Europe must reaffirm its commitment to refugees and migrants

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A hundred and fifty bodies were found in the sea off the Tunisian Kerkennah islands 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 who die trying to reach Europe. More than 1,400 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 upheavals, have quietly admitted hundreds of thousands of refugees from Libya, EU countries have failed to take credible measures to help prevent the deaths at sea of people fleeing that country.

They ought to have increased air surveillance and sea rescue to enhance their capacity to rescue vessels at risk. They even have the resources of NATO and FRONTEX (the EU border security agency) at their disposal. Similarly, they could have resettled vulnerable refugees from Tunisia and Egypt. Instead, EU governments focused on domestic preoccupations and panicked about those who had survived the crossing of the Mediterranean and managed to reach Europe.

The past decade has seen the gradual erosion in protection of the rights of refugees and migrants in Europe. Post-9/11 security policies were used as a blunt instrument to shoulder aside human rights concerns and sensible immigration policies for the sake of responding to populist fear-mongering. Certain politicians and sections of the media have encouraged the vilification of refugees and migrants, blaming them for rising crime, health scares and economic woes.

The Europe which once played an essential role protecting refugees, the continent whose Second World War refugee crisis produced 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 seeking freedom and safety. Migrants do not attempt to reach 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 also fuels hatred and violence. Surely everyone can relate to, rather than demonise, their desire for freedom, safety and a better future?

Driven mainly by political and economic interests, the EU has over the years paid lip service to the human rights of refugees and migrants. Meanwhile, 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 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 for the "management of migration flows" and "border control" paying them €50m 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. While they are right to do so, this exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of the EU's asylum and migration policies: pretending to promote the rights of refugees and migrants while 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 countries' willingness to place 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 stem these tragic incidents, Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights has said that "when preventing migrants from coming has become more important than saving lives, something has gone dramatically wrong".

Something has indeed 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 eroding the idea that everyone's rights are equal.

The EU and its member states are responsible for protecting the rights of refugees and migrants and rescuing them 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. Isn't it time for Europe to honour their bravery by embodying the ideal of human rights protection for all?