Prevent 'Biblical Exodus' from Africa: Build Water and Energy Infrastructure

by Claudio Celani

Over the weekend of Feb. 12-13, some 5,000 African refugees landed on the small Italian island of Lampedusa, about 80 km from Tunisia. The refugees, coming in groups of hundreds, in several waves, soon created an emergency on the island, which has just 4,500 inhabitants (**Figure 1**). But more than that, it rang the alarm bell for governments throughout Europe, for the waves of refugees that could arrive soon, but, orders of magnitude larger. Italy, on the front line, called on the European Union to help deal with the problem.

Following the revolution in Tunisia, thousands of refugees have flooded the small Italian island of Lampedusa, where there are only 4,500 inhabitants, creating a potential humanitarian disaster. Shown: a holding center on Lampedusa.

The crisis, however, cannot be solved with police measures. The refugee wave, currently limited to the nation of Tunisia, but soon to expand to Egypt and other countries, if policies do not change, is driven by a devastating economic crisis, which the European nations are co-responsible for having created, together with the International Monetary Fund (IMF); through the enforcing upon African nations of globalization and neo-liberal policies. Only if such policies are reversed, can an "exodus of biblical dimensions," as the former police chief of Rome referred to it, be prevented. Italians are somehow aware of that, as Foreign Minister Franco Frattini repeatedly stated, in calling for a "Marshall Plan" for countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Frattini went so far as to criticize the EU policy, but his calls are destined to remain empty words, if any actions remain confined to the Euro system, of which Italy is part. Such a system allows for no development policy.

The situation was made very clear by a Tunisian government delegation visiting Rome on Feb. 17. Minister for Industry and Tecnology Afif Chelbi said that the EU offer of EU17 million in advance of EU258 million, to be paid by 2013, is "ridiculous." The offer "shows that [the EU] has not grasped the dimension of the historical events unfolding in the South Mediterranean." When EU Foreign Policy chief "Catherine Ashton spoke about 17 million," Chelbi said, "our minister though he had misunderstood, and asked: 'millions or billions?' Once more, the European Union is not up to the task of dealing with the region."

Tunisian media tycoon Tarak Ben Ammar was even harsher than Chelbi: "What Europe has offered Tunisia is a tip, almost an insult. At least, 10 billions in six months are required to rebuild tourism, the economy, and jobs." Ammar said that "political will" is lacking. "Either Europe says that it wants to develop North Africa to prevent refugees from coming to its territory, or they will come not in 5 thousands, but rather in 500 thousands to its shores."

EU and IMF Responsibilities in North Africa

The damages to the nations on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, provoked by free-market policies imposed by the West, are indeed enormous. In addition

FIGURE 1

The tiny Mediterranena island of Lampedusa is located just 80 kilometers from Tunisia and 205 kilometers from Sicily.

to the lack of food and energy security, those countries have been hit by the increase in world commodity prices since 2007.

In the case of Tunisia, over 20 years of cooperation between Tunis and the World Bank and the IMF led to soaring unemployment, in particular among educated Tunisians. A World Bank report notes that the number of young unemployed graduates has nearly tripled in ten years—336,000 in 2006-07, compared with 121,800 in 1996-97.

With support from those international institutions, as well as from France and the EU, the recently overthrown government of Ben Ali had implemented "reforms" involving privatizing of essential infrastructure and industries (including ports, steel factories, and mineral production corporations), removing import tariffs, easing export restrictions, devaluing the currency, opening the domestic labor market to foreign companies which employ Tunisians as slave labor in the textile and auto spare parts industries. Tunisia was the first North African country to enter a free-trade agreement with the EU in 1995, allowing full implementation of those policies.

What was done to Egypt is almost a carbon copy of what happened to the Tunisian economy. In the beginning of the 1990s, under an agreement with the IMF to cut its foreign debt by half, the Egyptian government agreed to privatize its state companies; reduce tariffs on imports of food and textiles (killing the chances of these two sectors' survival); increase exports of cash-generating cotton, vegetables, and fruits; eliminate government subsidies on agriculture and food prices, and on fuels.

Worst of all, was the privatization of basic infrastructure such as transportation, water management, and telecommunications, leading to the skyrocketing of costs for small-sized farms and manufactures. This gave international mega-producers a tremendous advantage, enabling them to move in and take over. But the most outrageous, from the standpoint of the Egyptian population, is that the privatization was carried out with the collusion of the governments and large business interests, closely tied to members of the government, including President Mubarak's family. A large, wealthy, corrupt elite was thus created, whose loyalty was to the global economic interests rather than the Egyptian nation.

More than 30 years were lost for the Egyptian nation, since 1981-83, when Lyndon LaRouche and his associates presented to the Cairo government, a policy to ensure food self-sufficiency through massive investments in water and in agriculture infrastructure. That proposal was sabotaged by Anglo-American interests, represented by the likes of Henry Kissinger, whose main policy objective towards Egypt and similar large developing countries is "population reduction." The U.S. "aid" policy towards Egypt ironically made the country dependent on the U.S. to ensure that the Egyptian population had access to a minimum of food supplies, while undercutting its own production.

However, as LaRouche recently emphasized, only a global solution can give Egypt and other nations a chance to recover and ensure a future for their upcoming generations. The crisis in Northern Africa and the Middle East is not a result of the circumstances in those specific countries, but rather of the global collapse. None of them is able, by themselves, to control their destiny.

An "outside intervention" is needed, in the form of a treaty among African, European, and other nations, for development programs, based on large infrastructure projects, like water, energy, and transport infrastructures.

The Sicily-Tunis Tunnel

A few such projects could be immediately started, such as a modern version of the François-Elie Roudaire plan to supply fresh water to the chotts, or brackish marshes in southern Tunisia and Algeria, and thereby make it a granary and center of agro-industry.[1] Another

1. See Yves Paumier, "From Roudaire's 'Inland Sea' Project to the Blue Revolution," *EIR*, Jan. 28, 2011.

FIGURE 2
The Proposed Sicily-Tunisia Tunnel

EIRNS/Flavio Tabanelli

project is a tunnel between Tunisia and Sicily, which would create a landbridge between Africa, Europe, and Asia (**Figure 2**). The tunnel was first presented internationally to a Schiller Institute conference in Kiedrich, Germany, in 2007 (see below).

EIR spoke to the author of the tunnel project, Dr. Pietro La Mendola, a nuclear engineer and a transportation expert who has developed the idea for an Italian government agency. The tunnel, in conjunction with the Messina bridge, would be part of a 2,500-plus-km landbridge corridor from Tunis to Berlin, and further eastward. The project would create 10,000 jobs in Tunisia, which would be a major factor in stabilizing emigration. The tunnel will be a rail-freight tunnel only, composed of several sections of up to 60 km, separated by four artificial islands built with excavation material. Work could start immediately after the completion of a geological survey, which usually lasts four years. However, since the Italian oil company ENI has surveyed almost the entire area already for oil and gas drilling, their data could be used in order to accelerate the works.

With the Sicily-Tunisia Tunnel, the planned Messina Bridge between Sicily and the Italian mainland would make much more sense, because it would no longer be only a national connection (between two Italian regions), but would become a much more important international/intercontinental connection. To dig a submarine tunnel has become highly doable, with modern technologies, La Mendola said. Modern machines dig 1.5 km per month. This means that in 60 months, the tunnel would be ready. "As an engineer, I must update my knowledge on digging technologies every three months," he said. La Mendola, who has worked for the Italian national research agency ENEA, is in favor of a tunnel instead of the Messina Bridge, also because to build the bridge would take ten years, whereas a tunnel would be ready in ten months. "But a bridge is visible, while the tunnel cannot be seen by voters—politicians think."

La Mendola agrees that the financing issue is a political one. One option would be to have the Chinese finance it, as it was done for the Channel Tunnel. The best option, however, is to re-establish capabilities for national credit which have been eliminated by the euro. He agreed that the euro should become an accounting unit, and nations should be given the power to issue their own currencies again. Italy could then revive its dirigistic tradition of state industries, like those at the time of Enrico Mattei.

La Mendola has also developed projects to win parts of the Sahara desert to agricultural development, like in the case of the Shatt El Djerid in Tunisia, or in the New Valley in Egypt, which are consistent with the Paumier-Roudaire proposal presented by LaRouche associates in France. These are the key for development there, and for man-made climate improvement.

For instance, he has studied a 1,000-meter-deep groundwater reservoir in the Nubia region in Egypt, which he said could be tapped to create green oases 200 km long and 50 km wide. Opponents say that this will exhaust the reservoir one day, but he insists that the water won't be lost, and instead will enter the biological cycle, creating rains and changing the climate. He said that there are two of such very large underground lakes, created by infiltration by the old Nile course 20,000 years ago. These groundwater reservoirs have been studied by German experts.

Of course, a Nile nations agreement is necessary, La Mendola said. The 1948 deal is totally obsolete. In his view, Nile water use must be shared according to population size: nation A has 100 population and gets 100 units of water. Nation B has 1,000 population and gets 1,000 units of water.

The water projects for North Africa can connect with the Transaqua project to revitalize Lake Chad, and to green the Sahel region, in a larger plan to green the desert, change the climate, and build Pan-African infrastructure. Unless such development projects are urgently implemented, what we are seeing now is only the beginning of an explosion in North Africa which will hit hard Europe too. However, no such policies can be implemented, unless the bankrupt financial system is replaced with a credit system based on a Glass-Steagall standard, according to LaRouche's specifications.

DR. NINO GALLONI

The Sicily-Tunisia Tunnel: Link to Africa

Italian economist Dr. Nino Galloni spoke on the topic, "The Sicily-Tunisia Tunnel and the Extension of the Eurasian Land-Bridge into Africa," at a Schiller Institute conference in Germany, Sept. 15, 2007.

The Italian Agency for Alternative Energies (ENEA) and the Sicilian Regional government have recently presented a feasibility study concerning underground and underwater segments of up to 60 kilometers, for a tunnel across the Channel of Sicily, connecting Italy with Tunisia. Therefore, in the case under examination, researchers have suggested the construction of four intermediate islands which will be built with the excavated material; in this manner, the cost of waste disposal will also be reduced. In addition, the four islands would represent a financial asset in the operation, because they can be utilized for stocking the local sea fauna and selective fishing, as well as for quality tourism.

The plan takes on particular value if it is better integrated into the network of global infrastructure going from the Bering Strait (connecting the Americas to Asia and, therefore, to Europe), to the Mediterranean and Africa; those infrastructure networks also include the bridge over the Messina Strait and the Gibraltar tunnel between Spain and Morocco (ca. 37.8 km). In this way, there would be uninterrupted circulation of means of transport of goods and passengers along the Mediterranean coast, going through Italy, France, Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and, of course, all of the bordering countries.

The financial plan based on the estimation of costs performed by the ENEA researchers calls for 20 billion euros [ca. $28 billion], and proposes to collect the money through advanced sales of tolls which, once the project is finished, can be resold, used, or transformed into shares of the state-run, or mixed public-private firm that runs or owns the infrastructure. According to the same researchers, the presence of the four islands will allow for reducing finishing costs even under the projected ten years, as each section can be reduced to only 30 km.

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Dr. Nino Galloni

Any shares or tolls will be issued for a price of 100 euros (it should double in ten years), and applied to the equivalent of one medium-tonnage truck. Considering a transit frequency of one truck every five seconds, in both directions, for 20 hours a day, you have 20 billion euros to be amortized over 40 years at constant value, but in half the indicated time, if the values or prices of tolls double every ten years; of which, the initial ten years coincide with the completion of the work, and the next ten years with the first decade of activity. Therefore, the project seems to be sustainable, and governments can ask private investors for money, or issue currency that will not create inflation, exactly because it will start to generate income ten years later. (Thus, one could also choose to consolidate currently circulating short- to medium-term speculative financial instruments at high risk of insolvency, and instead spread them out in a project which is long term, real, and generates income.)

States and governments can maintain majority control and raise funds through the methods described above, not forgetting that a significant portion of income will be generated by the management of the islands for fishing and tourism, which on both the Sicilian and Tunisian sides, already have an ancient and deep-rooted tradition.