

*enclosure
no more stamp*

THE INDEPENDENT

Gaddafi behind wave of migrants to Italy, say refugees

By Peter Popham in Rome
28 October 2003

The Gaddafi regime is tacitly encouraging a trade in illegal immigrants that transports thousands to Europe every year, and kills hundreds, according to survivors of the perilous sea voyage from Libya to Italy.

"It's not hard to get a boat from Libya to Europe," said a young Sudanese man called Suleiman, squatting in a derelict railway shed in Rome. "Just ask a Libyan policeman."

One week ago, Europe had another chilling reminder of the horrors that illegal immigrants go through trying to reach its shores, when 15 Somali immigrants perished off the remote Italian island of Lampedusa during a nightmarish 16-day voyage from the Libyan port of Zuwarah. Thousands have made the same journey this year, and untold hundreds have died in the attempt.

"We know people have died because we hear from friends they are coming, then we don't hear any more," said one man, sitting in the crumbling railway shed with 400 other Africans, living from hand to mouth with the help of Médecins sans Frontières, an independent medical aid agency.

The cruel trade in hope and despair is thriving. Italian politicians are appealing for Europe to tackle the problem collectively. What is clear is that the man behind the trade - the man with the power to shut it down overnight but whom it suits to turn a blind eye - is Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan leader. Libya has replaced Turkey as the principal entrepôt for illegal immigrants bound for Europe.

Criminal gangs run an elaborate migrant-smuggling industry generating millions of dollars a year, with agents in desperate countries such as Somalia, Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Ghana funnelling migrants across the Sahara to Libya.

Officials of Colonel Gaddafi's regime argue that the task of patrolling their coast to stop the departure of migrant boats is formidable. Mohammed Mesrati, Libya's Minister of Justice and Security, said: "In Libya there are 2,000km of sea coast and 7,000km of desert border. Even if we put all five million Libyans to guard these borders, we would not be able to control them." But the migrants who have reached Italy say the trade is not scattered along the coastline but concentrated in a handful of places. Of these, Zuwarah, a port 65 miles west of Tripoli, is the centre. In Zuwarah, the traffic in people is organised with the knowledge of the police, who are well paid by the gangs who run it.

Suleiman, from Sudan, was reading foreign languages at Tripoli University when Colonel Gaddafi closed the faculty and told the students to concentrate on his Green Book - Libya's answer to the Little Red Book of Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution - instead.

Suleiman decided it was time to leave. "Things became bad," he said. "We were only allowed to study Arabic, political science and the Green Book. Every non-Libyan working in the country is like a slave. As a foreigner you are no better than a beggar." Most aliens yearn to leave, in a northerly direction. And, if you have money, it is not hard to do. "Ask anyone. Ask a policeman!" he said.

He believes that, at any one time, there are "thousands" of people in Zuwarah waiting to leave the country. In Piazza Roma, a square in Zuwarah, Suleiman met the agent who agreed to get him on a boat to Lampedusa for \$1,000 (£590). He was taken to a guarded house in the city, where he was kept for one month.

Despite Tripoli agreeing to a request by Rome to increase surveillance, the Libyans claim they cannot control the coastline without hi-tech items - such as radar, helicopters and binoculars. All

such "dual-use" items are banned under a European Union embargo. Libya is demanding the embargo be scrapped as its price for compliance.

The dead and dying in their leaky little boats trying to cross the Sicily Channel are chips in the game.

Mr Mesrati said last week: "We need money, lots of money, and lots of hi-tech equipment. Our technical commission has drawn up a long list for Italy of what it needs. But there is the problem of the European Union's embargo. We have asked Italy to be our spokes-man in Europe