

Belligerent or Impotent?

It is so easy to be carried away emotionally when one debates the immigration issue. This mammoth problem has no easy solutions and yet most people expect swift and simple solutions when there are none. Of course there are actions which may be taken to alleviate this problem, but most of the solutions proposed are the fruit of fantasy rather than calculated thinking.

The most obvious reaction is: "Send them back!" But send them back where? If anyone seriously thinks that it is possible to send back people to Somalia, Chad, Ethiopia or Ivory Coast by a mere stroke of the pen, then he is living in fantasy land. Repatriation is a laborious process involving the acquisition of travel documents from authorities of the country of origin, where enthusiasm to issue them is, to put it bluntly, extremely mild. In spite of these difficulties, bravely faced by the Police immigration authorities, 1000 irregular migrants were repatriated to several countries in the past 20 months.

The three-pronged approach of Government in tackling this problem is:

- a) Request resettlement in European Union countries;
- b) Participate in EU joint repatriation flights;
- c) Striving for 'ad hoc' repatriation arrangements with neighboring Libya from where most of the immigrants start their European-bound journey

In the meantime Government, in spite of criticism both local and foreign, has retained its law on detaining immigrants entering Malta without permission. Our immigration problem is completely different from that of other EU countries – with the exception of neighbouring Italy. Immigrants who land in Malta hail from sub-Saharan Africa. They arrive uninvited and unannounced in regular boatloads, barging in as they do in nearby Sicily. The pattern of these arrivals is completely different from that of, say, Cyprus; where the bulk of asylum-seekers consists of foreign nationals already residing, lawfully or unlawfully, in Cyprus and applying for asylum to avoid deportation. Comparing Malta's situation with that of Cyprus, as one Sunday newspaper did, is therefore grossly unfair.

Having said that, the crisis which we are facing requires a careful examination of all options. This statement of mine was interpreted by some as meaning that Malta would abusively withdraw from its international obligations. Nothing is further away from the truth. But we are sending the message – thanks to the continuous labors of our foreign Minister, and the Ministry for Home Affairs – that this island cannot cope with this terrible influx, and that there is a limit to our capability in coping with the situation.

It is estimated that 4,500 immigrants landed on our shores in the past three and a half years. There are currently slightly less than 2,000 immigrants in closed and open centres. The others have been repatriated, or have proceeded elsewhere.

As I stated at the European Union Justice and Home Affairs Council in the Hague last September, no one expects that the peripheral states of Europe be left alone manning the dykes to stop this human flow. If aid is not forthcoming, the dykes will collapse, and not only the border states will be flooded.

The appointment of Franco Frattini as EU Commissioner has strengthened the Mediterranean dimension of EU activity in immigration matters. But much still needs to be done. The setting up of an Emergency Fund, and the implementation of burden-sharing through resettlement, need to occupy a more important place on the EU agenda.

As for Libya, there is no doubt in my mind that some solutions may be found. This requires patient negotiations; but one of the solutions to this phenomenon has to be repatriation to Libya of some of the immigrants who arrive – most of them anything but refugees, who have been working for years in Libya unharassed and unmolested.

The enigmatic approach of the media to this problem was so clear some Sundays ago, when one paper obliquely referred to government's actions as "impotent", while on the same day another newspaper criticized government for being too "belligerent." The truth is that when a reasoned middle-of-the road approach is adopted, one ends up at the receiving end of opposing trends of thought.

What needs to be done, will be done. But being correct politically is synonymous, at least in my view, with acting in a politically correct way.

Tonio Borg
Deputy Prime Minister
and Minister for Justice and Home Affairs