

Criminalization of refugees: the dark side of EU and UNHCR policies in Tunisia

UN agencies for protection or apparatuses for denial of rights

On Thursday, 14th of April, 18 refugees were arrested by security forces in the Tunisian capital of Tunis. The arrests took place after a group of 210 people expressed their frustration with the unresponsiveness of the UNHCR, and decided to transfer their protest to the agency's headquarters located in Tunis.

The decision of moving the protest came after the group had a sit-in for over two months in front of the UNHCR's office in Zarzis following the agency's newly-adopted undeclared policy of closing many dorms sheltering refugees and asylum seekers and reducing the number of residents, and pushing many of them to leave in exchange of alternatives that do not live up to the minimum living standards and people on the move expectations due to "absence of financial support" as the agency declared earlier this year.

While the group of 18 detained was later released on the 15th of April, many women, men, and children, are still being denied the right of movement within the land transport station of Zarzis. This incident stands as a standing proof of the inadequacy of the agency, whose only response to the migrants sitting-in for months in undignified conditions was through the suspension of its services and shutting all doors in their faces, while answering their demands in an inhumane and disrespectful way, stating "we are not a travelling agency"

The UN Agency announced the suspension of its services to refugees and asylum seekers for the 18th and the 19th of April 2022 in response to their protest. Refugees and asylum seekers want an enabling environment where their rights are respected. Regardless of their demands' merits, the closing doors policy in the face of the ordeal of men, children and women seeking refuge and being left to live in the open for extended periods does not achieve "raising awareness of the suffering of refugees, defending their rights, and coordinating efforts to support them."

The Signatory actors:

- Stands in solidarity with the refugees struggling and protesting for their rights and dignity
- holds the UNHCR responsible of the escalating situation caused by the absence of dialogue with refugees and asylum seekers and deepened by the closing doors policy in addition to resort to provocative statements
- Considers that the performance of the Agency in Tunisia, and in the governorate of Medenine in particular, such as the lack of appropriate assistance delivery to refugees and asylum seekers, slow files processing, and other shortcomings related to access to basic services such as health care, education, legal support, livelihoods, and financial, psychological, and social support, contributed to deepening the precarious situation of refugees and asylum seekers, especially women and children.
- strongly condemns the externalization policies by which the EU tries to keep refugees away from its borders, and where the UNHCR is more assiduous in protecting EU interests rather than refugees' rights.

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Sea Watch e.V.
Refugee Rescue
Salvamento Maritimo Humanitario
Carovane Migranti
Melting Pot Europa
Rete Antirazzista Catanese
LasciateCIEntrare
Mediterranea Saving Humans
ASGI - Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'immigrazione
Progetto 20k
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المنتدى التونسي للحقوق الاقتصادية والاجتماعية
الجمعية التونسية للنساء الديمقراطيات
الجمعية التونسية للدفاع عن الحريات الفردية
مبادرة موجودين
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لجنة اليقظة من أجل الديمقراطية في تونس ببلجيكا
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