

The People Tsunami in Italy's Back Yard

Judith Harris (April 05, 2011)



Italy is currently facing a huge wave of refugees. On the island of Lampedusa, in Sicily, they now outnumber the local population and the government effort is to block further departures and force repatriations

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Rome—One can almost pity [Ignazio Benito La Russa](#) [2]. The stress must be horrendous: as Italy's war minister in the government headed by Silvio Berlusconi, this former neo-Fascist activist in the defunct Italian Social Movement currently speaks for the defense forces in a country committed to fighting two wars: one to bring democracy to Afghanistan and the other, to rid Libya of Muammar Gaddafi. There is little support for either, and the government is literally split in two over whether to support or unseat the Libyan leader. On the personal level as well, La Russa is under siege for his hiring of a young soap opera starlet named Hoara Borselli, whose entire contribution to the Defense Ministry effort so far, in exchange for earning about as much as one of La Russa's soldiers, was to organize a band concert.

Small wonder, then, that Minister La Russa was edgy enough to lose his temper in Parliament Wednesday. Red of face, shaking with rage, he shouted and screamed so loudly at the leftist opposition that Chamber of Deputies President [Gianfranco Fini](#) [3]asked him to speak more calmly. By way of response La Russa shook his arm at Fini in an unmistakable gesture and mouthed certain ugly words. Just as at a soccer match, a replay of the TV footage gave precise evidence of the Minister's saying a phrase as unmistakable as the jabbing arm: Vaffa 'n' cxxx. (Go fxxx yourself.)

After the fact La Russa explained lamely that, outside the doors of Parliament, he faced raucous hecklers, some tossing coins at him in gesture of scorn. Among these demonstrators, he said, was one who'd shouted at him on other occasions. Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, Fini objected that this display of cursing and yelling offended the dignity of Parliament itself. An investigatory commission of Parliamentary prefects will meet to determine what if any punitive measures are in order.

During the Sixties such shambollicky battles in Parliament were frequent, and deputies from far right and far left often ran menacingly toward each other until stalwart Parliamentary officials kept them apart bodily. The tossing of coins to insult a politician is also a tried-and-true way of showing disdain; in the Eighties Socialists [Bettino Craxi](#) [4]and Gianni De Michelis were both assaulted in this way. But since then such displays of ill temper in Parliament have been rare, and their revival evokes a saddening general sense of chaos and of no one tending the store. Even as the shouting goes on, and the Premier and his team of 80 lawyers are engaged in a desperate hunt for legal loopholes allowing him to dodge what is called Rubygate and other trials, the problems accumulate. Not least, the government must figure out what to do with the 20,000 or so immigrants who have landed on Italian shores in recent weeks—"a tsunami of people," as Berlusconi called them Friday.

According to the humanitarian organization [Doctors Without Borders](#) [5], the mass of hungry immigrants now on the island of Lampedusa, who continue to outnumber the local population, have just 16 chemical toilets and 1.5 liters of water per person per day. Standard for such refugee camps is 20 liters. There is little escaping of blame. As Charlotte Phillips of the [Amnesty International](#) [6]Programme for Refugees and Migrants said bluntly, "The crisis has been created by the Italian government's failure to respond adequately to the situation here in Lampedusa."

A problem for the 5,000 permanent residents of Lampedusa is that they live on summer tourism, and the grim reports and pictures sent worldwide can hardly be tourist attractions. And so, to show that his government was not absorbed in Parliamentary pyrotechnics to the point that it ignored the [Lampedusa](#) [7] crisis, this week Premier Berlusconi logged onto an island real estate agency and—to show his solidarity—purchased, over the Internet, a villa on the island, in what was presumably intended as the equivalent of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's saying, at the Berlin Wall in 1962, "Ich bin eine Berliner." The morning after his purchase of the villa Berlusconi personally dropped in on the island, which he promised to "liberate" within 60 hours, by shipping the migrants elsewhere in Italy to hastily-organized (read: not yet organized) tent towns called Centers for Émigré Identification (CEI).

That was Wednesday. Alas, winds and the sea whipped up, and two ships that were to take the refugees—escapees from poverty and politics—elsewhere were obliged to stay behind, though not in Berlusconi's newly acquired villa. And in the meantime some of those already sent to a CEI camp at Manduria near Taranto in Calabria discovered a weak point in the fence that kept them locked inside, and simply walked away—where, no one knows. Meantime, on the Northern Italian border with France, which declines to accept refugees, reporters said that Italian guards were literally turning a blind eye to escapees slipping across the border to enter France.

The next step is to try to stop the emigration at the source. Interior Minister Roberto Maroni of the Northern League has therefore announced that Italy may have to "force" Tunisia to block further



departures (most of the arrivals are Tunisians) as well as to accept repatriations.

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