

Boat-race people

No matter the response, thousands of migrants still cross the Mediterranean.

From her hospital bed, Titi Tazrar, one of only five migrants who survived a crossing from Libya, described how 73 other passengers had died. They included three pregnant women who aborted at sea. "Some died because they fell into the sea at night," said the 27 year-old Eritrean. "The pregnant women aboard suffered the most. We didn't know how to help or comfort them. But soon after losing their children they too died."

On the very day when Ms Tazrar gave her account, a game designed by Renzo Bossi, son of the Northern League's leader, Umberto Bossi, called "Bounce back the clandestine migrant", was removed from his Facebook site. A failure to block enough boats led to a message: "Try again...next time you'll manage to show you're a true Leaguer!"

Since May Italian vessels finding migrants in international waters have returned them to Libya instead of taking them to Italy where (whether or not they won asylum) most have tended to remain or else travelled to another EU country. The rescue of the 12-metre craft on which Ms Tazrar was found on August 20th triggered the biggest row yet. The church has been critical: the head of the Vatican's migrants department, Antonio Maria Veglio, is locked in an acrimonious dispute with a leading Northern League figure, Roberto Calderoli. This matters, for history suggests that Italian governments at odds with the church do not last long. And Mr Berlusconi is already in bad odour with the clergy over his private life.

Yet some of the opprobrium heaped on his government's immigration policy is misguided. The real objection is that the new approach prevents migrants from applying for asylum even if they are entitled to humanitarian protection (typically around a third of Mediterranean boat people qualify, according to the Italian government). It then forces them back to Libya, an undemocratic state whose leader scoffs at notions of human rights.

But there is no evidence that Italy is actually ignoring the plight of those, like Ms Tazrar, who manage to reach its territorial waters. Officials insist that she and her fellow passengers were rescued by a coastal patrol as soon as it was alerted to their presence. Since June 1st almost 500 people have been taken in by Italy (although, under the new law, they now risk prosecution for illegal immigration).

Graver doubts hover over Malta. Ms Tazrar and her fellow-survivors say that two days before their rescue their dinghy was approached by a patrol boat whose crew gave them fuel and life-jackets and even "turned on the motor because we were too weak". Malta accepts that its men found the Eritreans, but says the migrants were in good health and rejected an offer of rescue because they wanted to reach Italy. As a prosecutor in Sicily began investigating the incident, Italy's foreign minister, Franco Frattini, outraged the Maltese government by suggesting that it should limit Malta's territorial waters because it could not patrol them properly.

Continuing illegal immigration across the Mediterranean cries out for a co-ordinated EU response. Carl Bildt, the foreign minister of Sweden, which holds the EU presidency, said new proposals from the European Commission would be discussed by foreign ministers in October. But he added that such a complex problem could not be solved at one meeting.

BOAT-RACE people. **The Economist**, New York, Aug. 27th 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 01 set. 2009.