The Observer view on Europe's shameful response to the growing refugee crisis

One in 40. This is the dreadful death rate facing refugees attempting the perilous crossing from Libya to Italy in overloaded rubber dinghies. It has trebled since late 2015, when European search and rescue efforts in the central Mediterranean were much more concerted and coordinated. It's the shameful product of Europe's pitiful response to the growing refugee crisis.

Angela Merkel declared: "Wir schaffen das" – "we can do this" – when she flung open Germany's doors to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq for six months in 2015. But she failed to take German public opinion with her and her words quickly turned hollow. Other European nations, including Britain, chose to free-ride on Germany's generosity rather than follow its example. Led by Germany, Europe's approach to refugees in the last two years has evolved from Merkel's misplaced optimism in "we can do this" to a shameful "out of sight, out of mind".

All hopes of a united European response to the refugee crisis seem to have evaporated. There is still no network of commonly funded reception centres. National leaders have shunned the idea of equitable resettlement quotas for EU states. The cornerstone of the European approach remains the hopelessly outdated Dublin regulation, which insists refugees must be processed by the first EU country they set foot in and can be sent back there if they journey beyond it. And so the injustice of two of Europe's poorer nations – Italy and Greece – continuing to struggle with large numbers of refugees remains.

Meanwhile, Europe, led by Merkel, has recalibrated its efforts towards preventing refugees from reaching Europe. This simply shifts the locus of the problem elsewhere, at a huge humanitarian cost.

The refugee crisis has never been a European crisis: a small fraction of the world's refugees make it there. But in the last two years, as the number of refugees and migrants reaching Europe's shores has fallen as a result of our change in approach, it has become even less so. Out of sight, out of mind.

There are two main routes that refugees take to Europe: the Aegean route, via Turkey, Greece and the Balkans, and the central Mediterranean crossing from Libya to Italy. The Aegean route is now almost completely closed: partly as a result of much stricter Balkan border controls and partly because of the EU-Turkey deal that saw Turkey accepting the return of all irregular migrants arriving in Greece in exchange for billions in financial aid and visa liberalisation for Turkish nationals.

This unsavoury deal has left tens of thousands of refugees living in legal limbo in Greece in intolerable conditions. UN aid is reaching only around 10% of the 2.5 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. Jordan has now closed its borders because of security fears, leaving tens of thousands of internally displaced people in Syria with no humanitarian aid.

The situation in the central Mediterranean is even worse. The European response has shifted from an emphasis on the search-and-rescue efforts that resulted in a significant decline in drownings in late 2015 to working with the Libyan coastguard to try and stop the flow altogether. Well-meaning attempts to destroy the wooden boats used by smugglers have driven refugees to attempt the crossing on even more dangerous rubber dinghies. The Italian government, which is not getting adequate support from the EU, is accusing NGOs operating their own search-and-rescue boats close to Libyan waters of encouraging people-smuggling. But these are desperate people, who have survived treacherous journeys to Libya and endured weeks and months in Libyan detention camps where forced labour, rape and torture are rife. There is no evidence that halting search-and-rescue efforts will do anything except push the death toll up; indeed, European deterrence efforts so far have made the problem worse. UN agencies say there is evidence that the Libyan coastguard is co-operating with smugglers, selling boats it seizes on to other smugglers and returning migrants to appalling detention facilities.

This is what the European response has become: striking deals with quasi-dictatorial regimes such as Turkey and what’s left of the Libyan failed state, channelling cash to and boosting the credibility of regimes with terrible human rights records, all in the name of making the problem someone else’s. Any moral authority Europe might have claimed has leached away.

Britain has been a leading force for European retrenchment, pushing for

unilateralism in the face of requests for more support from Greece and Italy. David Cameron agreed only to resettle a paltry 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years and then only in the face of sustained public and media pressure after the image of the body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi washed up on a Greek beach went viral in 2015. This is nothing compared to the millions of refugees in the low- to middle-income countries close to conflict zones, including Lebanon, Jordan, Uganda and Kenya. In Lebanon, which now has the highest per capita rate of refugees in the world, some schools are operating two half-day shifts to cope with the pressure. Uganda has one of the most progressive approaches in the world, including giving all refugees the right to seek employment. They put wealthy Europe to shame.

There are solutions that could improve this crisis, as argued by Alexander Betts and Paul Collier in their book, Refuge. More humanitarian aid should be channelled to those countries coping with the bulk of the world's refugees. But assistance should go much further: it should include the leveraging of business investment and tariff-free trade deals that boost growth in exchange for allowing refugees to take jobs. Britain is already involved in pioneering these approaches in countries such as Jordan and Uganda. European countries must together develop a longer-term resettlement programme, providing safe and legal routes to Europe for refugees living in limbo.

But there is insufficient political leadership and will to deliver this. Europe's failure to get to grips with this crisis is not only an immoral neglect of its international responsibilities as one of the world's richest regions, but it runs counter to its self-interest. Without action, the pressure cooker in Africa and the Middle East will continue to build catastrophically. Out of sight, out of mind isn't just a shameful way for Europe to conduct itself – it will jeopardise the security of its citizens for decades to come.

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