

At Lampedusa, “The End of the World”

Judith Harris (February 21, 2011)



The Sicilian island where hope and desperation coexist has become a prime transit site for illegal immigrants hoping to make it into Europe

Lampedusa is an eight square miles islet off the Sicilian coast, and beloved of tourists and summertime scuba divers for its crystal clear waters. If the vacationers also visited the cemetery, they would see, off to one side, a dozen or so fresh graves unmarked save for a cross and a few dusty plastic flowers.

Despite the cross, the dead there are presumed to be Muslims—no one can be sure—whose names, ages, religion and countries of origin are unknown. Buried here are the bodies of the boys and men who drowned while trying to make their way to what they thought was the promised land after a 60-mile crossing from North Africa at a price of about \$1,350 a head. Their bodies, lacking identification, were instead found washed up on the rocky Lampedusa shoreline, or were fished out of the sea, sometimes tangled in fishing nets. In the past two weeks several dozens more are believed to have perished when the sleazy ships manned by the people-runners sank in rough seas. Tragically, one of the survivors related that sailors on a Tunisian ship seeing their rickety boat of



immigrants fall apart had applauded without intervening to help. By contrast, for the past decade fishermen from Lampedusa have intervened to help.

But today in Lampedusa the problem is the living. In the past few weeks at least 5,500 immigrants from North Africa, among them 100 children, did make it alive to the island, or one for every Italian resident. These days most have been Tunisians fleeing from that revolutionary fervor that won so much praise from Europeans, or at least had won it until the problem landed on the island doorstep of Lampedusa. Now it is a safe bet that they will be joined by thousands of Libyans fleeing their homeland turmoil.

Many of the new arrivals interviewed said that they did not intend to remain in Italy, but hoped to move on, with France their preferred final destination. Already, however, the French have backed away from accepting this new wave of mostly French-speaking immigrants, while Germany and Austria have firmly declined. By way of compensating for their rigidity they have made vague offers of improving the policing of Lampedusa's watery border. Premier [Silvio Berlusconi](#) [2]'s solution was to offer to send a contingent of Italian police to North Africa, but on this was roundly snubbed; other countries do not want foreign soldiers on their soil, particularly when these countries are themselves still engaged in deadly civil strife. Even in Tunisia the new regime does not control the entire country.

Meantime, Lampedusa is exploding. With a local population of just 6,000, it cannot handle such a mass flood of cold, wet and hungry newcomers. Even though hundreds have already been flown to Palermo, where their applications as political refugees to be processed, the local holding station, built to house 800, is presently accommodating 2,000. Hygiene, hunger and a place to sleep are daunting problems. Other venues are being sought, and other funds to feed and clothe these desperate newcomers, but, taking matters into their own hands, one group of refugees broke into the empty summer home of Italian singer Claudio Baglione, and helped themselves to canned food.

Local residents seem to alternate between angry frustration and generosity. They make gifts of foodstuffs, shampoo and whatever they can, but know that it can never be enough. "We ship out 700 or 800 people every day," said Lampedusa mayor Bernardino De Rubeis, "but then others arrive, and there just aren't beds enough for everyone. If the sea turns calm and other people come it'll be the end of the world."

So what is to be done from on high? Later this month European Union (EU) ministers of the interior, including Italy's [Roberto Maroni](#) [3], who represents the [Northern League](#) [4] in the Berlusconi government, will meet to discuss the problem, also on the agenda for the meeting of prime ministers March 24-25. Maroni, who has predicted 80,000 new arrivals in Italy has called upon the EU agency for immigration to take action, but already some of the Eurocrats are talking only of helping Italy police its borders better, or perhaps sending equipment and personnel to help out. "It's incredible that in the face of a crisis like this the European institutions just look on and do nothing," an embittered Maroni complained Wednesday.

And Lampedusa is not alone in accepting immigrants who arrive by sea. At Crotone a holding station built for 900 is now providing accommodation for 1,400, and the situation is described as explosive.

At present foreign immigrants make up about 7% of the Italian population. At the end of 2009, the latest statistics available, the population was of 60,340,000, with an increase of almost 500,000 (or up 13.4%) over the previous year. All the newcomers were immigrants from abroad, but they were only those with regular documents. The true figures therefore are higher. One change is visible: a slight drop in East European immigration.



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