egypt soon with Sharif Abdel Kouddous in Cairo, the three Al Jazeera reporters that were just sentenced to three years in prison. Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights [Watch] here in New York. And thanks so much to Dr. Chiara Montaldo, who is coordinator with Doctors Without Borders, speaking to us from Pozzallo in Sicily, Italy. Of course, we’ll continue to follow this issue.

This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. When we come back, though, we’re going north to Alaska. President Obama is there. He’s renaming the tallest mountain in North America, Mount McKinley—he’s renaming it Denali. And we will talk about climate change in Alaska, before we go to Cairo. Stay with us.



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